

GALERIE FONS WELTERS

Tenant of Culture

Slub

11 May – 15 June

Mining Fashion by Eilidh Duffy

“Time and labour mark themselves on denim and skin.” – Esther Leslie, *A Wind of Revolution Blows, the Storm is on the Horizon*

“Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me the more, is founded upon Cloth.” – Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*

Slub is the next iteration of a body of research Tenant of Culture has been developing since early in her career, manifested physically in sculptural form. Primarily, the artist is concerned with the destructive nature of the fast fashion industry, its wastefulness, its toxic and polluting production cycles, and the history of textile production as the *pièce de résistance*, the driving instrument, of the Euro-American industrial revolution. Here, her critique is expressed through the deconstruction of second-hand clothing, manifesting in the series *Smock* through ruched, patchwork garments made from discarded pieces of fast fashion. These ‘garments’ on display – dresses made from abandoned sportswear, a gathered T-shirt – echo an aesthetic that might easily be found in the new crop of DIY fashion retail spaces in cities like London, New York and Paris – their work itself, in part, a reaction to mass-produced clothing and a cannibalistic industry which devours the new as soon as it appears. This is another key feature of the artist’s work: she does not shy away from the mining of contemporary aesthetic trends, another facet of her critique on the fashion cycle that produces so much waste. This imitation and repetition remain part of Tenant of Culture’s rich lexicon. Her sense of humour remains ever-present.

One series, however, presents an entirely new body of work. *Jane, Ferrero, Osaka* and *pleasme* each adapt the notion of the industrially destroyed garment – its look, its touch, its affect – which goes to the consumer market near destroyed. Whilst in her last solo show at Soft Opening, *Ladder*, Tenant of Culture referenced the processes of slashing and unravelling in a critique of the pre-distressed, mass-produced garment, these works reference a more conspicuous and omnipresent form of destruction we see on the street every day: distressed denim. *Slub* refers directly to a continuation of her critique of the mass-produced distressed garment, this word being the name for a type of yarn with intentional irregularities in order to create a fabric with a ‘worn’ effect.

In particular, two garments act as a conceptual bridge between the works presented in this show. *Faux Biker*, a vest made from riveted pieces of imitation leather jackets echoes one of Margiela’s best jokes – his Spring-Summer 2001 halter top made from discarded leather gloves – as though Schimmel herself is participating in this cycle of reference and repetition. This, and a white *Fruit of the Loom* T-shirt squeezed and ruched, fixed with metal snaps, bind the show both metaphorically and physically. The rivets borrowed from horse blankets and added to the corners of denim pattern pieces was a momentous occasion in the history of dress. Denim squeezed between these metal rivets fused the fabric together, binding soft fabric with hard metal, reinforcing pressure points on the jeans and allowing the textile to endure more stress from the worker’s body.

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The denim jean was developed on the West Coast of the USA by Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth century. A hard-wearing uniform for hard working miners hoping to win big during the California gold rush and lesser-known Nevada silver rush, the exact detailing of the modern jean was a gradual process of trial and error, requiring years of testing before the classic horse-rievet jean we know and love today was developed by tailor Jacob Davis and patented by Levi Strauss & Co. on the 20th May 1873, ensuring that this name was to remain synonymous with jeans for the next 150 years. As the historian Michael Harris writes, in the jeans business, “strength became the measure of value”.¹ When we meet the denim jean in *Slub*, however, it is still in the process of becoming through its own destruction. Unlike the traditional life cycle that a garment is typically perceived to undertake (raw material > yarn > weave > fabric > pattern > garment > clothing > rag > dust) the undoing, the rag-ification of the garment comes before the denim has even had the chance to become a pair of jeans.

As in the denim works in *Slub*, lasers burn into rough cotton dyed indigo. A mark, an imprint, a ‘whisker’ as the trade calls it or, perhaps, a memory is embedded before the cloth is cut and stitched. A spectral shape appears before there is form. ‘Memories’, in the technical jargon of clothes-makers of the nineteenth century, are the wrinkles embedded into cloth over time. They “memorized the interaction, the mutual constitution, of person and thing.”² These representations of a presence within cloth are embodiment, a scent, a trace of repeated gestures. Yet, in *Slub*, this trace is no longer the presence of a person, it is pure, bright signal.

Each representation of a crease found in the works shown in *Slub* is derived from a pair of jeans that were physically worn out on someone’s body. These singular pairs of jeans – embedded with genuine ‘memories’ – were adapted as a pattern for a process of damage that could be repeated endlessly, lasers imitating the wear and tear that comes from warm, cardiovascular kinetic energy. “In the jeans the flaws reveal,” writes Esther Leslie, “the layers of dyes that rub off under friction...the force of the leg asserting its shape and the history of repeated movements.”³ Here, though, it is not the repetition of human movement, but the revolving actions of the machine, time is not marking itself on denim: searing white lasers burn.

Fabbricismo, a derogatory Italian slang word for those who idealise the factory, might be an appropriate term for the contemporary fascination with ‘classic’ garments whose history places them firmly in the history of labour – such as the denim jean and white T-shirt. The word’s origins can be found in the 1970s Italian workerist movement, yet when translated to the language of fashion and applied to the realm of aesthetics, it loses some of its bite. Why? Because it is in fashion’s nature to fetishise: “Fashion instantly mocks sensible inventions in clothing,” writes Anne Hollander, “subjecting them to unfunctional usage as soon as they appear, so they can seem authentically desirable and never merely convenient.”⁴ Fashion, in its drive to produce profit, mines culture and aesthetics. Tenant of Culture, in turn, mines fashion, breaking it down, turning it inside out, looking at it anew.

¹ Michael Harris, *Jeans of the Old West*, (Atglen: Schiffer, 2016), p.12.

² Peter Stallybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’, in *Border Fetishisms*, ed. Patricia Spyer, (Oxford: Routledge, 1998), pp.195-196.

³ Esther Leslie, *A Wind of Revolution Blows, The Storm is on the Horizon*, (London: CHELSEA Space, 2008), p.16.

⁴ Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress*, (New York: Kodansha, 1995), p.14.