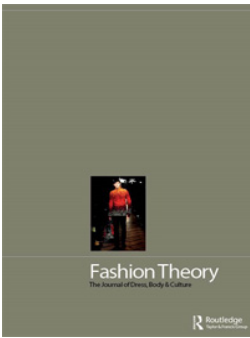


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Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion

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Abstract

Dutch designer Iris van Herpen is a modern alchemist and frequent collaborator with an eclectic range of material experts. This exhibition review considers the final venue of her recent two-year exhibition tour of North America, *Transforming Fashion*, exhibited alongside frequent collaborator and Toronto-based architect's exhibition *Philip Beesley: Transforming Space* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada in 2018.

KEYWORDS: material experimentation, couture, collaboration

Figure 1

Installation image from *Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion* exhibition. Iris van Herpen (Dutch, born 1984) *Capriole* collection, July 2011, 3-D-printed polyamide (Groninger Museum, 2012.0209). Image courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, photo credit Brian Boyle, ©ROM.



Iris van Herpen is perhaps best described as a modern alchemist rather than a fashion designer – a prolific decade of creations now charts her relentless material curiosity and experimentation. As the final stop of a two-year tour of North America, *Transforming Fashion* was exhibited alongside *Philip Beesley: Transforming Space*. The Toronto-based architect and Dutch designer van Herpen are longstanding collaborators: two utterly creative minds somehow not confined by the ruthless financial economies of fashion and architecture.

I had previously experienced van Herpen's work as contributions to group exhibitions where her creations tended to steal the show. This retrospective exhibition – a professional feat at the age of 34 – of 40 pieces from 15 collections held between 2008 and 2015 allows for more sober scrutiny. Earlier works often relied on low tech solutions with the sheer simplicity of their creation part of their wonder. *Chemical Crows* (2008), for example, makes use of cow leather and the metal ribs of children's umbrellas to create a garment that looks like it should be worn by a Samurai warrior. Increasingly, an extensive network of



Figure 2

Installation image from *Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion* exhibition. 2017.63.1 Aeriform Collection Finale Dress. Design by Iris van Herpen, textile in collaboration with Philip Beesley. Acquisition was made possible with the generous support of the Louise Hawley Stone Charitable Trust. Image courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, photo credit Brian Boyle, ©ROM.

collaborators contributes high-tech innovations to her collections. 3-D printing, in particular, is often tasked with new materials, although technology for its own sake seems to hold little charm (Figure 3). Simplicity is not ruled out either. The *Crystallization* (2010) collection was inspired by ‘the bathtub’ nickname given to the extension of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum. Van Herpen’s initial attempt to use digital printing to make physical a splash of water was eventually solved by hand, taking a hot air gun and pliers to PET (thermoplastic resin from the polyester family) to create a dramatic collar for the collection.

Beesley’s work with sentient architecture – buildings with the ability to feel – inspired van Herpen’s *Hybrid Holism* collection (2012). Numerous collaborations followed including the *Voltage* (2013) collection and, after they visited CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research which operates the largest particle physics laboratory in the world, the *Magnetic Motion* collection (2014). More recently, the ROM commissioned van Herpen and Beesley to collaborate on *Dome Dress* (2017) made of more than 300 zinc-coated steel, laser cut and then hand-molded pieces (Figure 2). Sited in the transition space between the two exhibitions, *Dome Dress* epitomizes both individuals’ ability to treat “laser cut” and “hand-molded” not as a contradiction in terms. A commissioned documentary by Stylianos Pangalos captures the creation of *Dome Dress* for *Aeriform* (2017), van Herpen’s 10th anniversary collection, presented in Paris. What the documentary



Figure 3

Installation image from *Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion* exhibition. Front row Escapism collection, January 2011 (Groninger Museum 2.0209). Back row *Crystallization* collection, 2010. Image courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, photo credit Brian Boyle, ©ROM.

unintentionally exposes is the very real risk, seen in the creation of *Dome Dress*, that creative process can hold more wonder than the final outcome.

Transforming Fashion groups van Herpen's works according to collections. This organization is supported by concise, but usefully detailed, explanatory wall text. Perhaps more importantly it helps confirm the sheer range of technical and material solutions each collection tackles. While extensive catwalk video footage tries to animate the static mannequin displays, the flat screen puts distance between the viewer and the extraordinary personalities of the garments. Mannequins (all Caucasian in color with those worryingly Barbie-like fused toes) created an unfortunate support for van Herpen's creative risks (Figure 3). What they do provide is an unambiguous reading of her creations as fashion. This, ironically, is a conundrum in her work. Van Herpen's second creative genius is her seeming ability to navigate the notoriously conservative Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week while pursuing her extraordinary commitment to material experimentation. A former ballet dancer, her collaborations also include costumes for opera and ballet. But there are times in her earlier works when her garments feel as though the body is curiously uninvited. Works like her digitally printed exoskeleton (*Capriole* 2011) take this to the greatest extreme (Figure 1).

At street level, the Royal Ontario Museum's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal designed by Daniel Libeskind offers a novel landmark. Inside it feels clear that exterior bling outweighed the creation of a functional

exhibition space. During my visit a combination of less than respectful viewers and nervous exhibition invigilators meant that individuals were cautioned from interacting with Beesley's work. The interior architecture does so little to encourage a change of pace – a shift into respectful curiosity – that I do not entirely blame a visitor for bringing the hasty manners they would enjoy when shopping into the museum. Iris van Herpen and Philip Beesley offer us stunning examples of creativity that finds equal intrigue in the skill of the hand and the potential of technology. However, the exhibition's eye watering 30-dollar ticket price leaves me wondering who is able to learn from these remarkable creations. Access is a crucial concern for ever more digitally literate, but materially alienated, emerging artists and designers.