

Look Like a Like

by Marie Canet

The *Passer-by* exhibition is divided into three sections: a fake shop placed strategically near a real one selling the *Jasperware* collection, the latest collection from Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie’s independent fashion label Atelier E.B; an archival section providing the visual archaeology of the installation which sheds light on the artists’ proposals and decisions; and a collection of previously unseen works produced for the exhibition. The artists invited to participate in the project are close to Atelier E.B—friends, relatives, collaborators, lovers or clients—and are all interested in the question of clothing in its aesthetic and cultural dimensions. For the exhibition, Lipscombe and McKenzie asked them to produce pieces intended to present or establish some of their work from previous collections based on the idea that the different ways of exhibiting clothing, when not directly on human forms (with the stakes of power, domination and instrumentalization of the model inherent to this type of objectification), create added value in terms of style in the way they present and generate the gaze. Some of these forms install like Auerbach’s table, Blessmann’s dissociated body or the polyurethane rocks of Steff Norwood; others are dressed like Bernie Reid’s woman-chair or Markus Selg’s man who fell on a surface of fractals. These contributions are part of the history of mannequins. They are often provocative, funny, sometimes a little ridiculous and offbeat.

For the Paris exhibition, Atelier E.B pulled out a relic from the warehouse—balustrades from the Galeries Lafayette grand staircase. In the art nouveau style, dating from 1912, they are made of wrought iron in a typical, familiar shape: clematis and water lily flowers hang from curves adorning the open corolla of the staircase to better attract the customer. Here, the object made it possible to connect the lower room, dedicated to retail and its history, with the upper atrium where the artists’ works were exhibited. Between the two was *LACUNA (Brussels/Rome)*, an installation produced by Lucy McKenzie and Markus Proschek that presents, on a platform, reproductions of fragments of ancient statues made from photogrammetric measurements of the originals. The plaster pieces are arranged with style on a blue background as in a special effects studio. They update the still powerful fantasy for the draped white bodies of antiquity and wear, carved from the mass, the Atelier E.B brand’s accessories: a headband holds back the hair of a soft female face with a broken nose; a cut body wears a belt bag over a long skirt.

For the exhibition, Elizabeth Radcliffe’s tapestry-portrait of the artist Marc Camille Chaimowicz has been repurposed. Wearing a blazer, chequered pants and a hat, he holds a cushion of his own creation under his arm. Striking a pose, he wears the Mackintosh Long Brooch from the *Inventors of Tradition II* collection created by Atelier E.B in 2015. This work connects antagonistic aesthetic stories: here a rigidity of the modern line against a camp dissolution of colour. And the tribute is twofold, it concerns the aesthetics of Chaimowicz, the icon that has become a model here, and the Scottish architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh, another icon.

This work of affiliation—it bears mentioning that Elizabeth Radcliffe is Beca Lipscombe’s mother—is inherent in the duo’s research. It allows Atelier E.B to write its own history through subjective, sensual and ideological filiations. Their inner circle is varied and includes the artists invited to participate in the exhibition as well as often eccentric—in the sense of peripheral—historical figures, presented in the archival section, such as the American Mary Blair with her work on colour, Bonnie Cashin with her innovative approach to sportswear, the artist and window dresser

