



July 19, 2009

Clothes make the exhibit

Georgette Gouveia
ggouveia@lohud.com

Kudos to the Katonah Museum of Art, which ended its fiscal year on June 30 with a balanced budget by raising more than \$120,000 with its year-end and spring appeals.

The museum also should get a nice boost from its new exhibit, the delightfully provocative "Dress Codes: Clothing as Metaphor" (through Oct. 4).

This is one of those rare shows in which every work is thoughtful and worthy of consideration. That's because the 36 artists in "Dress Codes" view clothing not only as a commodity, but as a symbol of consumer avarice, corporate ruthlessness, environmental and biological fragility, and gender, racial and ethnic identities under attack.

And that's just for starters.

Given the breadth of this exhibit, curated by Barbara J. Bloemink, a few examples barely do it justice.

Two that cleverly capture the spirit of the show are Sonya Clark's "Coppertone Covet" (1994) and "Penny Loafers" (2008-09). They are, respectively, a bikini made out of pennies, pantyhose and Lycra, and a pair of shoes made from pennies, with copper-sheet insoles. The titles play not only on the popular loafer and suntan lotion, but on the notion that while a coppery suntan may be prized, dark skin generally is not.

How, the work asks, do we reconcile ourselves with a culture that says it's OK to be tan as long as you're white? In truth, we can't. To that end, the pithy label text tells us the artist's choice of the penny - with its image of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator - was quite deliberate.

In the same vein, Cheryl Yun's "Halter Teddy with Suicide Belt" (2005) is a case of Victoria's Secret meets terrorism. As with Clark's bikini and loafers, you have something soft and seemingly frivolous - here, the idea of lingerie - married to something hard and deadly, the concept of the suicide-bomber's belt.

Yun also has contributed a series of topical shoulder, tote and bowling bags that are critical of consumer spending. She's more on the money (pun intended) with her suicide teddy. The ironic juxtapositions there ring true.

While it's easy to rail against shopping, particularly in tough economic times, such breast beating makes little sense. Buying clothes employs people, who in turn support families and other industries. But there's another reason clothing is important beyond its ability to help keep the economic engine running.

Clothes are about our relationships, to ourselves and others. The exhibit includes Louise Bourgeois'

"Pink Days and Blue Days" (1997), in which pink clothing, a blue scarf, beads and perfume bottles dangle from or are balanced on bone hangers attached to a steel frame. The pink days, Bourgeois is quoted as saying, are the good ones; the blue days, the bad ones. Still, it is on the blue days that you find your equilibrium.

Her work often uses fabric to confront subjects you'd rather not think about. Indeed, most of the works in the show are not beautiful in the traditional sense and couldn't be worn even if you wanted to.

Kate Kretz's "Defense Mechanism Coat" (2001) has a plush red-velvet lining with an outer layer made of quill-like roofing nails. Here, it's all about the vulnerability of the body.

There is, however, one stunning work in the show that is sure to rouse every woman's clothing lust. It's Barbara Bloom's "Homage to Frances Rey" (1998), a sleek white-halter evening gown that conjures images of Lana Turner and other 1940s movie stars. Rey, Bloom's mother, was an actress, from the 1946 film "The Razor's Edge" and TV's "Ben Casey."

Looking at the dress you can't help but desire it. But then you zero in on the tiny side buttons, with their photographic images of Rey, and you think, Bloom must have loved her mother very much.

Additional Facts

If you go

What: "Dress Codes: Clothing as Metaphor."

Where: The Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay St., off Route 22.

When: Through Oct. 4.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays and noon-5 p.m. Sundays.

Admission: Free to all 10 a.m.-noon and to children younger than 12 at all times. From noon to 5 p.m., it's \$5; \$3 for senior citizens and students.

Also see: The second in a series of exhibits called "Hudson River Trilogy," featuring the shimmering paintings of Ellen Kozak.

Information: 914-232-9555, www.katonahmuseum.org
