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Lucy McKenzie

Madeleine Vionnet, Betty Kirke, and Platonic Illusions

Display: Sort and Archive

In her 1991 book on Madeleine Vionnet, Betty Kirke examined the designer's life and work from multiple angles.¹ She was in a unique position to do so, thanks to her professional experience as a dressmaker, designer, and conservator. As a fashion business owner, she also understood just how atypical Vionnet's humane employment practices were for their time.

Like many, I have tried my hand at dressmaking with the patterns Kirke published, and through them, I have gained insight into the monumental amount of skill and labour that originally created them. Using the book as a guide, one is exposed to the profound intelligence, ingenuity, and talent of not only Vionnet, but also Kirke, in rendering them legible to us.

A hardcore fan consumes every scrap of material they can that relates to their object of devotion. Vionnet's oeuvre is well documented; her archive is held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, and her dresses are in museum collections all over the world. Much information is available online, but there is very little new to discover about her today. For those who want more, we must explore her work in alternative ways. This can be through scholarly research; one such example is *Exploding Fashion: From 2D to 3D to 3D Animation* (2018–2020), a project at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London) that used CGI technology to safely bring her designs to life. Or – as in my case – through more subjective methods of activation.

In 2016, I bought an unlabelled dress attributed to Vionnet at auction: a tricolour bias-cut chiffon evening gown, with a coral V-shaped front panel. Whether the dress was a genuine Vionnet or not was not of prime importance to me. Rather, I hoped that the detective work of investigating everything I could about it would catalyse a series of interlocking creative processes. Like Kirke, I could bring my own personal history and skill set to the study of Vionnet. And just like Kirke, I could express myself through the study of her.

Since its purchase, I have researched the authenticity of the dress, made replicas of several of Vionnet's designs, and, via exhibition-making, put her work in dialogue with a variety of artists and histories. These have included commercial display mannequins, Soviet public

¹ Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet* (1991; San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998).

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Taxonomies



Lucy McKenzie, *Giving Up the Shadows on My Face*, installation view, Cabinet, London, 2019.

monuments, and the Neo-classical sculptor Antonio Canova. In some exhibition contexts, I have placed her in counterposition to the projections and restrictions imposed on the female body under patriarchy: in some, she represents a symbol of Western high culture; in others, a cypher for modernity.

My work as a visual artist uses trompe l'oeil techniques to explore how painting relates to fundamental notions of style, value, and ideology. I combine these with strategies of conceptual appropriation, creating pastiche and replica. What interests me is cross-transference between artistic forms. For example, illusionistic and decorative painting techniques have qualities analogous to the traditional craft skill of couture; similarly, appropriation is a dynamic force in fashion, through quotation and homage. When these transferences operate on the fluctuating border between art and design, they can expose power dynamics that relate directly to high versus mass culture.

For thirteen years, I have been – in collaboration with designer Beca Lipscombe – creating clothing under the name Atelier E.B (E for Edinburgh, B for Brussels). We release a new collection every few years, and we do not sell in shops. Rather, we take advantage of existing networks and opportunities in the art world, which means we often stage exhibitions to contextualise our fashion. Because the audiences for art and fashion often intersect, we sell directly to visitors. With exhibitions, we show our research and express ourselves creatively. This means the clothing can remain relatively simple, leaving others free to imprint their own stories upon them. The garments are just one component in a cross-disciplinary practice.

We staged our most ambitious project to date, *Atelier E.B: Passer-by*,

in London (2018), Paris (2019), and Moscow (2020). This was simultaneously a group show, a presentation of historic material, and a retail space for our label. Its topic was the relationship between art and commercial display, including mannequins and window dressing. We did not have the kind of budget to facilitate an impressive scenography, even though the subject of the show was display. Neither could we borrow works that were too fragile or expensive to obtain. To compensate for these shortfalls, we used our own resources to plug any gaps, and replicas emerged as an important component of the show. Our request to borrow the painting *Trial and Error* by Meredith Frampton (1939) from the collection of Tate Britain was unsuccessful. So, I spent several months making as perfect a painted copy as I could, complete with trompe l'oeil frame.

I had never touched or seen the interior of historic couture before acquiring my Vionnet. Was it genuine? I had no idea how a knock-off or indeed licensed copy would compare to the real thing. I knew that Vionnet had a unique relationship to licensed copies, as she secretly produced these for the US market herself through a shell company. My dress has no label, however the material, cut, and finish are of exquisite quality. Perhaps this was how all clothing was made during the inter-war period?

I decided to try to find out if the dress was indeed an authentic Vionnet. To do this, I made a copy, like I had done of the Frampton painting. Working on it, I felt firsthand the analogy with couture, where the labour must be so well executed so as to be invisible: it remains light and feels inevitable.

First, I had the dress's blueprint reconstructed by a professional pattern maker. Indeed, the pattern corresponded with the perfect circles and quadrants Vionnet favoured. I visited the Betty Kirke archive at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and saw for myself Kirke's Vionnet toiles in calico. Then I visited the Photothèque of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, to see the model-registration photographs; although this exact dress design could not be found, I did find similar models in collections between 1931 and 1933.