Michael Haynes who collaborated with the great London retailers, or the iconoclastic designer Jeanne Lanvin. And if Marc Camille Chaimowicz’s work and approach are a source of inspiration for the duo, it is certainly because the artist has been able to maintain, since the 1970s, an oblique position towards art, architecture and design by destabilizing the borders between art and crafts, high culture and popular culture. Invited to participate, he chose to exhibit an oversized replica of the clothes unit he designed himself and which he uses, like many of his creations, on a daily basis. Hung on the clothing rail were a succession of garments with sober lines created by Atelier E.B as well as the voluminous frills of a dress with patterns designed and coloured by the artist for an ultra-queer film by Brice Dellsperger. The pinks, yellows, oranges and greens of the motifs overflow. Chaimowicz’s aesthetics, which are already highly distinct, create a break with the functionality of the clothes he has chosen to wear: a white jacket, a cream polo shirt, a two-piece sky-blue tracksuit with decorated stripes, all by Atelier E.B. A used pair of men’s shoes sits on the unit’s step, a large black hat on the shelf above. The sexual ambiguity—or perhaps it is a personality disorder—of the person to whom this wardrobe could belong is thus evoked. If it is not a single person, but a pair of bodies or ideas, then it is the possibility of bringing together contradictory aesthetics that is questioned: the assembly of a practical modernism and an over-play of the self, in the image of Atelier E.B’s clothing which combines pragmatic and non-spectacular design with visual research rooted in the history of forms, its repetition and its power of attraction. In this way, Bernie Reid, a former member of Atelier E.B who is Beca Lipscombe’s former partner, created a woman-chair for the exhibition whose features are borrowed from the designer. The plywood figure wears a sweater with motifs typical of the Atelier E.B aesthetic: a neoclassical update of ancient architectural ornaments. The empty legs of the orange trousers run onto a plastic mat decorated with multicoloured sprayed on patterns. The woman has light, wavy hair, fringe combed to the side. I asked Bernie Reid why he had given this figure the designer’s features without being able to stop thinking about the question of portraiture in Atelier E.B’s practice—I’m thinking of the cameos, one of which represents the Scottish architect Alexander Thomson, or of the influence of Marie Laurencin, whom Lucy McKenzie pastiched in a painting. And Reid confessed to me that the resemblance was not intentional, that often when he worked with Atelier E.B, the style he adopted was confused with that of the group’s protagonists—that the image was confused with the image.

The assimilation of the model into the aesthetics or the figure of the artist into the model—and I am also thinking of the fusion between Fanny Cornforth and the figures painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but also of the shaping of Josephine Baker by her manager Giuseppe Pepito Abatino—is something that runs through Atelier E.B’s visual research, notably through the question of the appropriation and reuse of motifs and styles.

I remember the first time I met Lucy McKenzie, it was in Ostend, Belgium. I still have an image in my mind: I can see her walking in front of me in a long, deserted suburban street. We were going to the beach. The light was yellow and bluish because of the sea spray that hung in the air, like an X-Pro II filter on my phone. It was like live Instagram and she was dressed entirely in E.B. She was the display unit of her own production and her style had no other referent than its sources: a tracksuit and a blue jumper with a Greek key design—which Beca Lipscombe says is one of the oldest and most used designs in the world. This signature pattern is also what structures Tauba Auerbach’s piece *Atelier E.B Table*. The artist has already used this same motif in her work. To install Atelier E.B.’s clothes, she created an ultra-shiny, black acrylic table, too sophisticated to be a display unit and too fragile to be a table. On it, she placed two cotton dresses with their folds arranged into waves in order to soften the rigour of the pattern running in stripes across the entire length of the fabric. The base of the table takes up the idea of this motif which, doubly embedded in white and

black, creates the joints and structure of the piece of furniture. Here, Auerbach creates a formal relationship that seems interesting to me and reminds me of the Lipscombe-McKenzie duo and the unusual machine that is Atelier E.B: an artistic and friendly production unit which shares a set of aesthetic and ethical values based in part, in my opinion, on a shared experience of the image. Because McKenzie and Lipscombe were both models: as is known, Lucy McKenzie worked for the American photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern. Of this experience she told me:

I worked on the fringes of the sex industry as a teenager and young artist, modelling for a photographer. And even if it was very light, done in a safe environment, it was a borderline experience, and people can still see these images. As a feminist, this remains an active topic for me and I am very interested in pornography's logic. It's a very dear part of my life. And socially, people treat you in a certain way because they make assumptions about you because of the images; your motivations, your availability. But we learn from experience, for me through these images of oneself, to be a subject and an object. What remains interesting is to be one thing and another at the same time.

Beca Lipscombe, who comes from the world of fashion, financed her studies by modelling. She remembers:

In the 1990s, Scottish newspapers were either tabloid or broadsheets—there was nothing in between. I worked as a model for both. For tabloids, I could hold bingo cards sitting on the shoulders of strong men. For broadsheets, I wore designer clothes and was photographed in beautiful neoclassical libraries and stately homes. Not particularly tall by model standards it was my ability to chameleon that got me work. I often did two fashion shoots for the same newspaper on the same day, so they could have two completely different fashion stories for the price of one because I never looked the same.

