

TOWARDS AN IDEA OF FASHION, a note on the Residency by the Curator :- Mayank Mansingh Kaul

Cloth & Clothing

Throughout history, dress, apparel and clothing traditions have been closely linked to how people have chosen to live and function in relation to themselves, others and the environment. From the simplest white dhoti to the most extravagant brocades- the use of material; draping and construction techniques; cuts, shapes, form, colour and structure; and their use in sartorial ensembles - show an amazing variety and complexity in the world-views of people across cultures. As aspects of culture, they perhaps best represent the material, visual and intellectual landscapes of a time.

If we see man's evolution from his hunter-gatherer stage to present, clothing has played a pivotal role in also pushing civilization from one point to another. In animist, or the so called 'folk and tribal' cultures even today, we see references of the concept of clothing not just synonyms with cloth as it has become today : materials like leaves and twines, metal objects and shells are used to make coverings and jewellery which are used as dress and ornament. The domination of fabric – woven, knitted, felted and so on, and made from fibres like cotton, silk, wool, hemp among others – in the making of garments; is also linked to various meanings that cloth itself has had for diverse communities, and through such human evolution.

Certainly, intentions to dress as we see today – to protect from weather, to create and communicate identity, for decoration, for seduction, as part of rites of passage, as symbols of sacred rituals and musings – reveal aspects of human nature, which often can only be gauged through itself alone. Therefore in their use; clothing, dress and garments can be seen as parts of living traditions as different from costume. Costumes, in a present context, can refer more to their objectification in museums as part of past traditions, or as part of artificially-created environments of periods in time, as in film and theatre. And while clothing may refer to the extension of cloth and fabric into a 'worn' tradition, dress may also refer to a whole range of hair-styles, footwear and jewellery along with garments.

The origins of Fashion: A European perspective

The word fashion in its present dictionary definition refers to prevailing customs or style of dress, etiquette, socializing and so on. In this use, it conveys conventional manners of conformity to trends. Its origins, are traced to the period 1250-1300, from the words 'facion' (Middle English), 'faco', 'facun' and 'faceon' (Anglo-French) and 'faction'(Latin); conveying an intentional act of shaping or making something.

In a reference to a European context, the word is associated with an emerging urbanity and the appearance of towns as centres of economic-commercial-political activity around the 14th century. The movement of people from rural to urban areas - towns or capitals of provinces – saw a complex set of social interactions emerging. On the one hand, was the need to create a platform based on which common values could be established for organized living within different groups of people; and on the other, a need to create distinctions between them. One of the ways in which feudal class distinctions were carried forward, were through a wealthier 'elite' that chose to dress consciously-

differently from the large number of people coming in from rural areas. New forms of dress, furniture, architecture, language and mannerisms became associated with them. The changes here, in time, became faster and more pronounced as society here became more and more complex.

As in most communities, political leaders or rulers, often dictate what the rest of the people wear. This becomes a way of the leaders showing their domination over a people; and in following what the leader wears, the 'subjects' show their subjugation to the ruler. In this way, it is possible to see the role of dress and clothing as part of the process of establishing and maintaining rules. However, we also see that in these communities clothing did not intrinsically change in style over centuries. For instance, Greek clothing may have influenced large parts of Europe as the Roman empire spread and so on, but Greek clothing itself did not fundamentally change over a period of almost 1500 years.

Also while we see that in most communities, there have been some differences in the way men and women dress, it was around the middle of the 14th century that one saw men's and women's clothing really drifting apart decisively in a European context. It was however not until the 16th century, that we see the phenomena of clothes changing faster than they were worn down. And we can assume that it is during this period that the word 'fashion' appeared in a present connotation, where its obsolescence is informed not only by its wear and tear. Here the need for change – in some ways – for its own sake, started dictating the creation of sartorial constructs which helped the wearer communicate his identity in relation to a group he belonged to, or wanted to distance himself from. .

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, it was also observed that elements of dress as status symbols began to give way to individual styles and interpretations of what were the norms. We see therefore, the emergence of a certain individualism, an emerging personalization of dress as a way of expressing an individuality.

Another important point to consider here, is that up to now, the design of clothes were created by the wearers' themselves, and the dress-maker followed instructions of such users. The sewing industry appeared around 1820 in England, and with it came the ability to standardize clothes. Soon after, we see the appearance of the dress-maker or couturier as an artist, and is often seen as a response to the standardization of clothes as 'mass products'. In 1857, the English dress-maker, Charles Frederick Worth, opened a clothes salon and 'professed the idea that attractive women should wear new fashions'. And the dress-maker took the initiative of creating trends that had earlier been the preserve of the wearer.

