

The third GSK Contemporary exhibition at the RA's Burlington Gardens galleries tackles the ecological, social and political influence of fashion on art. Co-curator, artist and designer Lucy Orta tells *Ben Luke* what's in store for the show

Fashion statements

Andreas Gursky's *Kuwait Stock Exchange* (2007, opposite) is an epic and enigmatic work by this German master of photography. Shot from a high vantage point typical of Gursky's work, the picture takes an overview of the trading floor where hundreds of men are milling about reading screens and talking either amongst themselves or on the phone.

What stands out is their uniform of flowing white gowns. These men are dressed not in the suits that we associate with the City and Wall Street, but in traditional, ankle-length *thawb* smock and *ghutra* headdress which, set against the red chairs and floor, give the photograph an extraordinary formal beauty. This single image at once creates a reflection of globalisation and the shift in centres of global finance, a stunning formal symmetry and colour harmony, and a striking evocation of the importance of clothing to cultural and social identity.

Gursky's photograph is one of the highlights of the third and final GSK Contemporary exhibition, 'Aware: Art, Fashion, Identity', which continues the series' commitment to showing contemporary artists' responses to environmental, social and political issues. The exhibition takes the baton from last year's GSK exhibition, 'Earth: Art of a Changing World', in which artists responded to the urgent need for action in the face of climate change. Lucy Orta, an artist and designer, is co-curating 'Aware' along with Italian contemporary art curator

Gabi Scardi and the RA's Kathleen Soriano. Orta featured in 'Earth', alongside her husband and collaborator Jorge, showing *Antarctic Village, No Borders* (2007), a tent covered in a variety of national flags. She recognised that GSK Contemporary also offered the opportunity to explore a fresh ecological sensibility in fashion.

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'We're looking at a new era in fashion,' Orta says, 'a new thinking about the ethics of designing clothes, the way we produce them, the materials and processes we use, the environments that clothes are created in.' Additionally, countless artists in recent decades have realised that clothing reveals much about the society we live in and our place within it. 'Fashion is useful because it is so tangible to the public,' Orta explains. 'You can get across messages to the masses very quickly.'

For Orta, 'Aware' is the result of around 20

years of thinking about the interface between art and fashion. She studied fashion design at Nottingham Polytechnic in the mid-1980s, specialising in knitwear design, but became disillusioned with fashion's extreme extravagance soon afterwards and began to make art. She has since trodden the line between the two disciplines, influencing the fashion world with works such as *Refuge Wear – Habitent* (1992-93), a shiny silver creation which is both tent and garment, while showing in galleries across the world. She is now Professor of Art, Fashion and the Environment at the London College of Fashion (LCF).

Belgian designer Martin Margiela is among those influenced by Orta, and he is one of a number of top fashion figures, including the late Alexander McQueen (page 60), to feature in 'Aware'. A series of Margiela's collages reflects his adoption of avant-garde art techniques in his design. In splicing apparently incongruous images of different dresses together, Margiela creates a variation of the assemblage techniques pioneered by modernist artists including Picasso and the surrealists. Margiela is clearly conscious of fashion's reputation as 'a consumerist business, always munching things up, and leaving a lot of waste behind', as Orta puts it. 'Aware' features a recreation of his exhibition from 1997, where he worked with a microbiologist to explore the permanence and



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Kuwait Stock Exchange I, 2007, by Andreas Gursky



decay of garments by dipping his clothes in a fungal solution so that they would gradually rot. 'It questions the ephemerality and destruction of fashion, but in a poetic manner,' Orta says, 'because the clothing itself then produces different fungal compositions and patterns, depending on the material used.'

The show features an iconic work by Alexander McQueen, whose frequently dark, elaborate catwalk shows trod the line between fashion and performance art. His 1998 Autumn/Winter collection, *Joan*, (bottom right) inspired by Joan of Arc, featured a delicate, red lace all-in-one garment that sheathes the face and body in the manner of chain mail. 'We were very interested in his earlier collections,' says Orta, 'and they were linked very much to identity – the revolutionary quality, and taking on the world, as a kind of battlefield.'

Dai Rees is a member of Orta's LCF research team, and he started out as a ceramicist, before creating accessories for designers including Alexander McQueen and John Galiano. Rees's work for 'Aware' is *Carapace: Triptych, The Butcher's Window* (2003, top right) in which he distorts dress patterns, and reconstructs them as sculptures. 'They look like cowhides or carcasses, but if you take a close look at them, you see that they are stitched together, so you can see the pattern for a sleeve or a bodice.' To decorate the skins of the carcasses, Rees has used marquetry techniques. 'They are exquisite pieces,' Orta says. 'They are almost deathly, but they come from an exploration of the body.'

