

Chalayan, McQueen and the body

By Jennifer Eurell

The body fascinates both artists and fashion designers. This essay looks at the work of fashion designers Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan and their approach to fashion, art, and the body.

Over the years the line between fashion and art has blurred. Artists contribute to fashion, and fashion designers aspire to art status. In the 16th century Albrecht Durer advised on fashion, and in the 18th century Jacques Louis David helped popularize the Empire line. The female body has not dramatically changed over the centuries, but it has been visually pushed around with corsets, crinolines, padding, hair styles, make-up, exercise, diet, and cosmetic surgery. In 1910 Paul Poiret honed in on the Orientalism art movement and applied Eastern style to *haute couture*. He discarded the corset thereby changing the entrenched hourglass silhouette of women's clothing into what is now regarded as modern clothing. (Loschek n.d., Baudot 2009).

There were rapid changes in the 20th century with hemlines rising and falling; and the waist coming and going in both direction and circumference; but it was the work of Elsa Schiaparelli in the 20th century that led to the fashion houses of Alexander McQueen and Chalayan. Schiaparelli used Surrealist ideas, including a Salvador Dali painted lobster on an evening dress. The Dadaists changed perception of what was art. Marcel Duchamp's 'found objects' questioned authorship and revolutionized art ideology. Vivienne Westwood pushed eclectic sources with her punk fashion collections and put British fashion in the limelight (Baudot, 2009).

Lee Alexander McQueen (England, 17.3.1969-11.2.2010) and Hussein Chalayan (b. Cyprus, 12.8.1970) were both innovative British fashion designers. McQueen astonished the fashion

industry with his early shows for their shock value, slashed garments, and the launch of the low-rise 'bumster'. Chalayan's graduate show is remembered for garments buried with iron filings, left to rot, then exhibited as art with accompanying text.

There are similarities between McQueen and Chalayan. They were about the same age and studied at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design, London. McQueen graduated with a Master of Arts in 1992 and Chalayan with a Bachelor of Arts in 1993. They both became British Designer of the Year and McQueen was awarded a CBE in 2003 and Chalayan a MBE in 2006. They had their ups and downs with finance. McQueen was £32 million in debt when he suicided in 2010 and Chalayan's first company Cartesia Ltd. was liquidated in 2001. Their art status comes from giving precedence to ideas over wearability of dress. There is a performance element to their shows; and their work is exhibited in art museums (Black 2009, Evans 2013, Daily Mail 2010).

The difference between McQueen and Chalayan is that McQueen was a showman, and Chalayan the 'intelligentsia'. McQueen draws from the past with themes of nationalism, exoticism, primitivism, Gothic and the sublime (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). Chalayan acknowledges his past in a more personal manner, but also has a technological bent that looks to the future and sustainable fashion (Black 2009, Evans 2013).

Andrew Bolton summarised McQueen: 'His fashions were an outlet for his emotions, and expression of the deepest, often darkest, aspects of his imagination. He was a true romantic in the Byronic sense of the word – he channelled the sublime' (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). McQueen dealt in binaries: light/dark; hard/soft; delicate/strong; attraction/rejection; male/female and beauty/horror. McQueen's success was also due to his impeccable tailoring resulting from a Savile Row apprenticeship, combined with experience as a costume designer. (McQueen 2013)



Fig. 1 Highland Rape, 1995, Alexander McQueen
<http://www.fashionfave.com/alexander-mcqueen-munkassaga-i>

McQueen's shows are cinematic. His 1995 *Highland Rape* referred to the Jacobite rebellion, but using 'rape' in the title added to the sexuality of the garments and the sense of violation of women (Fig. 1). His battered and bruised models staggered around in combinations of military jackets, McQueen tartan and lace, and slashed fabric revealing erogenous zones (Evans, n.d.). Evans also states that McQueen wanted men to look at woman but feel that they couldn't go near them. This wasn't an entirely new idea as artist Jana Sterbak had previously used rejection/attraction with her 1984/5 dress of barbed wire where a filament of light glowed if the viewer got too close (Loschek n.d.).

In 2002 photographer Nick Knight videoed Alexander McQueen's performance *The bridegroom stripped bare*, an obvious take on Duchamp's *The bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even*, 1915-23, and a visual affirmation of McQueen's interest in performance art, deconstruction, gender and body transformation. McQueen starts with a man dressed as a groom who he gradually transforms to a bride using gaffer tape, glitter, gloss paint and veil (Knight 2013).



