

LIFE & ARTS

THE ROYAL ACADEMY EXHIBITION

Red lace, Joan of Arc – and security guards as interactive art

The first thing you see on entering the Royal Academy of Arts' new exhibition, *Aware: Art Fashion Identity*, is a security guard wearing a navy blue suit. So far, so normal – except he is also wearing a cumbersome harness with an assortment of odd objects dangling from it, including a teddy bear and a first aid kit. It turns out he isn't just a guard; he's also part of a work by the artist Lucy Orta.

Known for interactive, performance-based pieces that bridge art and fashion, Orta says that the eight harnesses included

in the exhibition are "kits containing various objects that symbolise different states of emergency", including "shortages of food and water or even loss of love and affection." They are communication tools, she explains, "to trigger discussion with the public".

Orta, professor of art, fashion and the environment at London College of Fashion, is also one of the show's curators, and her desire to reveal the complex stories that fashion can tell about people and communities drives the exhibition.

An assortment of equally playful, thoughtful works by other contemporary artists is sprinkled

around the galleries, including a series of costumes exploring national identity by Alicia Framis; a video by Gillian Wearing, featuring 26 people who attempt to remain straight-faced and motionless while dressed in police uniforms; and a newly-commissioned mural by



British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, based on 19th-century children's dress designs.

Contrasting with these pieces are more politically didactic works by Rosemarie Trockel, Cindy Sherman and Yoko Ono – the latter represented by a film of her 1965 performance in Tokyo when audience members were invited to cut her clothes off to reveal her naked torso, thus transforming the

passive viewer into active participant.

But artists who manipulate the language of fashion and costume make up only half of *Aware*. The other half is comprised of catwalk pieces such as an exquisite red lace dress by Alexander McQueen (pictured), inspired by the story of Joan of Arc; a photographic installation of clothes treated with bacteria and left to erode by Martin Margiela; and costumes constructed from plywood by Yohji Yamamoto. The point was to "test out more edgy ideas that perhaps wouldn't usually

comfortably fit within the Royal Academy's remit," says Kathleen Soriano, director of exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Indeed, Orta's harnesses are among the most effective pieces in *Aware*, as it is clear the guards revel in the opportunity: they no longer just keep watch, but become a part of what they see.

'Aware: Art, Fashion, Identity' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, until January 30. www.royalacademy.org.uk

Alex Coles