

WINTER ARTS GUIDE 2017

When art is in fashion

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, January 26, 2017, 10:00 p.m.



An Amy Congdon back piece from "CODED_COUTURE." LORNAJANENEWMAN.COM

‘How in God’s name can anybody wear that?’

That’s what Lynda Hartigan, deputy director of the Peabody Essex Museum, says she expects many visitors to think when they see the garments on display in the museum’s “WOW® World of WearableArt.™” Hartigan curated the exhibition, which opens on Feb. 18.

Three shows in the area this winter will likely prompt that question. That's the canny trick of wearable art: It makes us think about art in relation to our own bodies, sometimes in uncomfortable or hare-brained ways.

“WOW®” highlights the outlandish concoctions of a host of international designers, artists, and others who made a splash in the annual wearable art competition in New Zealand for which the show is named. The aim: to be as creative as possible, using the body as a canvas.

Many of the “WOW®” outfits are pure fun, but some have unexpected depths. Hartigan points to Marjolein Dallinga's “Skin,” a spiky red ensemble made from felted wool and silk.

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“This is not fluffy stuff,” says Hartigan. “[Dallinga] talks about the pain of her interior world.”

The outfit, she adds, “looks aggressive, exotic, fanciful, but super-soft. She thinks of it as

enveloping protection.”

Notably less protective is Lauren McCarthy’s “Happiness Hat,” in the “Body Politic” exhibit at OPEN, a new gallery in the leather district: When it senses you’re not smiling, it pricks you.


And, at “CODED_COUTURE” at Tufts University Art Gallery, “Holy Dress,” from Melissa Coleman, Joachim Rotteveel, and Leonie Smelt, is wired with a lie detector and a shock-training dog collar. It’s fun to picture certain politicians outfitted with similar gizmos.

Couture, traditionally, is handwork that makes a garment unique to its wearer.

“CODED_COUTURE” extrapolates custom design to include fashion that springs from different types of coding, genetic to digital.

“In this me-me time, when we’re all the stars of our own reality shows, this is part of the movement of personalization,” says co-curator Judith Hoos Fox. Imagine wearing Amy Congdon’s) designs for jewelry grown from your own skin cells.





Xuedi Chen and Pedro Oliveira's "x-pose." SARAH NEWMAN

The November election inspired the distinctly dystopic "Body Politic." Curator Laura Zittrain tapped mostly women and artists of color to explore fashion as a means of resistance; the show also takes on OPEN's mission of showcasing art that critiques the relationship between society and technology.

Xuedi Chen and Pedro Oliveira's "x-pose," for instance, is a bodice that grows more transparent every time the wearer uses Google — and Google gathers information about the wearer.

"'Body Politic' is showing us that just treating the symptoms of problems in society is problematic," says Boaz Sender, OPEN's gallery director. "Our responsibility is to notice that tendency, and to engage in civic discourse."

The intersection of technology and fashion is red-hot. Last year, two major exhibitions addressed it: the Museum of Fine Arts' "#techstyle" and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology." "CODED_COUTURE" and "Body Politic" extend the trend. Some works examine the complicated role fashion plays for women.

"Ying Gao's garments of super organza — silk threads — respond to gaze," says Fox, of "CODED_COUTURE." "If I'm staring at you, the dress starts to move, to protect and shield you. Others react to voice or to light, or to breath."

In contrast, "emPowered," Brittany Cohen and Emmeline Franklin's dress shown in a video at "Body Politic," invitingly unlocks a shoulder strap when the wearer takes on a power pose.



David Walker's "Lady of the Wood." COURTESY OF WORLD OF WEARABLEART LIMITED

The garments in "WOW®" have less utility, but perhaps more heart.

David Walker, a computer programmer from Alaska, designed "Beast in the Beauty" as a tribute to the

David Walker, a carpenter from Alaska, designed *Beast in the Beauty* as a tribute to the dignity and beauty of women with cancer. His late wife, who died of breast cancer, collaborated with him.

“It looks like a fancy dressed piece of armor, almost, on a female form,” says Hartigan. “You’ll look at the headpiece and say, ‘That’s a helmet.’ It’s smooth blond wood, to signify baldness from chemo.”

Walker weaves symbols throughout the piece, such as pink laces on the boots to denote breast-cancer awareness.

While the all-wood “Beast in the Beauty” sounds more like sculpture than fashion, one of the aims of the show, Hartigan says, is to celebrate “the category-busting.” Besides, “Beast in the Beauty” is indeed wearable.

“That is a key criterion for the competition. If you can stand up in it, then it’s wearable,” says Hartigan. “You may not be able to sit down.”

WOW® World of WearableArt™

At Peabody Essex Museum, 161 Essex St., Salem, Feb. 18-June 11. 978-745-9500,

www.pem.org

CODED_COUTURE

At Tufts University Art Gallery, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford, through May 21. 617-627-3518,

artgallery.tufts.edu

BODY POLITIC

At OPEN, 201 South St., through Feb. 24. galleryopen.org

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