

“WINDOW SHOPPER”

Christian McNab

The window display has traditionally had a relationship with the arts since the rise of the department store in the mid-nineteenth century. Art has a unique value which exists beyond the quick turnover of fashion. Aligning with this value, department stores sought to lure customers through window displays into physical shopping environments where leisurely consumption could commence. Many American artists including Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg began their careers as window dressers in top American department stores. In earlier periods, the window display was an opulent and extravagant spectacle, whereas today we can see the influence of the 'white cube' in the presentation of objects which are aesthetically elevated through their isolation. The layout of Apple's stores was the forerunner in this approach, with the products presented reflecting their all-in-one purpose and constructed necessity in contemporary life.

The project “Window Shopper – A Fashion Showcase” was presented in the Vitrine or V-Space of the Robertson Library (the joint library of the Dunedin College of Education and the Otago Polytechnic) between 30 June and 11 July 2014. Taking the V-Space's glass display cabinet as the show's starting point, the title “Window Shopper” referred to the mechanisms of display in both digital and physical dimensions. Dissecting themes around art, fashion, and retail within a contemporary framework, “Window Shopper” presented a selection of garments designed in collaboration with artists Nikki Cain, Ted Whitaker, Spencer Hall and Lisandru Grigorut, alongside individual works, and incorporated utilitarian display devices.

The exhibition explored several crossovers from within my recent practice – themes around notions of functionality and the relationship of objects to the body. “Window Shopper” sought to extend these ideas into the digital realm, considering ideas of private and public spheres and the materiality of these spaces.

Originally I conceived “Window Shopper” specifically for the vitrine space. The V-Space is not a traditional gallery in the white cube sense. It is comfortably located within the entrance of the Robertson Library. As a space of exchange and transfer; it was the perfect environment to experiment with a project that pushed conceptual and interdisciplinary boundaries. The V-Space has a large amount of foot traffic from a mostly young student demographic, many of whom are not regular gallery visitors or who have limited exposure to contemporary art. In the installation, it was important to allow the exhibit to be looked at from any angle while playing with the reflective nature of the glass surface. I understood that many people would simply pass by without stopping, so the idea of window shopping quickly with one's eyes became a focus.

As one enters the library, a large video work proclaims “2K14” in a bright font on a white background. Where fashion has a cyclic nature, art supposedly mirrors what is culturally happening at a specific period in time. Will the “Window Shopper” collection look good next year? Or fade away, only to look good in five or ten years time? The date serves as a signature for a body of work fixed to a moment. Fresh now, potentially faded tomorrow.

“Window Shopping” refers to the activity of experiencing goods in a leisurely way without purchasing anything. In both a literal and metaphorical sense this was explored in the installation. Behind the two glass panes sit the garments, displayed in elegant perfection in the communal space of the library foyer. Clothing oneself is a private action. The installation describes an interior space which is held behind the glass screen, accessible with one's eyes

but not by body or touch. The works are withheld from their normal use, instead functioning as frames for signs and symbols of digital and material culture. The single wall work presents an architectural draft print of a mirror for sale on Trade Me. Rendered as a thin digital tracing, the decorative frame maps out a private domestic space accessible from the communal space of the Web. Where exposure on the Internet is entirely about projection and the construction of our image through decorative means, the mirror reflects a physical reality enacted by the object's materiality. There are countless examples of these 'still life' works on Trade Me, each revealing an interesting observation of space. It is only through the act of selling that they become images of public spaces.

The garments constructed in "Window Shopper" reflect ideas of screen culture. Situated between casual ready-to-wear, surf, and comfort, the pieces subtly proclaim "pure heaven" and "2K14" in their branding. The collection could be seen as garments embodying a post-internet approach to dressing and style, where one connects with the world from the comfort of the lounge.

The collaboration process of "Window Shopper" involved sending participating artists a brief description of the project and a series of adjectives. Garments were then designed which related to the images received, with an emphasis on the material and design choices in their overall construction. Graphics were screen-printed, followed by construction in a process emulating a swift sweatshop momentum.

"Window Shopper" was the culmination of multiple interests, some related directly to my art practice, others more to an ongoing interest in design. The decision to include other artists in the project was a new development in my practice. Although I directed the initial concept and constructed the pieces, the conceptual scope of the exhibition was broadened by the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Fashion is a creative process involving many people: a designer may draw a sketch, but it is realised through a cumulative process of fluid exchange and tweaking with multiple parties.

Christian McNab is an artist from Dunedin. Having recently completed a certificate in fashion design at the Otago Polytechnic Design School, he is completing a BVA at the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 1. Christian McNab, *Window Shopper*, (2014), garment prints designed in collaboration with: Lisandru Grigorut, Ted Whitaker, Nikki Cain and Spencer Hall. Photograph by Craig McNab.