

CANVAS | Art and Culture from the Middle East and Arab world

Unpublished interview with Lucy ORTA

Extracts published in Canvas Guide, Thursday 2nd December 2011

<http://www.canvasguide.net/>

CANVAS: How did you become involved in the exhibition *GSK Contemporary – Aware: Art Fashion Identity*?

LUCY ORTA: After having exhibited my work in the previous GSK Contemporary: Earth co-curated by artist David Buckland, I was convinced that the Royal Academy of the Arts was the perfect venue to propose the exhibition I had been researching together with Italian co-curator Gabi Scardi. In my second role as Professor of Art Fashion and the Environment at London College of Fashion, I am particularly interested in exploring how and why contemporary artists employ clothing in their practices to challenging our opinions on fashion and to create a wider public debate on the subject. The close proximity of London College of Fashion to the Royal Academy proved the ideal partnership between the education and research of art and fashion.

The show focuses on fashion as a mechanism of communication, revealing snippets of one's identity, nationality, political stance etc... How do the display and selection of works in this show help convey this concept?

We spent several months reflecting on each of the artists' work and looking at how they crossed-over into each of these sub-themes; it was a very difficult process of attempting to pinpoint one area that would best represent the artist – we called this 'spontaneous islands of meaning'. We selected work in a variety of media to express the diversity of ways in which artists reveal or represent identities. At one stage we abandoned themes in favour of the interaction of each artist's work and their scenographic positioning within the gallery spaces, small reflective rooms for more intimate works, or larger gallery spaces for 'catwalk-like' installations. Once the Royal Academy had secured the loans we sat down and rearranged each work reflecting carefully on the islands of meaning and the dialogue between the artists within each room. The disposition of the galleries in the Burlington Garden building is challenging, each space has a different atmosphere and it was important to think of the public flow, so that each island of meaning and the huge variety of media we hope will excite and surprise the visitor.

What was taken into account in the curatorial process? How many artworks will be shown? How many participating designers/artists?

Through an ongoing and passionate dialogue with the curators at the Royal Academy, we expanded our choice of works to over fifty artists. We had the floor of the Royal Academy office strewn in hundreds of images of artists' work from files of research. I must say, it was a heart-wrenching process of elimination, as each work had a perfect place and relevance within the show. With the help of the exhibition designer, we finally selected thirty artists, and over the double amount of artworks to privilege larger installations. There are few designers - we selected those that have a longstanding conceptual research-based practice pertinent to the theme of the exhibition.

How was the selection of participating artists made?

Both Gabi and I have either collaborated with many of the artists or know them personally and admired their work for a number of years. In conversation with the curators at the Royal Academy of the Arts, we began looking outside of our sphere of research to expand the initial selection.

What type of media and artistic style can viewers expect?

There is video installation, film projections, photography, installation, sculpture, free-standing and suspended objects, wall works, knitting, embroidery, patchwork, braiding, couture, marquetry, rendering, collage, drawing, and so much more. I think the only media we do not have in the exhibition is painting, but this features in the catalogue.

Why was it important to have such an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts?

Clothes lie at the core of research carried out by many artists as an expression of identity and speak of our experience of the present day, with its pleasures but also its rapid transformations, with its urgencies and extreme conditions. It is a universal subject of interest and after the success of the Earth exhibition, the Royal Academy of the Arts GSK Contemporary program was the ideal program to present an innovative and socially engaged exhibition to large audiences.

What do you hope to teach the audience through this exhibition?

This is the first exhibition that will reveal, through the medium of clothing, the different approaches contemporary artists use to express issues of a social, political and ecological kind through themes such as liveability, recycling, the relationships and diversity among cultures, the search for protection and safety. The artists chosen are particularly attentive to new contexts and new values, to the social situations of their times and the transformations under way within our society. There should be through the work we present, evident signs that we are entering a new era in which considerations linked to the natural environment, social sustainability and intercultural activities are on the front line.

How important is functionality versus aesthetics in fashion?

The exhibition includes a series of actual garments that can be worn and are in fact attractive items. This functionality aids in bridging metaphor and reality, and assists in creating communication with the diverse audiences beyond the sphere of the imaginative, to touch and interact with real life situations.

Fashion is an extension of one's personality. In your opinion, what role does fashion play in both our individual and social identities?

Clothes have always been a foremost reference to individual and social identity. They are shelter, an element fundamental to physical survival, an interface between self and others, between what we are and what we wish to reveal of ourselves. Mask, costume, vehicle of identity, element of recognition, distinguishing others from self, but also as a sign of belonging, even to extreme standardisation. Clothes may reveal our way of life and our unconscious, may communicate social position, aspirations and desires, needs and emerging aspects, visions of the world.

When does fashion become art?

Fashion is an expression of our times, like art it shares the need to reveal and reinvent in continuum. They neither become one or the other - they are working in close parallel. If a tangent traverses this perfect and infinite geometry, it provokes an obstruction to the notion of artistic self-expression.