Dress Codes

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON "A QUEER HISTORY OF FASHION"

DURING MY TEENAGE YEARS thrift-shopping in Houston, the gay mecca of the South, I would often come upon T-shirts emblazoned with slogans of local HIV/AIDS organizations, each cast-off garment evoking the loss of a friend or a father or a lover. This special ability of clothes to register the presence of queer lives, as well as their historical repression, is thematized in the sweeping survey "A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk," curated by Fred Dennis and Valerie Steele, with exhibition design by Joel Sanders, at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

Featuring more than one hundred ensembles from the past three centuries, the exhibition has an ambitious scope, starting as far back as a satin-and-taffeta look typical of an early-eighteenth-century British "molly house" during a time when "sodomites" were persecuted and even executed, and extending into the present via a wall of recent gay-wedding garb. So although its emphasis is on fashion designed and sported by LGBTQ people, the show also tracks wider social shifts away from persecution and toward more mainstream acceptance of homosexuality. The earliest material is some of the most fascinating, as period outfits highlight the ways in which queer subcultural codes have been expressed through design, and illustrate both the risks of alternative gender presentations and the significant work that style and artifice can *do*, forming communities and forging potent social languages.

Blown-up photographs (along with a musical playlist) provide theatrical backdrops for the spotlighted clothes, evoking specific contexts through their depictions of such settings as the famed Parisian lesbian club Le Monocle in the 1920s and the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade in the '70s. But three hundred years is a lot of time to cover, and the exhibition's major premise—that queer fashion has transitioned from marginality to mainstream success—focuses disproportionately on the expected big names in haute couture while giving short shrift to more homegrown, less market-friendly efforts. Balenciaga, Dior, Gaultier, Halston, McQueen, Saint Laurent, Versace: All are featured, while the tremendously influential and outlandishly innovative Leigh Bowery is all but missing. Gossipy wall labels speculate about the sexuality of a number of female designers, including Coco Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet, yet the gender-bending stylings of '20s lesbian artist Claude Cahun and her partner, Marcel Moore, are absent. Renegade, handcrafted costumes, such as those worn by the Cockettes, merit only a token inclusion, as the curators favor gay and lesbian designers' contributions to the industry over a wider-ranging exploration of makeshift and individual performances of queer identity through fashion.

Left: **Clothing from the collection of Marlene Dietrich, 1932–54.** Installation view, Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. Photo: Eileen Costa.

Below: **Liberace costume designed by Frank Acuna, 1977.** Installation view, Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. Photo: Eileen Costa.

In short, I yearned for more demonstrations of high/low blurring, the type that comes from fantastic invention and sly appropriation: flamboyant old-school drag queens, outré new-school club kids, voguers in ballroom "houses"—those across the gender spectrum who make their own outfits because their bodies don't conform to what is sold in stores. Perhaps the show is too tasteful to be really queer—if by *queer* we mean nonnormative or deviant—and in places it seems almost embarrassed by its rare bursts of camp and kitsch, such as the purposefully excessive hot-pink number worn by Liberace that is pushed to the back of the display. Even the most extreme designers appear tame, as in Rudi Gernreich's unisex caftans or the muted examples of wild Belgian bear Walter Van Beirendonck. And by focusing on such known metropolitan centers as New York, Paris, London, and San Francisco, the exhibition misses an opportunity to explore regional quirks, rural getups, and—glaringly—fashion-forward communities of color. We get white Castro leather clones, but no black radical lesbian feminists or queer Latino Morrissey fans.

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In 2013, it's not exactly news that many fashion designers are queer. The curators do a decent job of including important women in the mix, including Jil Sander and Liz Collins, though they lean too heavily on the iconic masculinity of Marlene Dietrich to provide a sense of gender balance. The show also briefly raises some theoretically knotty issues, including gay-male misogyny toward female clientele, and troubling moments of cultural appropriation dating as far back as the exotic Indo-Persian *banyon* "house gown" worn by Germans in the 1750s. (The strong catalogue, published by Yale University Press in association with FIT, is much more comprehensive on such issues.)

By far the most affecting part of the show is the section dedicated to those who have died from AIDS-related causes, with high-dollar designs movingly paired with activist T-shirts. Political groups such as ACT UP used graphics and text as a way to make anger visible on the body; their slogans display militancy, humor, and the importance of shared witnessing. One T-shirt from the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation has clearly been worn. Yellowed by use and bearing the fitting words I WAS THERE, it serves as a reminder that the most basic garment can have high stakes: Clothes tell the world something about who you are, as the marketing platitudes go—and those expressions can be life-threatening, as well as life-sustaining. □

"A Queer History of Fashion" is on view through Jan. 4.

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