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Awkward Gestures

When you think of ‘fashion illustration’, a humorous image may not be what springs to mind, yet some of the most prominent practitioners are known for their ironic, playful or witty interpretations of their subject. For instance, the drawings of Gladys Perint Palmer, who has referred to herself as a ‘humourist’, caricature the industry’s stars and bring out the irony in fashion. The graphic designer Henry Steiner has said of her work, ‘Gladys’s impudent and exuberant brush vividly nails the fashion zoo’s excesses; she is our reincarnation of Toulouse-Lautrec.’

Often described as satirical, the illustrations of Jean Philippe Delhomme interpret fashion in terms of culture, lifestyle, attitude and personality. Explaining the captions he often uses to emphasise the humour of his scenes, he says, ‘I love absurd declarative statements, the way people are usually quoted in magazines or the lifestyle mantras one can read through headlines and titles. And I like to apply those declarative statements to the situation and the characters I draw, pretending like it's normal language... The thing is to not get too used to it: maybe if I camped out in an art gallery for two weeks, I wouldn't notice the oddness of the talks any more.’ Whether working in the spirit of reportage or creating imagined characters and scenarios based on observations (as he does on his blog *The Unknown Hipster*, described by *The New York Times* as ‘a *rive gauche* version of [Robert] Musil’s “man without qualities”’), he gently mocks the cultured ‘elite’.

The artists selected here take a similarly irreverent approach, bringing a sense of awkward humour or subtle absurdity to their fashion reports. This has obvious appeal in fashion marketing and publishing terms; it’s eye-catching and fun but it can also allow illustrators to express more nuanced or critical ideas about our relationship with fashion. By challenging ways of representing the body, making fashion images that are more ‘human’ or ‘real’ or reflecting on what our preoccupation with fashion says about human nature, these artists filter their personal preoccupations through their fashion drawings.

Like Delhomme, the French illustrator Damien Florébert Cuypers looks at the world of fashion from an outsider’s perspective, seeming most interested in what it reveals about the foibles of human behaviour. “I don’t focus on fashion,” he told *Kitsune Journal*, explaining that he considers the clothes to be “real-life character design. Colours, shapes, movement all combine to create a story and a persona. Even if you’re not into fashion, you tell a story with your non-fashion.” He works across various genres but he is best known for his crayon pictures of people at high fashion and art events, which regularly feature in *The New York Times*. He was recently artist in residence at Hermès, Paris.

Florence Shaw is also interested in observing people and considering how we construct an identity through fashion. In 2013, she offered an unusual, amusing perspective on the season’s men’s collections for *Port Magazine*. As with her personal work, the sparseness, patches of detail and oddly drawn characters create a compelling strangeness that invites us to ask questions.

The London-based Helen Bullock often works with *AnOther Magazine* and her work has also appeared in *GQ* and *Pop*. With a background in textile design and inspired by the paintings of Robert Motherwell, she has an almost abstract approach that reduces the body to a few lines or sets it against daubs of pure colour. Her irreverent style captures the essence of the clothes but in bringing out an awkwardness, both Shaw and Bullock transform models into new characters of their own devising and have thus found a way to present fashion without the idealised bodies so often associated with it. Instead, these artists emphasise the decorative and colourful qualities of clothing, *joie de vivre* in an odd world.

Helen Bullock interview

How did you get into fashion illustration?

When I was studying my BA (Fashion Print at CSM), we were lucky enough to have regular Fashion Illustration classes with a super inspiring teacher. It eventually filtered through in to my design work ... and essentially became a new skill. When I graduated, I then saw it as another genre to draw on, so whilst exhibiting at Vauxhall Fashion Scout, I asked if I could do some live drawings there, and, as I completely loved it, continued to persue it.

Could you describe your process? How does it change when you make live drawings?

Whilst doing show drawings, there is no process - just get the best position you can, and try to keep up. As the show goes on, sometimes new approaches crop up. But yes. No thought just speed! Drawing from a posed model is still high speed - but perhaps with a bit more chance to have a more considered response. And then finally... most of my commissioned show drawings are from still images. SO you have to work to create an energy and emotion. I use music, and try to be physically active when drawing - always trying to find a way to get inside the image.

You often give your models quite awkward faces – how do you edit your drawings, what are you trying to capture in their expression?

Editing is done intuitively. I rarely know what I want, but am very clear on what feels right and what doesn't. I'm always looking for a strength in the face. I'm not a fan of the saccharin, passive or pretty I want to find those strong lines in the nose, or the graphic angles and planes on the cheeks or jaws. I think it's all about the lighting, and first noticed it when I was drawing JW Andersons show a few seasons back - they were so menacing, really incredible to draw.

Humour seems important in your work?

Not necessarily humour, more joyful energy! Or just at times an overall ugliness. I see them as these odd little creatures that appear before me! But I think describing them as humourous suggests an intention to invoke humour - which I never really do. As in - it's all very intuitive... I let the image direct me.

With their faces and the bold, semi-abstracted way you draw them, your people are almost like anti-glamour models - you don't idealise the body for instance?

Absolutely not. Perhaps even the opposite. I like the drawings to be challenging. I like the models to be active, and alive. I pick up on the awkwardness. And avoid showing that generic glamour that I think can come through in your stereotypical fashion illustration. Fashion is so much more than that.

How does your outlook on life affect the work you make?

Oh. Um. My outlook I guess is to experience as much as you can, be as bold as you can, and be as truthful as you can. So yes! I hope that this is the foundation of my work.

You also design textiles. What interests you about fashion?

I've always been drawn to the transformative qualities of fashion. Both in terms of the effects it has on it's wearer, but also the constant production and development of new ideas. It's always moving.