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (opposite bottom) offers an unsettlingly direct and personal reflection on body politics. A video of Ono's 1965 performance at Carnegie Hall in New York, the work shows her sitting on stage dressed in black, while members of the audience cut away at her clothing, gradually exposing Ono's body as she stares impassively ahead of her. Though originally ambiguous in its intention, the work has been read variously as a response to the effects of the atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as a feminist comment on the objectification of women's bodies, and, recently, by Ono herself, as a plea for world peace. 'It is probably the most intimate piece in the whole exhibition,' Orta says. 'It is linked to feminism, and to Ono's activism and her idealism, but also to the self, and to the stripping of one's identity to reveal the fragile human being beneath.'

A new commission by another legend of early performance art, American artist Vito Acconci, *Umbruffla* (2005, top left) is 'both a cocoon and an umbrella', Orta says. 'It's an umbrella that creates a personal space, like a bubble. He is using a special material that is reflective, and he says it is about the need to have your own space in an urban environment.'

Two other new commissions have been realised with Orta's colleagues at the LCF. One is a large installation by Yinka Shonibare, whose sculpture *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (2010) currently sits on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth. The other is an installation,

Sakoku-segment (2010, opposite bottom) based on *Bunraku* a traditional Japanese form of puppetry, by Hussein Chalayan, a Turkish Cypriot designer and contemporary artist who shows at London's Lisson Gallery.

A number of works are visually enticing but contain complex social subject matter, such as Spanish artist Alicia Framis' *China Five Stars – 100 Ways to Wear a Flag* (2007). 'She invited designers to imagine different dresses using the Chinese flag,' says Orta. 'In the first instance, it looks like a beautiful collection of garments, but then it's the Chinese flag and, of course, because a lot of manufacturing is done in China, there's the idea of uniformity, of mass production.' Meschac Gaba's colourful sculpture series *Wig Architecture* (2006, bottom right) prompts a similar double-take. 'Gaba is from Benin, and he uses traditional braiding, so at first glance they look like fantastic braided headpieces, wigs that could be worn,' Orta explains. 'But on closer look they are representations of iconic buildings of power, like the Tour de la Defense in Paris.'

Royal Academicians' works punctuate the show. Gillian Wearing RA's famous *Sixty Minute Silence* (1996, opposite, centre) is an hour-long video featuring a static shot of three rows of policemen posed as if for an official photograph.

'Yoko Ono's 1965 performance at Carnegie Hall in New York shows her sitting on stage dressed in black, while members of the audience cut away at her clothing, exposing her body.'

'One minute we recognise them as being policeman because they have the uniform, but then over the period of the video the authoritarian look then disappears because they start moving and shuffling, so they become human in a sense. It's this idea that we have of uniform as a protective shell around you, it is linked to identity, how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us.'

It seems apt that 'Aware' should take place in Burlington Gardens, which overlooks Savile Row, the historic centre of bespoke tailoring, and Bond Street, the centre of London's most exclusive fashion stores. Orta and her fellow curators hope to use the imposing Burlington Gardens stage to 'provoke us to look at and think about clothing differently'. After a visit to 'Aware', wandering through those famous streets might indeed be a very different experience.

GSK Contemporary – Aware: Art Fashion Identity
6 Burlington Gardens, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 020 7300 8000, www.royalacademy.org.uk, 2 Dec–30 Jan, 2011. Supported by GlaxoSmithKline. See Events and Lectures, page 88. **Light Works: Lucy + Jorge Orta** by James Putnam and Gabriela Salgado (£29.95, Black Dog)



Top left Collage for exhibition catalogue *La Maison Martin Margiela (9/4/1615) silhouette 16* (Autumn/Winter 1996/1997), 1997 (before being dipped in fungal solution) **Top right** Exhibition *La Maison Martin Margiela (9/4/1615) silhouette 16* (Autumn/Winter 1996/1997), 1997 (after being dipped in fungal solution) **Above left** *Cut Piece*, 1965, by Yoko Ono **Above right** *Ivry, Rue des Péniches*, 2006, from the 'Wig Architecture' series, by Meschac Gaba

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