

AnOther

Talking Fashion and Femininity with Artist Paulina Olowaska

— June 23, 2017 —

Her larger-than-life paintings of vintage Biba dresses feature in a Stockholm exhibition, Form and Volume

Text Francesca Gavin



From the series Construction First - collages from Japan, 2000 © Paulina Olowaska,
Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong

The representation of women by women is very different to images by men. Paulina Olowaska has depicted women with a notable breadth of approach. Her pieces have included 1980s girls in DIY knitwear, old ladies with big glasses and female workers in car factories. Two of Olowaska's larger-than-life paintings of female mannequins are part of the group show

Form and Volume currently on show at CF Hill in Stockholm. These feminine figures are bold and imposing – inviting the viewer to fall into the fabric's mesmeric prints and folds.



Mycella maxi-dress with wrap-overlap and flared skirt, Biba, 2014.
© Paulina Olowaska, Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong

Olowaska is not limited to a single medium. She recently presented theatrical performances at the Tate Modern in London and Kitchen in New York, which sat somewhere between ballet and a fashion show. She is currently working a new magazine *Pavilionesque*, dedicated to puppetry and contemporary art, and making new ceramics and paintings of women missing from the erotic arena, inspired by the 1970s soft porn mag *Viva* and Polish the cartoonist Maja Berezowska. Paulina took a break to discuss mannequins, Biba and negotiating history.

On the idea behind the series of mannequin paintings...

“This series of monumental gouaches was first shown in 2008 at gallery Daniel Buchhloz in Cologne. The show was prepared in two separate spaces: an intimate gallery space and a storefront. I divided the works into a “tailoring agency” and a kind of “stage set”. The show titled *Attention à la Peinture* was inspired by Elsa Schiaparelli’s fictional story of a catwalk, where models would wear canvases as clothing. For *Attention à la Peinture*, I reversed this action by making the dresses from my painted canvases. One of the spaces, the store front, had eight, gigantic realist gouaches of larger than life dresses.”

On the use of mannequin-like forms in her work...

“Mannequins are uncanny objects – a perfect human being without basic facial features. The only aspect of the mannequin that truly resembles the human is the clothing. I wanted to enlarge the clothes so that the viewer gets stuck on the patterns, curves and folds. As a painter, I am fascinated with the abstraction and figuration motives at work, rather than with the division of the themes, which is more common. Once, I painted a portrait of Bridget Riley stuck between her large abstract canvases and this created a push and pull narrative: was she in front of the paintings or were the paintings in front of her?”

On her particular focus on vintage Biba dresses...

“The Biba brand, created by Barbara Hulanicki, opened in London in 1966. My mom was working in the 1970s in London and Paris. She would bring Biba’s black nail polish, brown art nouveau dresses and the first ever canned dog food back to Poland. This was a moment of dramatic forms, designs and volume. I am thinking, in particular, of the opium smell by Yves Saint Laurent, or Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the absolute seduction and happiness of women. The enlarged size, the ghostly feeling of this work was meant to present such a mood.”

On the representation of female bodies, and their relationship to clothing and fashion...

“Fashion can play a strong role in political and gender statements. I think it is doing so, actually, more and more. I like to use fashion in artworks as a tool to speak about past ideologies and allude to different movements and moments in history.”



From the series Construction First - collages from Japan, 2000
© Paulina Olowaska, Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong



Crepe Kimono-style dress with Deco print, Biba, 2014
© Paulina Olowaska, Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong

On her relationship to the former Eastern Block, and her childhood in Poland...

“After my studies abroad, I returned to Warsaw in 2004. It was then clear to me that I wanted to be part of the debate regarding this moment of transition in Poland. It was a question of how to negotiate the past – not only how to destroy it, but how to learn from it. I loved working around the themes of Modernism and historical utopias. I still work with the idea of a utopia, but now from a psychological reference; it is more about memory, trauma and the inner intuition.”



From the series Construction First - collages from Japan, 2000
© Paulina Olowska, Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong

Form and Volume runs until June 30, 2017, at CF Hill, Stockholm.