Can you tell us what you're working on at the moment?

I've just been commissioned to do some art to cover a car, which I'm VERY excited about! I'm also working on a few personal projects, including a collection of scarves. Plus researching live events where I could possibly be Artist in Residence. I've just come back from Bath in Fashion and it was just a great job - capturing all the activity and buzz.

Florence Shaw interview

How did you come to illustrate fashion for Port Magazine?

Peter Nencini, an ex tutor of mine put me in touch with David St John-James, the fashion director at Port. He was looking for someone to illustrate the key collections at London Collections: Men, followed by men's fashion week in Paris and Milan. He and David Hellqvist the features editor would send me iPhone photos from the runway shows; specific looks that they wanted me to focus on, and in about 4 hours or so I'd turn out an illustration. I'd always wanted to illustrate fashion.

Could you describe your process?

I'm a bit of a snob when it comes to working from photo reference. To be totally frank it makes my skin crawl, but sometimes with a tight turnaround it's the only option. I printed any images David and David had sent over alongside pilfered photos from Nowfashion.com and spread them all around me. I start by drawing in a childish way - as though I'm an 8 year old designing a dress; drawings that are just for myself. This is to get ideas down, see if they look promising. I'll re draw bits of these original drawings and leave some bits behind, add new bits, and refine and refine until I've got something that feels right. It's quite wasteful, particularly in terms of tracing paper. Often I'll make thirty or forty slightly different sketches before I reach the final drawing.

To me, your drawings convey a kind of awkward humour. How would you say your illustrations relate to your outlook on life?

I think about how I look a lot. And not only in terms of my clothes, but also I wonder how my face looks, my body language. Sometimes ideas for drawings

come from making fun of myself. For the faces in these drawings I thought about mugging in the mirror - pulling fashion faces and what that looks like on an ordinary person.

People don't move gracefully. They aren't rhythmic, in the way that animals are. Self consciousness introduces all sorts of uncanny stiffnesses and affectations to how a person moves, and I think that's interesting so I like to show it. I like to try and show reality when it comes to the people in my drawings, and let the clothes be the fantasy. I'm not interested in bolstering ideas of unattainable, unrealistic beauty - I think those things cause all kinds of problems that I don't want to be a part of. And also it's boring. The fashion is the magic, transformative thing, not the bodies wearing the fashion.

In your drawings, the models seem to become characters - how do you develop these and what's your relationship with them? Are they based on photos of the actual models?

The characterisation starts with some small element of what the model looks like. I'll exaggerate something, a chin, a forehead- make something odd happen. Drawing is only ever an impression of what something looks like, so why try so hard to replicate. It's also boring to replicate - I don't know who's interested in looking at that. It's more fun to play- what happens if I move the ear waaaaay down here.

Although this is your first time illustrating fashion, as a close observer of people, details such as hairstyle and clothing often appear in your personal work. You've said before that taste is one of your interests when drawing people. What are your thoughts on taste? And did they influence your fashion drawings?

The choices that people make interest me very much. I like to pick apart what you can and can't tell about somebody by whether their eyebrows are drawn on or where they're drawn. I like make up - the fantasy of starting from scratch - whiting out a face and drawing it on anew. I think that's a very comforting process for some people - pulling and pushing your features around, making them seem bigger or smaller with dark or light marks.

I often imagine people I see - strangers - dressed in different clothes - try and imagine them as a punk or a business man. My favourite thing to do on the underground is to look at each person and imagine which historical style of dress would suit them best.

If you're borrowing someone's painstakingly assembled outfit and hair and makeup for your drawing, there's a responsibility to do it justice. A lot of care has gone into it. It's someone's self esteem, visible for everyone to see. I want to elevate it by making them an icon in my own small way - putting them in a drawing.

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm finishing a comic book and preparing for an open studio show in May.

Damien Florebert Cuypers Interview

Your fashion drawings have been attracting a lot of attention. Do you see these primarily as fashion illustrations, portraits or

records of a moment?

If I had to choose I'd say it's more like the record of a moment and it just so happens that's in a fashion context, which allows me to play with colors a lot.

What interests you about drawing people?

I like the storytelling and the character design aspect of it, how a color, a shape, body language tells you something deeper than just itself. Also, Humans are fun to draw.

Do you always draw live, directly from your subjects or do you use photos?

I don't always draw live. I actually do most of my drawings at my desk. During fashion week I run around and use my camera to take notes. The first fashion week I covered was in February 2012 in London. I did a few drawings live in the street and then it started raining. I was glad I had my camera with me.

Your work has a gentle humour, with a hint of the absurd perhaps?

The world is absurd, the fashion world is especially absurd. I love capturing these self-important people in a moment where they show their humanity, like when I draw Stefano Tonchi at the Deli.

I wish I were funny, like clever funny, but I always think about what I should have said or done later on.

How does your outlook on life influence the work you make?

From a very early age (between 6 and 8 I think) I've developed interests in fashion, design, colors... I draw on paper the old fashion way because I need the physicality of it, I need to be human and do mistakes and start over and get lucky and push my crayons hard on the paper when I feel like it. It's like a mini dance with mostly just my hand. Dancing makes me happy.

The world is a dreadful place, not because it is but because people make it that way. I'm in search of beauty and poetry to get relief and inspiration, trying to have fun along the way.

I've heard that you're working on some short animations about farts and philosophy – can you say more about these?

The Stories of Philosophies are a work in progress with my friend Benoît who lives in Berlin. Living on two different continents makes it hard to move things forward but we are still developing ideas and trying to animate when we find the time. Animation is very time consuming and I like procrastinating... The short film about farts is on permanent hold for now.

