

MARTINA COX

Waist Management

November 14 – December 19 2024

EXHIBITION TEXT

Written by Kate Sekules

No one sees Victorian body containers like Martina Cox, not even their makers—least of all them. *Waist Management* toasts the long dead sisters, their private wrappings and their unseen labors. Dress goods of theirs spilling their guts, thousands of hours of invisible stitchery modeled by Martina's ranks of pencils—and on occasion, her own needle. That is the dimensional kicker, she stabbed stitches just like they did. Stitch is time marked in thread, and time is wound all around this work: the sheer history of it, 1890s dress history, a tiny stripey watch pocket; the thousands of hours of miniature construction in textile, the hundreds of thousands of pencil marks to match, the month it took to transmute crumpled silk and bobbin lace to graphite.

The bodices are hyperreal and totally fake. You feel you can pick one up and fondle it, sniff it, try it on, but no, it's a dress ghost and we'll never meet. Collected not from bodices in the flesh, but bodice *images* in the digital, this left a pleasing constraint - the placement of prearranged wrinkles, topography and invisible sleeves were not her choices to make. They are splayed open to document the inside, purely for... you. So few eyes were ever laid on them - these backs of embroideries that people call the dark sides, so...consider yourself lucky?

Martina performs a kind of transubstantiation from flesh and blood to paper and pencil (and stitch) to make the in sides not just guts, a term for dress viscera, but gut *flora*. She brings us news and views from the front, where the action is. What transpires when dress meets flesh where the torso carves out territory, where the stomach sits, the seat of female intuition, the second brain, the microbiome?

The interior landscapes are taxidermy-like, with baleen strips stitched into cotton, silk and linen channels, always an odd number of them, whether fewer fatter bones oversewn with herringbone or the many, many dainty ones inserted into the refined *Arsenic and Lovelace*, the only upper class lady here. She looks to be the only professionally made bodice of the bunch, which is no shade. Rendered in graphite and the best stitches here, sitting modestly among the messier ones, the ones that went awry, where the individual hand is showing— non-elite, amateur hands. In fact, sloppier stitches might be more evidence of good time management than bad workwomanship, since everyone, but everyone, remade and remodeled every gown, often for decades, and stitches were worked to be easily removable. The whalebone casings are exceptions to that: so time intensive, they were built to last.

Overall, what we forget, or never knew, is that textile goods were fiendishly expensive and precious, even when not handmade like these. In any case, menswear markets were far earlier than women's to adopt the "readymades" simply because the wearing needs of women were much too complex and fiddly for a machine to produce.

The earliest of these are *Gut Flora III*, which represents the wholly different, mid-eighteenth century dressing system, and *Spinal Top, Cast Off*, and *Landscape with Hooks*, which date from the 1860s, when industrial production was only just beginning to crank up. The others Martina selected

were all born around 1890, an interesting time to get dressed, when women were allowed to exercise and work, if not vote, and the eye was shifting from exaggerated rear to oversized sleeve: or from bustle (more shelfy than its first round twenty years before) to gigot sleeve. Corsets were about to bend women into a pigeon-fronted S-shape, but not quite yet. These were still upright days of boned bodices.

“This is when the grotesquerie of underwear began to have its own slightly morbid but positive appeal, along with the increasingly deliberate seductiveness of its actual materials and trim,” wrote Anne Hollander in *Seeing Through Clothes*, her 1978 book about clothes and bodies in Western art that is a key reference for Martina. It is a landmark work altogether. Hollander was the first art historian to take clothes seriously, who interpreted centuries of draping, nudity, and fashion as of more than surface importance. “The proportions of the female torso,” she wrote, “is the most significant field of fashionable alteration.” *Waist Management* shows the truth of those torso proportions, seen through Hollander’s “actual materials and trim.” Literally. Martina’s topstitching was originally a solution for the technical problem of showing pale thread on a dark ground, but has added a delicious visceral element, ostensibly replicating the dead women’s work, only really not at all: “Stitching is fun. That part feels sculptural, flipping the paper, making a circumference of two feet around you,” Martina says. But the original stitches of course, made tiny two-inch circles, close to the body. These through paper are gestural, extra dimensional, So is the hardware. “*Landscape with Hooks* is everyone’s favorite,” Martina says, “there’s something eerie about it. That’s got such a history, women’s body as landscape.” Also it has period hooks, their partners sewn onto *Newey’s Imperial Eye*. “I love it when they’re rusty, and when the package says rust free,” says Martina.

Talking of hardware, or actual materials, or “the grotesquerie of underwear,” not everything in the room is flat: there are sculptures. They are representatives from the naughty nether regions: cheeky beings born of horsehair-stuffed linen tournure—skirt supporter pad, or bustle. “Bustle” was a scurrilous word back in the day, as was leg: stockings were known as *footwear*. Indecency isn’t high in our vocabulary now, and yet bodily function can still suggest the grotesque. Peer at *Horse Girl I* with her garniture of pube-like horsehairs. “She makes everyone really uncomfortable,” admits Martina. “That’s why she has a little tear.” Causing squirm is this artist’s happy place. Intimacy, vulnerabilities and power shifts that “come with inhabiting a femme body” are a big theme, along with the functionality and history of clothing. Previous works include garments with clear PVC floral-curtained windows opening onto erogenous parts, pieces made from kitchen rags, worn out bedsheets, cotton printed with penile ears of corn. Those referenced surrealism, led her to the radical, embodied, provocative work of the Austrian performance artist VALIE EXPORT (google “Aktionhose: Genitalpanik”), and the paintings of Christina Ramberg, all shoes, hair, corsets as urns or tabby cats, and genital abstractions—as Martina says, “dark femme torso and clothes-core.”

