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Throughout time the social and political influence of cloth has been felt in every realm of society. Textile has long been associated with history, memory and identity. Its very essence permeates our lives from the time of our birth and beyond the moment of our death; its very presence and style locates our memory in a period of time; it is often described as 'having memory' – a memory that holds not only form, but also a sense of experience and history.

In the forward to the book *Cloth & Human Experience*, Schneider and Weiner describe cloth as representing "the key dilemmas of social and political life: How to bring the past actively into the present" (Schneider & Weiner, 1989, p. 29). The artists Reiko Sudo, Trish Little and Christian Bumbarra Thompson create works which, in vastly different ways, bring the past very much into our present.

Traditional practices often play a very important part in contemporary textiles. They offer the opportunity to connect with past times of ritual and tradition and afford the contemporary artist the ability to adapt and develop new ways of interpreting historic practice through contemporary applications.

The work of Reiko Sudo and NUNO Corporation offers a melding of the traditional with the contemporary, blending traditional processes and techniques with the latest technological developments in synthetics and computerised processes. This amalgamation of traditional sensibility with the latest possibilities available in science echoes the development of contemporary Japanese society, where purity and the subtle elegance of tradition co-exist with the manic urgency of all that is offered in a technological consumerist society.



Reiko Sudo_NUNO *Maku*

The installation *Maku* presents us with a series of cylindrical lengths of cloth creating unique spaces which carry within them the symbolic power of traditional meaning. The 'memory' of cloth is utilised and beautifully exploited by Sudo and her design team at NUNO through the careful use of traditional processes, finely tuned and refined by artisans who are connected through their cultural traditions to another time. These time-honoured processes and techniques are explored without nostalgic constraints, applied to and with contemporary media, creating textiles of incredible beauty. These sumptuous creations are not developed purely for the walls of museums or galleries, but created with the intention that they be applied to everyday use.

The works of Trish Little have often been excavations of the domestic and everyday space. In this new work Little offers us stories (histories) of special moments experienced. Her work *Sub Rosa* consists of twelve red evening dresses, full of the reminiscence and recycled memories of special events. These dresses are coaxed and shaped, then secured with pins and presented like souvenirs (memento mori) of experiences of days gone by.

Little's use of the discard and its manipulation through processes and materials of 'low technology', emphasise the associations to past experience, and connect the viewer to the tactile quality of the materials she employs, offering triggers for our own memories. These 'special frocks' prompt the recollection of dress-up and the opportunity for the individual to re-live a 'special' time. Through the recollection of an adopted image and identity, somewhat more glamorous and exotic to the reality of everyday existence, the individual is able to re-live the excitement of a special moment and event in time.

The very deliberate use of the red dress prompts our contemplation of the symbolism intrinsic in this primal hue – life, passion, death. While the title of the work (*Sub Rosa*) refers to "sacred mysteries, not to be revealed to the uninitiated" (Little, 2004), this in fact alludes to the secret stories and associations that we make privately about our previous experience and personal history.

Another type of historical connection is explored in the work of Christian Bumbarra Thompson. Entitled *Emotional Striptease*, this series of photographic images acknowledges traditional ancestry while presenting new visualisations of the contemporary urban Aboriginal.



Trish Little *Sub Rosa*



Christian Bumbarra Thompson
Emotional Striptease

The garment forms worn by the individual in each image, conjure memories of colonial representations of Aboriginal people. Often photographed in studios wearing Victorian costume, they looked out of place and uncomfortable in a situation quite alien to their natural environment. This 'fashioning' of indigenous Australians was a quite deliberate attempt to make them acceptable to Victorian society. Chris Townsend, when discussing the use of costume in film as a device in constructing identity, comments that "The frivolous and the transitory become vital elements in a strikingly artificial architecture of identity" (Townsend, 2002, p. 89). Thompson uses the frivolous elements of colonial costume to encourage the viewer to consider representations of 'artificial individuals', created to satisfy society's need for a recognisable and therefore acceptable image.

Thompson employs a photographic style reminiscent of contemporary fashion photography, utilising a combination of staged poses, heightened colours and carefully placed elements. The deliberate use of traditional weapons and artefacts, along with elaborate backdrops, construct a narrative that encourages the viewer to question past representations of Aboriginal people.

While Thompson has used a variety of elements and visual devices within the photographic prints to reference an ancestral past, this series of images presents young contemporary individuals, empowered with an identity in which they feel completely at home.

The possibilities of textiles continue to present us with old and new forms to reinterpret and evaluate. Through the use of traditional practice coupled with new technologies, the on-going connection of cloth to human experience and the ability of clothing to define our identity, textiles continue to permeate our existence while developing and adapting to retain their relevance in a contemporary society. The works of Reiko Sudo, Trish Little and Christian Bumbarra Thompson present us with new histories, fresh memories and alternative identities, continuing the experience of textiles into the future.

References

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