

SUDDENLY, LAST SUMM
JULY/AUGUST 2013 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU





White Petals Surround Your Yellow Heart Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

Can an art exhibition about surface be anything but superficial? I think it can, but it's not a premise supported by *White Petals Surround Your Yellow Heart*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia [February 6–July 28, 2013]. Conceived and designed by ICA associate curator (and 2014 Whitney Biennial co-curator) Anthony Elms, the exhibition is, at its loosest, a show about artists engaging fashion and facade as tools of self-presentation and modification. Elms took his prompt from the British novelist J.G. Ballard, who wrote these perceptive lines in his book *A User's Guide to the Millennium*: "Fashion: A recognition that nature has endowed us with one skin too few, and that a fully sentient being should wear its nervous system externally." This sentiment—that clothing exists as an extension of our own internal circuitries, an extra transmutant skin that completes our otherwise unfinished bodies—is really beautiful. But it's hard for me to relate its promise to much of the work here. Instead of Ballard's words ringing in my head while I walked around the show, I kept hearing those of *Project Runway* contestants, each declaring a desire to make clothes because "they're an extension of my personality." That sentiment is just too flat and self-interested for me to keep watching.

There are a lot of interesting personalities on view in *White Petals*. Hilton Als, Bernadette Corporation, Dexter Sinister with Halmos, Lynda Benglis, Zoe Leonard, Seth Price, and Frances Stark are among the 28 participating artists. Despite the large roster, the show manages to not be overcrowded, and it plays between sculpture, video, performance, photography, and painting. However, the collages have the most reach; in particular, works by the Belgian artist Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, especially

NonPlus (2012), reminded me of the expansive fashion-boards that teenage girls produce in the privacy of their bedrooms after poring over glossy fashion magazines. Cut-out and aggressively layered images of beauty products and hyper-smooth-skinned models has a strange effect on these otherwise unblemished museum walls. It's a little monstrous.

The inclusion of Inez & Vinoodh—perhaps the most successful and innovative fashion photographers working in the industry at the moment—is a little more confounding. Their black-and-white digital video of the actor Michael Pitt, *YSL Homme F/W 2009* (2009), was produced to open an Yves Saint Laurent men's show at Paris Fashion Week. It's a single five-minute shot, entirely in close-up, of Pitt's sexy and effete face, which shifts around the frame as he listens to the voice of an unseen woman speak suggestively to him in French about clothing ("I fondle your gray flannel"). It's a smart piece of advertising—entangling lust, access, and power—but that's the thing with advertising: if I'm being sold a feeling, it's only in service of a product. However shrewd, that's the condition that separates commercials from art.

Another video targeting the world of high-fashion culture is Karen Kilimnik's *Kate Moss* (1996). It is decidedly less cunning than Lamsweerde and Matadin's video, and far stranger. Using footage from an early-90s documentary made about Christy Turlington that features Moss, Naomi Campbell, and other notable supermodels, Kilimnik doubles and triples the footage of the women walking the runways, smoking backstage, giving interviews, and posing for photographs, as if continually rewinding and fast-forwarding the tape. It's all pretty glamorous and vapid, but unlike Lamsweerde

and Matadin's product, it's far too amateurish to be manipulative. If anything, Kilimnik comes across as an obsessive fangirl looking for clues on how to be beautiful. The footage that she used feels so familiar (see Robert Altman's 1994 film *Prêt-à-Porter* for a likely antecedent, or in place of, this whole exhibition) that it is hard to glean new meaning from her choppy, repetitive editing. But I appreciate Kilimnik's willingness to approach high fashion as an outsider, eager for an entree that will never arrive.

It's not that interesting when critics assail shows, and that's certainly not all I hope to do here. *White Petals* isn't at all lazy or unambitious—it just misses a ripe opportunity to say something new or critical or daring. Some great art has engaged clothing, adornment, and self-presentation, but wouldn't it have been more interesting to fold the conceit of superficiality into itself? For instance: why are certain artists more fashionable than others like them? Are narcissism and hubris inherent to all art production? How do successful artists engage within a culture of materialism? And what sorts of artistic surfaces themselves are more salable? Let's not forget that still lives with more fruit command bigger prices at auction than similar paintings with less. Surface value is a flawed and compelling concept, and one that's deeply engrained in the worlds of contemporary fashion and art. Why not use it more self-reflexively as a two-way mirror? Instead, *White Petals*, itself a grab bag of trendy artists, teases out nothing deep; it revels in the superficial without prompting viewers to look for anything substantial inside its thin layers.

—Carmen Winant