Waist Management is all that, with the dress guts, splayed bodices, torso prosthesis so soberly, painstakingly rendered. But what is also important, and what the Horse Girls reclining on smocked, stiffened silks and the clingy men clambering around a crinoline cage make abundantly clear, if we hadn’t already noticed: these Gut Flora are totally winking.

MARTINA COX

b. 1995, New York, NY
BFA 2018, Cooper Union
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

Cox received her BFA from Cooper Union, New York, NY and was recently an artist-in-residence at the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, NY. Recent exhibitions include *WallFlower* Erkelenzdam 51 Ausstellungsraum, Berlin, Germany; *Way In/Way Out* Textile Arts Center, Brooklyn; and *Merde!* Alyssa Davis Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. She is the organizer and host of mending club *Darn it!* and has recently been mentioned in Interview Magazine, LVL3, Coeval, and Sleek Magazine.



Martina Cox observes the femme form through the history of dress and the gendering of craft. Working with actual antique garments, she begins to dissect the ways the femme body has been contained, manipulated and molded over the years by dress.

This series is focused on colored pencil and watercolor drawings of 19th and early 20th century corsets and bodices, often depicting the hidden whalebone ribs, busks and laces inside the garments. She examines the bodice as a type of container, with the insides of these containers often being referred to as 'guts.' These 'guts' are both compelling when photographed and possess the potential for abstract compositions, which she captures through her series of drawings, *Gut Flora I-IX*.

On select pieces, Martina delicately pierces and sutures through the paper in between the drawn folds and seams and sewed in hook and eye closures, which become miniature sculptural moments within landscape-like scenes. The still, almost photographic rendering plays with the influence of art on the clothed figure in reality and the shift from what forms of art were conveying the human image to western eyes - from prints and engravings to the overwhelming contemporary influence of photography and cinematography.

Martina's drawings of actual garments display the technical elements of how the clothes were made but through the rendering the perceptual knowledge that was transmitted through figurative art as well - primarily, how the bodies in them were supposed and believed to look at the time.

The five sculptures on view are constructed and animated into bodies from Victorian bustles; they are stuffed with horsehair from two centuries ago (a historical material for stiffening and shaping garments) and animated with sewn, beaded eyes. Oneiric in their child-like appeal and anthropomorphic expressions yet with a macabre undertone, these pieces playfully reference Victorian oddities or a form of invented vegan taxidermy.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

July 2023 Brashnar Artist-in-Residence (BAiR), Skopje, North Macedonia
2022-2023 Textile Arts Center AiR Program, Brooklyn, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Way In/Way Out*, Textile Arts Center, Brooklyn
2022 *LVL3 x LTDWEAR6 Sleepover Show*, LVL3 Gallery, Chicago, IL
Merde! Sculpture Auction, Alyssa Davis Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
Gum:Scale, Jack Chiles Gallery, New York, NY
2021 *LVL3 x LTDWEAR5 Baking Show*, LVL3 Gallery, Chicago
2019 *Pillow Talk Presents: Sex and Love in the City*, New York, NY
2017 *Tie His Hands Gently*, Romeo NYC, New York
2014 *15 Warren*, 15 Warren construction site, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain*, The Cooper Union Senior Thesis Exhibition, New York, NY
2016 *WallFlower*, Erkelenzdamm 51 Ausstellungsraum, Berlin, BE
2015 *Re Covered*, The Cooper Union, New York, NY

PROJECTS & WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2022 – PRESENT Organizer and host, mending club “Darn it!”
2018 – 2021 Resident Designer, Cafe Forgot
2020 Featured, “Untitled Cafe Forgot Documentary,” by Cyrus Duffy
2019 Costume Design contribution to *El Planeta*, directed by Amalia Ulman & Costume Design by Fiona Duncan

EDUCATION

- SEP 2013 - JUN 2018 BFA The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art
OCT 2015 - APR 2016 Erasmus Berlin University of the Arts

PRESS

- 2023 Textile Arts Center, March 2023, ‘The Femme Body and Performative Fashion with Martina Cox’
2021 LVL3 Chicago, January 2021 Spotlight: Martina Cox
2020 Precog Magazine, Precog Time Lecture Series: Ep 9 Window: Martina Cox
Garage Magazine, March 2020 Martina Cox’s Curtain Call
2019 Coeval Magazine, December 2019 Martina Cox
Sleek Magazine, September 2019 ‘Martina Cox’s Upcycled Garments Subvert the Feminine Tradition of Arts and Crafts’
Larrie Gallery; New York, NY ‘Becky Akinyode in Conversation with Martina Cox’