

'On the edge of fashion'

Arlette

Alfa Bransfield

Aaron Ford

Jonah Pontzer

Mary Stephenson

19 Jan – 11 Mar 2023

Rose Easton

In 1995, Alexander McQueen presented his now canonical show, *Highland Rape*. Models staggered down the runway in slashed tartan and torn lace in reference to the nineteenth century Highland Clearances that McQueen referred to as genocide: a reminder of England's violent history. The show was a display of defiance towards the many English designers of the time presenting flamboyant Scottish clothes, highlighting fashion's appropriation of Scottish culture.

McQueen's show typified the way in which fashion designers of the 1990s harnessed historical themes to protest the present. In Caroline Evans' seminal text *Fashion at the Edge*, she posits that "this new type of fashion design... seemed to function like a hysterical symptom that could articulate current concerns". To elaborate:

On the edge of discourse, of civilisation, of speech itself, experimental fashion can act out what is hidden culturally. And, like a neurotic symptom, it can utter a kind of mute resistance to the socially productive process of constructing an identity. As we produce a disciplined and controlled self, via the technology of manners for example, what is repressed comes back as a trace, under the weight of some cultural trauma, of which experimental fashion can function as a tell-tale memory. Seen thus, Fashion is hysterical. It can be a symptom of alienation, loss, mourning, fear

of contagion and death, instability and change. Like psychoanalysis, it investigates the domain and configuration of incoherence, discontinuity, disruption and disintegration.

– Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness*, 2007

In times of similar struggles and change as those designers were living through, and speaking to, in the nineties – economic instability, political upheaval and technological advancement – the artists in *On the edge of fashion* (which borrows its title from Evans) deploy similar strategies to “investigate the domain and configuration of incoherence, discontinuity, disruption and disintegration.”

The works in the show wrestle with social, political and cultural anxieties prominent today: class, capital, empire and the crisis of masculinity. Atop a ‘dynasty pink’ carpeted floor, shrouded in glamour and harnessing the power and language of advertising, like a stealth Trojan horse they revisit cultural trauma anew. Just as McQueen reconfigured and restaged the ‘rape’ of Scotland through the manipulation of fabric, so too do the artists in the exhibition navigate contemporary concerns through form, materiality and humorous deception.

In Arlette’s *XXXL Buckle Belt*, an enlarged cowboy belt made in silver is set loose of its trousered restraints and, re-oriented, climbs the wall. The buckle’s shine

captures a reflection of an absent scene: an image originating from Grindr and then memefied in Mexico of a man in a suit grabbing his penis through his trousers. Overlaid embossed silver text reads 'skinny dick in the dark', announcing anxieties that the hyper masculine adornment may ordinarily be intended to obscure.

In Alfa Bransfield's *Three (Thug Votive)*, an image of a heavy gold neck chain, rendered in diamanté set onto engraved aluminium, is taken from screenshots of his own social media algorithms in which his marketable personality coordinates as a 'gay chav' were reflected back through targeted adverts. Bransfield's work is tinged with tragicomedy, merging bleak critical theory with wanton camp. This chain is both decoration and restraint, signifier of both at once – the wearer's personal aspirations and their societally imposed limitations.

For Aaron Ford, two paintings, *Man Sitting Down* and *Figure* explore traditional Ghanaian cloth and its (re) presentation in the mainstream media, and within his own personal history. *Man Sitting Down* is derived from a found family photo of Ford's cousin wearing Adinkra cloth while *Figure* finds genesis in an image sourced from the Met archive, of an anonymous mannequin wearing Kente cloth, staging the personal and the impersonal within the context of cultural production.

Jonah Pontzer's five panel dressing screen *Cancer Son Greets the Day, Dresses Accordingly* borrows form

from Edouard Vuillard's *Place Vintimille* (1911). Speaking to notions of capital, spectacle and artifice, Pontzer delights in the luxuriousness of fashion, the painted panels embellished with a skin like texture reminiscent of the sought-after crocodile skin of a Hermes Kelly bag. The image itself is of a Dressing Spider Crab, a crustacean that adorns itself to appear less conspicuous. Much like the screen itself – an object for privacy and metamorphosis – the act of decoration is not to reveal but to conceal.

Two new paintings from Mary Stephenson, *Citrine Green* and *Middle Red*, see the artist using fabric as a method to commune with her unconscious. Laced with anxiety, cloth appears to fold and unfold, reproductive in nature, revealing forms that feel simultaneously yonic and phallic; erotic in their lack of specificity. Gazing at the works, shapes emerge before retreating back into the canvas, inviting the viewer into the amorphous appearances.

Arlette (b. 1998, Mexico City, Mexico), lives and works in Mexico City. She received her BA from Central Saint Martins, London in 2022. Recent exhibitions include *Talabarteria Malcriada 2021*, Espacio Union, Mexico City (2021); *WORLD FAMOUS BABYLON*, Barbican Arts Group Trust, London (2022); *Graduate Showcase 2021*, Lethaby Gallery, London (2022); *Auftrebende Kunstler*, Proyecto Paralelo – Recorrido Zona Maco, Mexico City (2022); *Sonic Event*, Lethaby Gallery, London (2019); *Without Maiz There is no Pais*, TATE Modern, London (2019); *Metaphonica IV*, Central Saint Martins, London (2018) and *Art Park*, LUX, London (2018).