Fig. 2 Dress No. 13, 1999, Alexander McQueen
White cotton muslin with tulle underskirt and paint.
<http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/dress-no-13/#sthash.EnpvumK8.dpuf>

McQueen's 1999 Autumn/Winter finale featured a model in white muslin dress on a turntable being sprayed with black and yellow paint by two robotic spray guns (Fig 2). Like many other McQueen works it was seen as a body violation, however, McQueen says he was inspired by Rebecca Horn's 1991 installation *High Noon* where two shotguns sprayed red paint at each other (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). Another stunning finale was the 2006 Autumn/Winter *Widows of Culloden* show where a full sized hologram of Kate

Moss appeared, swirled, and disappeared into the darkness. In the same show an antique lace dress (Fig. 3) was worn with lace draped antlers. The combination was very surrealistic and reminiscent of the weird juxtapositions of Jake and Dinos Chapman 'exquisite corpse' etchings (Limander n.d., Mower, n.d.).

Fig. 3 Dress. Widow of Culloden collection, 2006-7. Alexander McQueen.
Cream silk tulle and lace with resin antlers.
Source: <http://arttattler.com/designalexandermcqueen.html>



McQueen was fascinated by birds which would appear as jaunty wings on close fitting hats, stuffed eagles in wavering headdresses, and as feathered skirts. He saw the birds in terms of freedom and flight dynamics. Both hats and birds were symbolic of his mentor, Isabella Blow, and these and other 'found objects' were a recurring symbol in McQueen's work (Mower, 2010). The 2001 *Voss* collection showed a dress made from scallop shells with an overdress of 19th century embroidered Japanese silk screen panels (Fig. 4). An equally intriguing dress had a bodice of 2000 microscope slides and feather skirt (Fig. 5). The glass slides were painted red to match the soft red feathers of the skirt. McQueen also explained 'There's blood beneath every layer of skin' (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). There would always be a dark side to his aesthetic.



Fig. 4. Ensemble, Voss collection, 2001. Dress of oyster shells with overdress of 19th century Japanese silk screen panels.



Fig. 5. Dress, Voss collection, 2001. Glass medical slides and ostrich feathers.

Source://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/tag/voss

McQueen had a reputation as the ‘bad boy of British fashion’, so it was only to be expected that he would connect with the ‘bad boy of British art’, Damien Hirst. Hirst’s shark in formaldehyde in a glass cabinet had shocked in 1991. McQueen completed his 2000 show with a Rubenesque naked woman in a glass box with live moths and a breathing tube. It was McQueen’s slant on a mental asylum and the woman contrasted strongly with his tall, thin models (Style, 2013).

Hussein Chalayan differs from McQueen as he uses stark, austere catwalk presentations. Chalayan has an interest in sustainability of fabrics, innovative design and technology. As a Turkish-Cypriot who was forced to abandon his home at age eight, he is concerned about displacement of people (Black 2009). Chalayan references the anguish of others, where McQueen reflected his own angst.

The performance side of Chalayan’s work showed in 2002 when a model in Turkish costume stood motionless for 15 minutes on stage. The dress was gradually morphed into a Western coat, but the show was an unsettling experience for the audience (Style 2013, Black 2009).

There is something reminiscent of Fluxus and Yoko Ono's *Cut piece*, originally performed in 1965 in Paris. In the latter performance the clothes were cut away from Yoko Ono's body, where in Chalayan's work they were transformed (Ayres 2013).

Fig. 6 Aeroplane dress, 1999.
Fibreglass resin and tulle.
Source: <http://sabrinarhoden.com/linha-tecno-fashion-hussein-chalayan/>



Although Chalayan designs perfectly wearable fashion, there have been garments that are very sculptural. In 2000 he made the first wireless device garment. A boy with a remote control operated the garment. The fibreglass panels opened and the back of the skirt rose to show the tulle underskirt. Bradley Quinn (2000b) stated that Chalayan 'used the spatial relationship between the fabric and the body to reflect the relative meanings of speed and gravity' with his kite and aeroplane dresses (Fig. 6).

Other performances included a series of chair covers that transformed into dresses and a wooden table that concertinaed out to become a skirt (Fig. 7). The works addressed urban nomadism and how refugees were forced to leave their belongings behind. It was a protest at the time, but the idea of displacement and transformation remains part of Chalayan's design today. (Quinn, 2002b, Black 2009).