I then found online images of a dress from Spring–Summer 1933 that resembled my model. It had belonged to textile collector Martin Kamer and was now in the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin. It was also unlabelled and featured similar colours and a triangular waist detail. A visit to Kamer in Switzerland confirmed that the condition and style of the dress corresponded to the one he had owned. He believed my dress was a genuine Vionnet.

Looking at photographs is incomparable to seeing a real object in the right conditions. The Kunstgewerbemuseum would not allow me access to the dress to make comparisons but kindly sent me photographs of the interior stitching. They matched.

In making my replica, I had to first learn to pre-stretch silk on the bias before construction; prior to doing that, my toile had been baggy

and shapeless. My painting assistant Josefine Reisch is an experienced dressmaker, so we worked together on matching the quality of the interior seams and hems. No matter how much I spent on fabric, I could not find silk as fine and liquid as the original. My first acceptable copy was used to dress a hand-painted mannequin as part of the exhibition *Giving Up the Shadows on My Face* at Cabinet Gallery, London, in 2019. It was exhibited alongside a painting of the mannequin in the replica dress, in reference to the importance of painted portraiture in the history of dress study.

Rebecca (2019) also had a wooden frame painted in trompe l'oeil style like the Frampton, to accentuate its artificiality. From 2007 to 2008, I studied at Van Der Kelen-Logelain, a school in Brussels specialising in traditional nineteenth-century techniques for illusion painting. Their methods for creating the illusion of wood and marble are procedural. These tried-and-tested techniques incorporate gravity, gesture, specific tools, and all the aleatory tricks you can use to aid precision, vitality, and variety.

Illusion painting has a specific effect on the viewer: a sensation often described as uncanny. This has deep roots in the Baroque, mass entertainment, and folk cultures, and other practices with deceptive effects, such as ventriloquism, magic shows, and *tableaux vivants*. While the viewer is distracted by the vertigo induced by the illusion, you have an opportunity to connect with them in a visceral way.

Not long after the *Giving Up the Shadows on My Face* exhibition, I came across a 1934 painting by Federico Beltrán Masses of the heiress and magazine director Madame Bonnardel (Madeleine de Montgomery). The gown languidly skimming her curves is the same Vionnet design as that held by the Kunstgewerbemuseum. Because I had worn a Vionnet dress, and made and painted its replica, I knew immediately that mine was from the same fabric and period. It was the way the chiffon interacted with the body: I could feel the original dress against my skin as I looked at this portrait. It draped in exactly the same way. And the colours – always missing from photographs of the time – were the same.

The Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 offered the time and concentration I needed to attempt some other Vionnet replicas: *L'Orage* from 1922 and *Quatre Mouchoirs* from 1920. In 2022, I made my version of Model 920 from 1921 using the pattern that the *Exploding Fashion* project had created and published. Every model demanded a new procedural approach. Each time, I had to make an average of seven versions before I got close to something I would consider wearable. The published patterns and descriptions were a good guide, but did not contain all the necessary information: under slips were missing, and there was no indication of sizing. I thought a visit to the exhibition *Luxes* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 2021 would help, because *L'Orage* was on display. Unfortunately, the museum's conditions, including artificial lighting and alarmed barriers, meant I did not learn any more than I

Lucy McKenzie, *Leaning Mannequin (Roman Statue / L'Orage)*, 2021, fibreglass, acrylic and oil paint, silk dress with gold braid, gym shoes, 60 × 168 × 70 cm.





Lucy McKenzie, details of the replica murals in the Vionnet salon by Georges de Feure, 2016, five parts; 4 parts 180 × 110 cm (each) and 1 part 180 × 180 cm.

could have from a reproduction in a book. Another visitor measured it for me with an iPhone application, and a friendly museum guard held up my version so I could compare it to the original. I had to heed the advice of curator Harold Koda, one of the many experts I pestered for more information on L'Orage. He told me Kirke considered hers as “platonic” copies – interpretations intended to unlock the essence of the dress without being slavish replicas – and this helped me to relax and stop trying to make “perfect” facsimiles.

My platonic copies were made to gain insight into Vionnet’s working process, to get close to her, to feel her creativity from as many angles as possible. It was an act of veneration. By wearing and moving in these dresses, I could also connect haptically to my forebears, the kind of women who appreciated her vision at the time. Women like me, who perhaps liked to walk alone in the city and feel the interaction of silk with their skin and muscles, as they took in their reflection in the shop window of a department store.

As a painter of monumental murals and lover of interior décor, I was also fascinated by the paintings Vionnet had commissioned for her salon by Georges de Feure. These depicted women from antiquity wearing some of Vionnet’s iconic gowns. In researching the exhibition *Passer-by*, Beca Lipscombe and I had discovered that the subjects we wanted to know more about were often the kind that fell between the cracks and

were absent from archives. For instance, the commercial jobs undertaken by artists for money are frequently considered outside of their oeuvre and not worth preserving. The murals commissioned by Vionnet were not typical of Feure’s style, and I could not locate colour images of the works. I looked through all the Vionnet material I could find to match the depicted dresses and accessories with actual garments and coloured them accordingly. The resulting work, *Vionnet Salon Murals after Georges de Feure (North East, North West, South East, South West)* (2016), was exhibited in the group show *'33 — '29 — '36* at UMPRUM, Prague, in 2016, where Vionnet’s work was put in dialogue with several contemporary female artists and Czech modernism.

