

'Social Seduction' tempts more than just the fashionistas

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'Social Seduction'

*Through April 9

*Betty Rymer Gallery, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 280 S. Columbus

*(312) 443-3703

Josiah Mcelheny

*Through April 3

*Donald Young Gallery, 933 W. Washington

*(312) 455-0100

For the first time since its inception 17 years ago, the Fashion Resource Center at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago is offering selections from its collection for public viewing. It's hardly a conventional archival show, though. Instead, **Social Seduction**, now on view at the Betty Rymer Gallery, is a unique exhibit that combines haute couture with a juried selection of photography, video and soundwork that looks at how fashion influences society.

The show is unusual and daring in that it combines the rarified world of fashion with the irreverent perspective of artists. Fashion is an applied art that depends on a context that supports rigid standards of beauty and stylized expectations about form and functionality in clothing design.

Exquisite fabrics and extreme shapes meant for exceptional bodies are the norm in the fashion world, a world which can only exist when supported by a monied social class. So the designs are not just especially pretty clothes. Any display of high fashion is by definition also a glimpse into a world of wealth, privilege, leisure and refinement taken to extremes of sometimes decadent self-indulgence.

But to see a silk chiffon Prada dress trimmed in Mongolian fur and a pair of Roger Vivier fuchsia pumps in a gallery alongside a gritty video by Vincent Haq-Mastrionni showing someone stitching their fingers together changes the meaning of the clothes. We can see how fashion is at least as stylized and remote from the real world as video is, probably more. And we can see how fashion is meant to tell a story about a person or an idea the same as any art is.

Haq-Mastrionni's idea seems to be that fashion maims. We also see how ideals for women's bodies are to some extent shaped by the fashions they are meant to fit into, that fashion is a form of role-playing and acting. Ricketty platform stiletto high heels are meant for mincing in and out of limos, not for slogging through muddy gardens or riding the L.

In our increasingly corpulent society, the trim-to-emaciated profiles drawn by these exquisite dresses represent an almost impossible ideal for most women. Not entirely meant for the real world, the dresses are beautiful objects themselves, probably even more beautiful hanging on mannequins than they would be on any woman.

The perfect companion to these glamorous and impractical garments is "Tony" Denise Conca and Katrina Fullman's inspired video "Refuse and Refashion."

This short, simple piece begins with a young woman taking the viewer on a tour through the thrift shop where she works, talking about the pleasure she derives from recycling the material excesses of our capitalist society. As she does, she admits to how she's become preoccupied with the clothes and has begun to collect them. The video ends with a brilliantly weird little fashion show, set to a perky pop song, in which she then models selections of thrift-store clothes. The woman half mimics and half mocks the haughty gait and insouciant attitude of runway models, all the

while wearing recycled underpants, down parkas, baggy shorts, sparkly dresses and some kind of diving mask.

I loved this video. There is an inspired sense of invention here. It is both radical and funny, making us think about the economic consequences of our not buying and discarding so much stuff, and finally just aesthetically ingenious. We begin to consider the arbitrariness of what makes fashion good or bad, and ensembles that combine recycled finery with beat-up old coats turn out to be highly expressive if not conventionally so. The video is only eight minutes long but I could have watched for an hour.

Anyone approaching Josiah McElheny's glass landscapes, now at the Donald Young Gallery, expecting to see glass as decorative craft, as I confess I did, will be embarrassed at their condescension.

McElheny transforms glass into something beyond its own materiality. We see his forms as poured silver or shaped light, never as merely pretty vessels.

His groupings of hand-blown glass shapes on polished mirrors form landscapes that appear heavenly somehow, or at least unearthly in their luminescence and lack of cast shadows. They look like perfume bottles on a vanity table in outer space, beyond functionality, just existing to daze and confuse us.

Supple, sensuous forms recall Brancusi and Noguchi, but they are so slippery and liquid that they remind us as much of nature as of art, of elements like mercury and silver or of melting ice on a sunny morning. McElheny's arrangements with mirrors in a darkened room produce particularly dizzying effects where multiplied reflections repeat to the point of infinity.

McElheny has said that his sculpture with reflective materials is a meditation on the idea that "the act of looking at a reflective object could be connected to the mental act of reflecting on an idea."

Cerebral or not, finally these works are sensuous and otherworldly. To try to imagine how or even why they were made is both impossible and beside the point.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.

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