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Fashion Forward: Toronto (ad)dresses the future

special needs | wearable tech | sustainability | choice

We wanted to say "No" this season.

— Viktor Horsting ad Rolf Snoeren

Fashionistas have come to expect the unexpected from Dutch design team Viktor and Rolf. But even against that background, the show of their Fall 2008 Ready-to-Wear collection was disconcerting. Opening with a precise, grey trench coat featuring the word "No" bulging from its chest, the extravaganza highlighted models with "NO" emblazoned in black on their faces and ended with a strapless black dress that declared "Dream on" in embroidery. Stark refusals — but of what? Parsing this odd combination of decisiveness and directionlessness, Olivier Zahm, editor of the magazine *Purple*, said, "We have to protest, but today we don't know *why* we have to protest."

Contrary to Zahm's analysis, the designers in *Fashion Forward* have some good ideas about why they might protest — starting from the tiredness of the cliché about fashion serving no purpose. To complain that fashion has no point is to say that ineffable concepts like imagination and aspiration are irrelevant. True, these notions have been under attack from the collection of ideas known as postmodernism for decades. But this onslaught, its persistence and insight notwithstanding, hasn't dislodged our sense that we're free in our minds, if nowhere else. At the very least, most of us still believe that we can, and should, think of ourselves and our world as other than they are.

In Toronto, this perspective has long been sustained by designers whose clothes invite us to look at ourselves differently, often with a sense of humour — as in the case of the Comrags coat in this exhibit, treated to look as if street salt has damaged it irreparably. Together with Hoax Couture, Comrags points to a long-standing, underappreciated community of fashion designers who encourage us to think of clothing as aesthetic objects rather than simply utilitarian coverings for our backs. And, with more space, far more people could be included: Jeremy Laing, Philip Sparks, Nada Sheperd, Lucian Matis and many others.

On the fringes of this community are designers who encourage us to rethink the very idea of clothing, again often with a sense of humour and a sly edge of commentary. Thus, Christabel proposes an improbable 'what if' with his rainbow-hued hooded robe for the "gay KK" (just the thing should the Klan develop a counterpart to the Log Cabin Republicans), and Lily Cornell has anticipated the possibility of an evening getting too dark by creating a dress that lights up.

The impracticality, delicacy and bizarreness of some of these pieces can prompt us to wonder why they exist: who would wear such a thing? But this complaint misses the point. It's not about having your feet on the ground. It's about the good that can happen when your head's in the clouds.

This attitude has everything to do with the Toronto fashion community's restless curiosity, which not only endlessly reconsiders what clothing might be — how new materials and processes might be used, historical motifs revisited, and so on — but also how the fashion community might relate to its broader context. And the larger point of *Fashion Forward* is to explore this inventiveness as inspiring new forms of social responsiveness.

By forcing the issue of what new possibilities are presented to us by emerging technologies and ideas, these designers pick up on an important thread of fashion's history: William McDonough and Michael Braungart, in their influential book *Cradle to Cradle*, argue that fashion was key to driving the

industrial revolution. The bulk of *Fashion Forward* presents work by Toronto designers who are participating in equivalent revolutions today around wearable technology, special needs and sustainability, often in ways that merge at least two of these concerns.

In this context, Lily Cornell's LED-infused dress is unusual, a lighter side of wearable technology. But its playfulness has an important counterpart in the "Earwear" hearing aids produced by Mimi Shulman. Born hard of hearing and later trained as an artist (she's a graduate of OCAD), Shulman decided a decade and a half ago to confront her disability directly. Bucking the trend to make hearing aids less and less visible, Shulman developed a line of devices that are playful fashion accessories. One looks like a batwing. Another, shaped like a banana, comes with a t-shirt that provides the Ernie and Bert punch line: "I can't hear you. I've got a banana in my ear." Meanwhile, a collaboration between Ocorant and George Brown College is investigating new ways of attaching heart monitors to make them practical to wear for the long-term — a complicated issue that could dramatically increase the data collected by these devices.