Fig. 7. Armchair dresses and coffee table skirt. Hussein Chalayan.
Source: <http://sabrinarhoden.com/linha-tecno-fashion-hussein-chalayan/>

Where Alexander McQueen's themes were generally evoking past eras, Chalayan also looked to the future. In 2008 Chalayan used laser technology (Fig. 8) to emit 200 red laser beams from a dress (Bugg, 2009b). The next year he used LED lights to project moving images of car crashes onto clothes (Fig. 9). His models were motionless but their latex moulded dresses were sculpted to give the appearance of the impact of a car crash (Style, 2013; Black, 2009b).

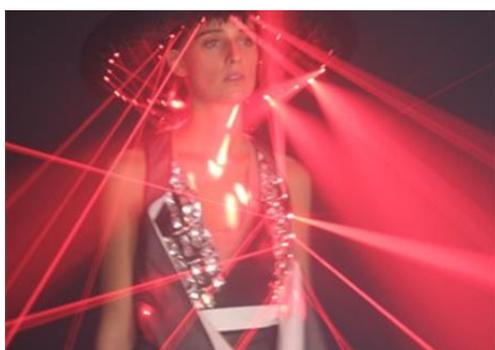


Fig. 8 Readings, 2008. Hussein Chalayan. Dress with 200 red laser lights.

Source: www.nickknight.com



Fig. 9 Inertia, 2009. Hussein Chalayan

Source: <http://www.shift.jp.org>

Chalayan reacted against fashion's concern with the past with a moving dress that transformed in one minute from a long Victorian dress to a short beaded 'flapper' dress (Style, 2013). He considered that the body was the 'ultimate cultural symbol' and that he was 'like a storyteller who creates new environment for the body through clothes' (Jacobs 2013).

Neither Chalayan or McQueen have taken their involvement with the body as far as artists have. Orlan used plastic surgery to change her body and Stelarc has suspended himself with hooks through his skin, used prosthetic robotic arms, and has grown an extra ear on his arm. He plans for the ear to be internet enabled at Wi-Fi hotspots with sound coming from a speaker hidden in his mouth (Centre de Arts Paris n.d.).



Fig. 10 Alexander McQueen model with 12" high claw shoes, long legs and expressionless face.

Source:

<http://arttattler.com/designalexandermcqueen.html>



Fig. 11 *It's only a game*, 2005. Lilac leather and horsehair. Padding gives extreme enlargement to the hips. Alexander McQueen.

Source: www.blog.metmuseum.org

Fashion designers change the silhouette of the body rather than the body itself. They change perceptions on how people should look. They can make women feel that they need to be tall and thin. The 'heroin chic' appearance of white face and dark patches around the eyes has almost gone, but it has been replaced with bland expressionless faces and long legged catwalk trots. Both Chalayan and McQueen used very tall models (Fig. 10) and McQueen in particular extended the silhouette with extremely high shoes (Fig. 11) and hairstyles or hats. He also corseted, shaped and padded his clothes to create nipped in waistlines and shapely hips. Chalayan is more 'geek chic'. Quinn, 2002a notes that radical fashion designers 'reshape the body, design according to philosophical and intellectual concerns, push boundaries, challenge perceptions, and usurp conformity to give form to extravagant projects of the imagination'. Chalayan and McQueen have done this.

Artists are delving into the realm of art, science and fashion. Lucy McRae designed an emotion sensing dress *Bubelle* which has heart rate sensors connected to LED projectors and reacts to the wearer's feelings, including sexual responses. In a low-tech collaboration with Bart Hess, McRae used balloons and pantyhose to transform the body to show how it might evolve with technology (McRae 2012, 2013). Suzanne Lee grew a vest from bacterial cellulose cultured in a bath of green tea (Lee 2011), and Oran Catts and Ionat Zurr grew

'mythological wings' from pig's ear bone marrow cells as a protest against the use of animal products in fashion (Lee, 2011; TCA project 2013)

Iris van Herpen (b. 5.6.1984) represents the next generation of fashion designers who will work in a multidisciplinary and increasingly technological world. Herpen collaborated with Neri Oxman of MIT to produce the first 3D printed dress. Van Herpen's future promises a continuation of Chalayan technology and McQueen aesthetic (Van Herpen 2013).

McQueen and Chalayan thought like artists. They put together their ideas within a theme. McQueen reshaped the body by augmenting garments with corsets, padding, tall shoes and headdresses, and bizarre attachments. Chalayan used the body as a vehicle for ideas. Both designed wearable fashion, but it is their less wearable garments that have put them on the world stage. Both draw on performance art with McQueen leaning towards theatre and Chalayan to sculpture and technology. McQueen will remain known for the dark side of his showmanship, and Chalayan still produces clothes that enquire and transform.

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