

EXHIBITION REVIEW: “THE FASHION WORLD OF JEAN PAUL GAULTIER: FROM THE SIDEWALK TO THE CATWALK,” NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE.

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Curated by Thierry-Maxime Lorient of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), “The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk” was collaboratively organised by the MMFA and Maison Jean Paul Gaultier, Paris.¹ The first truly international exhibition of works by French couturier Jean Paul Gaultier; this exhibition was first shown in 2011 in Montreal. I was fortunate to experience it at its ninth venue, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne, Australia, during December 2014.

In the gallery, over 140 cutting-edge couture and ready-to-wear garments created between 1970 and 2014 were exhibited alongside accessories, sketches, fashion photography, contemporary artworks and stage costumes. Also included were filmed excerpts from runway shows, films, concerts, television programs and dance performances.² All celebrate Gaultier’s avant-garde creations and rich collaborations.



Figure 1. Jean Paul Gaultier; outfit inspired by ‘Sandy’ from the movie *Grease*. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Figure 2. Jean Paul Gaultier; surfer mannequin. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

The original Montreal show evolved as the exhibition toured, with each venue adding its own unique flavour. The NGV installation included a focus on Gaultier's use of Australian muses such as Nicole Kidman, Catherine McNeil and Alexandra Agoston. However, 100 works remain unchanged to be celebrated internationally. The curators had divided the exhibition pieces into seven themed displays – Odyssey, Boudoir, Punk Cancan, Skin Deep, Metropolis, Urban Jungle and Muses – each illustrating the passions, influences and obsessions which have formed Gaultier's signature look throughout his long career.

Jean Paul Gaultier's Australian muses were introduced to visitors as they entered the gallery by means of large-scale mural portraits of Cate Blanchett, Kylie Minogue, Gemma Ward and Andreja Pejic. These were commissioned by the NGV and painted by Melbourne-based street artist Rone. In addition, visitors encountered two other Australian-themed items before entering the Odyssey gallery. The first was a black leather bustier and pants outfit, inspired by Olivia Newton-John's character Sandy Olsson in the 1978 movie *Grease*, part of "Let's Dance with the Stars," Gaultier's women's ready-to-wear collection for spring–summer 2014. Secondly, welcoming visitors to the exhibition was a tribute to the Australian beach lifestyle – sailor-style swimming trunks, from his men's ready-to-wear collection for spring–summer 2008.

Entering the exhibition proper, visitors had many of their senses engaged in the blue-tinted Odyssey room through the presentation of sparkling Madonnas, singing mermaids and full-voiced sailors, all signature motifs of Gaultier's creative practice. Gaultier himself was represented by one of over 30 high-tech animated mannequins included in the exhibition, wearing his signature blue-and-white Breton stripes. Viewers were welcomed warmly by a mannequin relaying Gaultier's voice in both English and French.

These animated mannequin effects are achieved through the use of high-definition audiovisual systems that project facial images onto the individually sculptured mannequin heads. I did a double take as mannequins appeared to come to life – they sang, laughed, smiled, winked and even whistled suggestively. Gaultier collaborated with Quebec theatre company UBU to design and manufacture the mannequins' diverse ethnicities and body shapes. These two signature components of Gaultier's approach to fashion are realised through the mannequins as they portray multiple skin-tone finishes and varied sizes and proportions.³



Figure 4. Jean Paul Gaultier; mannequins illustrating the lack of a divide between men's and women's fashion. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Figure 3. Jean Paul Gaultier; animated mannequins including one representing Gaultier himself. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Feeling more like a traditional museum setting, the 'Boudoir' room highlighted Gaultier's fascination with lingerie as outerwear.⁴ He pushes boundaries through the reworking of corsets, waist-cinches and the hoops and cages of crinolines, highlighting his longstanding concern with the defining of gender through dress. Here visitors were confronted with skirts and corsets for men and the mixing of masculine with feminine elements.

Punk Cancan also illustrated nonconformist fashion. Here I was transported back to the 1980s through the blaring music and punk London aesthetic. A moving runway displaying a number of Gaultier's couture works (echoing Paris) stood proudly amongst the deconstructed denim and mohawks, encouraging the viewer to consider diverse societal and aesthetic codes within the one exhibit.



Figure 5. Jean Paul Gaultier; mannequins with garments inspired by the streets of 1970s London. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Figure 6. Jean Paul Gaultier; moving 'Parisian' runway. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Highlighting the beauty of the human body, Skin Deep featured body stockings, printed lace and the tactful placement of embroidered beading, all intended to challenge traditional concepts of beauty. Framed by red curtains and red light, a number of mannequins were stacked in cubicles as part of a wall setting, emulating the erotic street windows of Amsterdam. The X-rated feel achieved in the garments and accessories presented in this room reflected Gaultier's interest in the figure of the dominatrix.⁵



Figure 7. Jean Paul Gaultier; mannequins wearing printed stockings as outer garments. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Figure 8. Jean Paul Gaultier; mannequins posed in dimly lit 'red light district.' National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Figure 9. Jean Paul Gaultier, kaleidoscopic appearance of Metropolis display, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Figure 10. Jean Paul Gaultier; mannequins displaying diverse cultural influences. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

A mirrored backdrop provided a dramatic setting for *Metropolis*, where Gaultier's many collaborative works of costuming – not only for film and within the pop and rock world, but also for ballet and theatre – were presented. This theatrically staged display truly was an entertainment spectacle.

The mixing of varied influences informed the *Urban Jungle*, where scenes from the animal kingdom and interactions between cultures and religions created an extravagant display of hybrid fashion. Highlighting the couturier's use of unusual materials and refined techniques, the up-close viewpoint offered here enabled an appreciation of the unexpected, as traditional approaches to fashion continued to be challenged by Gaultier's skill and craftsmanship.

The *Muses* room concluded the Melbourne exhibition, clearly illustrating not only Gaultier's use of his Australian-born muses, but also the inspiration he openly gains through the inclusion of less conventional models in his work, and his embracing of differences through attention to questions of gender, sexuality, body type and culture. These are all areas often overlooked by the fashion industry, but considered and executed beautifully by Gaultier.

Gaultier's reputation for designing with both daring and humour; but also with an awareness of difference, is clearly evident within the large body of work seen in the exhibition. Over the years, Gaultier has broken down preconceived notions of beauty through his cutting-edge designs. I feel fortunate indeed to have experienced this celebration of the imaginative works of this unique French couturier.



Figure 11. Jean Paul Gaultier; haute couture gowns worn by Kylie Minogue mannequin. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

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- 1 Thierry-Maxime Lorient, *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Catwalk to Australia* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2014), 4.
- 2 "The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk," 17 Oct 2014 – 8 Feb 2015, National Gallery of Victoria, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/jeanpaulgaultier/overview.html>. [accessed 12 June 2015].
- 3 *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, ed. Thierry-Maxime Lorient (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts with Abrams, 2013), 389.
- 4 *100 Contemporary Fashion Designers*, ed. Terry Jones (Cologne: Taschen, 2013), 218.
- 5 Charlotte Seeling, *Fashion, 150 Years: Couturiers, Designers, Labels* (Potsdam: Ullmann, 2013), 221.