I have a high degree of tolerance for and kinship with inauthenticity. Working as a teenage pornographic model, I learned how one’s image can be commodified for profit and how distant that is from one’s private self. Projecting a false impression of innocence and availability felt like the same kind of trompe l’oeil I would later learn to paint. By participating in the scripted space of pornography, I had – literally and metaphorically – skin in the game. It was a formative experience in exploring the space between fake and real – with real-life consequences. As an art student, I also worked as a painter’s model, posing for semi-erotic paintings that emulated popular prints of the day, depicting women as neo-noir vamps. I enjoyed experiencing the gaps between



high art and popular culture through my body.

One impetus for the exhibition *Passer-by* came from the fact that the term “only window dressing” is used pejoratively, implying superficiality. This is a well-known gambit in belittling women’s concerns as insubstantial and lowbrow. Another impetus was the obstacles we had encountered trying to find suitable mannequins on which to present our fashion. This seemed puzzling to us, considering how frequently mannequins have been repurposed in visual art, most famously by the Surrealists. This opened many avenues of research, one of which was how mannequins interacted with the female body as a site of conflict. We found that the discourse around mannequins and sex workers often overlapped: both acting as a projection screen for patriarchal fantasies while being considered mute objects without personhood.

For our brand, we choose not to display our clothing on commercial mannequins, but through the craft of suspending and pinning garments in dynamic poses for a dramatic and uncanny effect. These are installed by professional “trimmers” inside custom-made sculptures that resemble scaled-down shop fronts. As physical retail recedes, those idiosyncratic hand-dressed windows look more and more like a precious artisan skill to be preserved.

Vionnet’s logo, illustrated by Thayaht (the pseudonym of artist and designer Ernesto Michahelles), is a striking example of a mannequin in two-dimensional form. Rather than depicting an idealised, thin, young, white, female consumer as in most fashion illustration of the time, it shows a genderless, sculptural figure draping in a simple piece of cloth. It is mannequins’ humanity – their abjection and vulgarity – that makes them so problematic in fashion and so useful in art. In the former, they are there to sell dreams and, in the latter, disquietude and unease. In my solo practice, I have worked with display mannequins as sculptures since 2017. Mine are hybrid objects, considered in relation to their non-commercial co-workers: figurative sculpture and ethnographic display dummies that do not need to sell the garments they wear, but rather embody a racial or cultural archetype. My mannequin sculptures have their anonymous egg-shaped heads replaced with casts of statues: in some cases, John the Baptist as depicted by Donatello; in others, the secular saint Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. She was a teenage Soviet partisan murdered by the German Army in 1941, posthumously declared a hero of the Soviet Union and depicted in many public monuments today.

A mannequin is meant to recede; it elevates the garment it wears without overwhelming it. My figures do not: they are in partnership with the clothes I display on them, which are often Vionnet replicas. Mannequins are symbols of hypercapitalism, expressing the beauty ideals (and manufacturing methods) of their time. By combining all these elements – the body of a mannequin dressed in modernist couture with the head of a socialist hero – I want to animate the tension between

Lucy McKenzie, '33 - '29 - '36, collective exhibition, UM Gallery – AAAD, Prague, Czech Republic, 2016.

highly mediated aesthetic worlds and put them in dialogue.

In 2023, my exhibition *Vulcanizzato* at Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, placed these hybrid mannequins in relation to the eighteenth-century Neo-classical sculptor Antonio Canova. Neo-classicism is a container in which to explore serial replication, the primacy of surface and the role of creativity in proximity to power. By contrast, it accentuates the radicality and modernity of anything it comes into contact with; the work of Vionnet is exemplary of this. Her use of classical motifs and her brand's status as exclusive luxury obscured just how forward-looking it actually was.

In my work, Vionnet embodies many things. In a world built for and by men, she is a figure who devoted herself, through her ethical business practices, to women's needs and realities. With her designs, she responded to and shaped women's fantasies, proposing a new kind of freedom. For me, she embodies the gulf between the erotic and the pornographic. The erotic is wild and idiosyncratic sensuality that can be found in unexpected places. Pornography, on the other hand, is the weaponisation of desire under capitalism, with its cold, industrialised, and possessive mechanisms. For me, Vionnet embodies the truly erotic, prioritising the body as a site for experience. The strength and autonomy I feel wearing her clothes is not inspired by the gaze of others: it is how I *feel*, not just how I look. Anyone who undertakes a study of her life and work cannot help but reflect on their own relationship to their body: what defines its sensuality, intellect, and freedom in both public and private space.



Lucy McKenzie and Antonio Canova,
Vulcanizzato, installation view,
Pinacoteca Agnelli Turin, Italy, 2023.