Lipscombe and McKenzie have experienced modelling and objectification (to shape themselves and to be shaped, meeting the expectations of the gaze and being created by the—often masculine and capitalist—gaze). Therefore, the question of the figure, whether it is installing their own clothes in shop windows or on bodies, is central. In this sense, the subjective selection of archives and documents installed in the exhibition *Passer-by* aims to highlight a more experimental and less objectifying history of the women's body as a model—one thinks of Lynn Hershman Leeson's film, *25 Windows: A Portrait of Bonwit Teller*, which relates her radical experience in New York in 1976, but also of the terracotta mannequins designed by Jeanne Lanvin, who in 1937 combined an image of the posed female body with the overpowering sense of excessive proportions. This is also how we must understand the duo's aversion to normative reproductions of bodies in shop windows and the theatrical proposal of the fake shop of modern, almost dated inspiration branded on the shopfront in round, golden letters: 'Atelier E.B'. Here, Lipscombe and McKenzie explain how they used the traditional and economic knowledge of window dressers: the clothes are devoid of humanoid supports, they are hung and suspended like dynamic and autonomous shapes by means of transparent threads and pins. This anti-fantasmatic exhibition device goes beyond the relationships of domination. Paradoxically, it 'reincarnates' the garment which is deployed in more formal and visual dimensions. This goes against the mutability of bodies and their commercial erosion. It is said that in Paris, it was the displays in shop windows and in stores that created the modern gaze and experience, not the places devoted to art or the avant-garde: one thinks in this regard of the experiences described by

Joris-Karl Huysmans, who loved to see the busts impaled on rods or placed on tables in the windows of rue Legendre in Paris.

One of the challenges of Atelier E.B’s project, which is positioned on the fringes of the fashion industry and which only materializes as a shop during exhibitions in contemporary art venues, is to be voluntarily situated on the fringes—both of fashion and of contemporary art. In this way, McKenzie explains how Atelier E.B tests the limits of artistic institutions by transforming the exhibition into a point of sale—adapting the walk-through and the gaze from the point of view of the shopping experience. Just as shopping does, the exhibition thus stimulates curiosity, amusement, appreciation and desire. Like the installation, the works appeal to the art lover’s tendency to gawk while also counteracting the distanced and institutionalized relationship at work in these spaces—because the presented works can also be touched. It is a play on confusion in the sense that, in my opinion, Atelier E.B’s work is based on a process of disidentification: with the expectations of institutions and the rhythm of fashion, its compulsive logic, its exploitation of resources and beings—assistants, interns, models...

Atelier E.B is then also the implementation of power relations and the use of communication and visual levers which allow an independent brand such as this one to take advantage of the art world’s clientele (made up of professionals, artists, amateurs and collectors) while being part of the alternative history of ready-to-wear. The two hands coming out of the wall in Anna Blessmann’s installation, moulded from her own body, are like an invitation to a fitting, and this work makes us think of the first models who worked directly in the shop. Called ‘doubles’, they were just coat racks. Transparent, they embodied the erased double of the client. Before putting on the clothes, these women’s bodies were masked by a black sheath dress, which not only distinguished them socially from the buyers but also depersonalized the clothes aesthetically while protecting them from these working bodies. The two thin arms designed by Blessmann hold a delicate satin camisole by the straps. The pose of the pink, almost translucent fingers is sensual and the saleswoman has no face. This is about undressing. Her body is dissociated as the title *Parts Two Plus One* suggests. It emerges from the wall. A soft, blue boa-like protuberance acts as a head. An Atelier E.B pendant is attached to it. On the ground, in a ball, as if thrown away, lies a garment adorned with a frieze of Greek keys.

During a public discussion, McKenzie recounted a founding event for the conceptualization of the exhibition. Together with Lipscombe they visited the famous W.A.L.T.E.R. shop in Antwerp, which is now closed. The clothes were elevated on large geometric podiums. McKenzie climbed on them to get a closer look, to touch the products, and Lipscombe pointed out to her: ‘I’m not sure you can walk on this...’ She was not sure about the invitation offered by this type of presentation device. She was not certain that it was possible to walk on a device that aims to regulate behaviour and strengthen an object’s power of attraction. She was perhaps not sure that an institutional platform could be destabilized in this involuntarily performative way. She was also unsure of the position of her accomplice and her double in the project she was watching as a spectator in the audience.