Of course, clothing doesn't have to be hi-tech to address special needs, since day-to-day routines also present challenges. Opening and closing a purse can be complicated for women with lymphedema, an acute swelling of arms and hands often linked to breast cancer. So Susan Barnwell, Sandra Tullio-Pow and Joyce Nyhof-Young produced a line of bags that are easier to use, and that conceal a sling because lymphedema sufferers often need support for their afflicted arm. By addressing special needs, these designers and others like them change the wearer's relationship to society. Izzy Camilleri makes her stylish Adaptable Clothing for seated clients. Lida Baday helped Taxi Communications celebrate their 15th anniversary by working with them to produce the 15 Below jacket for distribution to Toronto's homeless; this rain jacket rolls up for storage and can be insulated with newspaper.

A side-benefit of the 15 Below garment is that it removes waste paper from the garbage stream — a point worth mentioning since the use of recycled materials and other environmentally sustainable processes is a growing trend in the Toronto fashion community. Earlier this year, the Toronto Fashion Incubator launched *Fashioning Sustainability*, a handbook of resources, practices and marketing strategies published as a pdf so that readers can print only the pages they need. But this publication is part of a broader tendency, represented in *Fashion Forward* by the recycled materials in the bags by jack & marjorie and the clothing by Susan Harris, and the emphasis on sustainable materials and processes in the dresses by Wendy Traas.

Given that fashion — from multinationals to cottage industries — primarily targets women, a key subtheme of this project is the issue of how clothing choices mediate a woman's view of her relation to society. For decades the fashion world has been criticized for reinforcing the expectation that women should look sexy — yet Izzy Camilleri was right to create clothing that expanded what we consider alluring to include disabled women. Such leaps of imagination remind us that there could be another side to the challenge to "dream on" provoked by the little black dress in Viktor and Rolf's "No" collection. We're used to hearing this phrase as a petulant, adolescent provocation. But it also could be a call to action. We're not there yet, wherever "there" might be. Keep imagining, keep thinking, keep dreaming.

— Charles Reeve, Curator

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fashion Forward: Toronto (ad)resses the futures was produced with the support of the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council, and with support from Creed Dry Cleaning. Special thanks also to Coupe Bizarre Hairdressing.



CONTRIBUTORS TO THE EXHIBITION

Comrags (Joyce Gunhouse & July Cornish) Lily Cornell jack & marjorie (Meghan Parsons) Taxi Communications	Hoax Couture (Jim Searle & Chris Tyrell) Christabel Mimi Shulman Izzy Camilleri
Susan Barnwell, Ryerson University, Faculty of Communication & Design	Lucia Dell'Agnese, Ryerson University, Fashion
Sandra Tullio-Pow, Ryerson University, Faculty of Communication & Design;	Alex Ferworn, Ryerson University, Computer Science
Dr. Joyce Nyhof-Young, Department of Radiation Oncology, University of Toronto, Princess Margaret Hospital Susan Harris	Const. Kevin Barnum, Canine Handler, Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), Provincial Emergency Response Team (PERT) Wendy Traas
Dawn Davidson, George Brown College	Sami Torbey, Ocorant

This exhibit also marks the inauguration of Gord Peteran's *Inbox*, the Professional Gallery's new entrance. *Inbox* was made possible by generous support from Ernie and Louise Kerr and features a massive assemblage of objects donated by OCAD faculty, staff, students and alumni. Gord Peteran's exhibits "Furniture Meets Its Maker" and "Recent Work" are at the University of Toronto Art Centre (15 King's College Circle) until December 5th.

HOURS AND EVENTS

The OCAD Professional Gallery and all its events are free and open to the public.

Fashion Forward: Toronto (ad)dresses the futures is at the OCAD Professional Gallery from October 21, 2009 to January 24, 2010. The gallery is located in OCAD's main building at 100 McCaul Street. The gallery is open Wednesday through Friday 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday noon to 6 p.m. The gallery is closed Tuesdays, Wednesdays and holidays.

Panel discussions:

Fashion Forward: Special Needs

Tuesday November 10, 6:30 pm

Chaired by Kenny Fries, Goddard College

Author of *The History of My Shoes and the evolution of Darwin's Theory* (De Capo, 2007).

Fashion Forward: Wearable Technology

Tuesday January 19, 2010, 6:30 pm

Chaired by Sara Diamond, president of the Ontario College of Art & Design.

For more information on the Professional Gallery and its programs, please go to www.ocad.ca/progallery or visit us on Facebook.