Alfa Bransfield (b. 1986, Coventry, UK) lives and works in London, UK. He received his BA in Sculpture at Brighton University (2008) and was the recipient of Arts Council's DYCP Award for his independent, MFA-equivalent study programme *The Chic Academy* with mentors Mark Leckey, Prem Sahib and Larry Achiampong (2022). Recent exhibitions and projects include *The Chains that were Sold to me by an Algorithm at Woodsy's*, London (2022). *Populism Live* at Tate Britain, London and MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (2019).

Aaron Ford (b. 1994, London, UK), lives and works in London. He received his BA from Central Saint Martins, London in 2017. In 2022, Ford participated in the Xenia Creative Retreat residency. Selected group exhibitions include *Tree and Leaf*, Hannah Barry

Gallery, London (2021); *Triggered Economics or How to Commit to the Inevitable*, 34 Bruton Street, London (2021); *Swift As Sword*, Parallelogram Gallery, Florida, USA (2021); *WDT 1:1*, Wetdovetail, Online (2020); *Free Wall Space*, Online (2020); *Show-Off*, Menier Gallery, London (2020); *Exceptional: The Collyer Bristow Gallery Graduate Art Award*, Collyer Bristow Gallery, London (2019); *Four Good Eggs*, Brixton Beneficiary, London (2019) and *Paper Cuts Kristian Day*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2018).

Jonah Pontzer (b. 1989, Pennsylvania, USA) lives and works in London. He received his BA in Performance Design and Practice from Central Saint Martins. Pontzer completed residencies at Sarabande: The Lee Alexander McQueen Foundation, London (2019) and McKinsey & Company (2016). Selected solo exhibitions include *SUMMER BODY*, Sarabande: The Lee Alexander McQueen Foundation, London (2019); *Can't Host*, Hollybush Plc, London (2018) and *Re: Joyce*, McKinsey & Company, London (2016). Selected group exhibitions include *Unity*, The Artist Room Gallery, Tom of Finland Arts & Culture Festival, London (2022); *Placeholder*, La Forchetta, Bethnal Green Road, London (2022); *Triggered Economics or How to commit to the inevitable*, 34 Bruton Street, London (2021); *Power, Moves*, Online (2020); *Stable*, Sarabande: The Lee Alexander McQueen Foundation, London (2019) and *LAPADA*, in partnership with Sarabande, London (2019).

Mary Stephenson (b.1989, London, UK) lives and works in London. She studied at The Glasgow School of Art (2011) and is currently a student at The Royal Academy of Arts (2023). Selected solo exhibitions include *Soft Serve*, Linseed Project, Shanghai (2022); *Suddener Than We Fancy*, Incubator, London (2022) and *Egg Roll Play*, After Nyne Gallery, London (2019). Selected group shows include *Interior*, Michael Werner Gallery, London (2022); *Civil Twilight*, Ginny On Frederick, London (2022); *Premiums Interim Show* – Royal Academy of Arts, London (2022); *Contrappunto*, Vin Vin Gallery, Vienna (2021); *Watch The Fire From The Shore*, Linseed Project, Shanghai (2021); *DISCO*, Fitzrovia Chapel, London (2021); *Fertile Spoon*, Bosse & Baum, London (2021); *Staying Sane*, Berntson Bhattacharjee, Skanor, Sweden (2020); *Preview London*, Bosse & Baum, London (2020); *Marigolds*, Harlesden High Street, London (2020) and *Maison Dakota*, Super Dakota, Brussels (2020).

List of works, clockwise from entrance

Mary Stephenson

Middle Red, 2023

Oil on linen

45 × 55 cm

Aaron Ford

Man Sitting Down, 2023

Oil on canvas on board

40 × 50 cm

Arlette

XXXL Buckle Belt, 2022

Silver, resin coated
photograph

125 × 17 × 1.5 cm

Aaron Ford

Figure, 2023

Oil on canvas on board

40 × 50 cm

Mary Stephenson

Citrine Green, 2022

Oil on linen

55 × 65 cm

Alfa Bransfield

Three (Thug Votive), 2022

Aurora Borealis Diamanté
on engraved aluminium

150 × 100 × 3.5 cm

Jonah Pontzer

Cancer Son Greets

the Day, Dresses

Accordingly, 2023

Ultrachrome ink,
colour pencil, promarker,
watercolour, acrylic
and oil on paper mounted
on wood, framed
215 × 300 × 2.5 cm
Dimensions variable

Private View, Wednesday 18 January, 6 – 8pm
Open, Wednesday – Saturday, 12 – 6pm

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of live events and activations.

Fashion at the Edge

In Conversation

Thursday 2 February, 7pm

On the occasion of its re-issue, *Fashion at the Edge* author Caroline Evans will be in conversation with Alfa Bransfield, Aaron Ford, Jonah Pontzer and Mary Stephenson.

Additional events to be announced, follow @roseeaston223 to be kept up to date.

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