Haute Couture & Pret-a-Porter

At this point, I will take some time to introduce two modes of producing/selling/wearing fashion - Haute Couture and Pret-a-Porter - which are standard references in the international fashion industry today. Haute Couture, is a French word literally meaning 'High Sewing' or 'High Dress-making'. The first Haute Couture House is attributed to Charles Frederick Worth, as has been discussed in the last section. However, its emergence is seen as a continuing tradition of clothes being specially made for monarchs, and subsequently for other members of the aristocracy and nobility. It implied a certain kind of affordability and status which often came from belonging to a certain class within the feudal hierarchy of the 17th and 18th century, and its rise can be seen closely with the need to produce an elitism.

Haute couture refers to the creation of hand-made, exclusive, custom-fitted clothing made for specific customers. It is most often associated with very high-quality, expensive fabrics and an extreme attention to stitching details and sewing. The word can be used only if a design house meets certain standards (its use as a name is protected). Today it is loosely used to describe all high-fashion custom-fitted clothing, whether it is produced in Milan, London, New York Tokyo or other cities of the world.

Its development can be seen in relation to Paris of that time, where it was founded, and where diverse intellectual-artistic activities were laying the foundations of a culture which became known for its innovation and eclecticism around Europe. Such reputation brought avant-garden thinkers and artists from around the continent, to produce such cultural content for a wealthy clientele. If the 16th century Renaissance period was a time of art developing in Europe, which posed questions related to man; 18th century France was a phase of art growing to increasingly define a certain cultural consumption, which by its elitism, could define a decadence.

At the time of the First World War, there were already many couture houses functioning in Paris, and an indication of how such decadence was held onto till the second world war is seen in how – through the period of rationed clothing in Europe – couture houses went on an extreme track, producing collections of such custom dresses using more and more bales of silk.

Ready-to-wear or prêt-à-porter (Pret) is the term for factory-made clothing, sold in finished condition, in standardized sizes, as distinct from made to measure or bespoke clothing tailored to a particular person's frame. Ready-to-wear has rather different connotations in the spheres of fashion and classic clothing. In the fashion industry, designers produce ready-to-wear clothing intended to be worn without significant alteration, because clothing made to standard sizes fits most people. They use standard patterns, factory equipment, and faster construction techniques to keep costs low, compared to a custom-sewn version of the same item. Some fashion houses and fashion designers produce mass-produced and industrially manufactured ready-to-wear lines, while others offer garments that, while not unique, are produced in limited numbers.

The rise of Pret, is related to the rise of chain-style departmental stores in Europe and the USA, as well as international brands of clothing. Its rise is also closely linked to the economic rise and prosperity of the USA through the 1970s, continuing upto the 2000s, and its development as a large consumer market in urban cities. This is evident from the earlier advertising campaigns of major brands like Armani, Versace and Yves Saint Laurent among others, who played with the changing notions of a new urbanity in metropolitan cities of the world. For such new money to find a heritage needed the reference of these brands' international/European lineage, but it also helped forge new urban identities, which included the evolving roles of women as increasingly professional in nature.

Today, these brands and Pret, has emerged as an industry worth hundreds of Billions. Its ability to expand constantly to South America and Asia has further necessitated the brands to – in light of cultural clothing traditions often being strong here – to grow their businesses through fashion accessories like eye-ear, bags, footwear as well as perfumes. At a cultural level, such brands and fashion in a larger sense is providing the opportunity for different parts of the world to connect over a common sense of aesthetics. An off-shoot of such homogenizing tendencies has further led to local identities and modes of expressing fashion to also strengthen as an anti-thesis.

Fashion in the Indian context

In developing a way of understanding fashion in the Indian context, it is necessary to go back to its western origins. This, because British colonial rule fundamentally changed the way Indian men dress and impacted notions of it for women. Historically, before the coming of the Muslims to India, dress in India primarily comprised of unstitched fabric which were draped around the country in differing ways. Infact, even today, in many parts of the country like Bengal, the sari (for women) is called the 'dhoti', which has come to be associated in a present context as only the unstitched garment worn by men.

The only exception to this comes from Rajasthani-Gujarati skirts and blouse, which are speculated to have come to India via the western Desert route through the Romanian gypsies. Another version attributes this to being a response to the Muslim invasions much later, beginning with the 10th century A.D. onwards.

The study of 'costume' in India has been in the past approached by two parameters by some Indian sociologists. The first is that of gravitational clothing, that is fabric being used in shaping garments for the body with reference to their fall and drape in relation to gravity. The second is anatomical clothing, where fabric is used to shape the human body and highlight it.

Both present very different philosophies of understanding material culture. In the Hindu philosophy, the act of weaving cloth is likened to weaving the tapestry of life and spinning itself has many metaphorical meanings. The use of woven cloth, especially cotton has had several meanings in relation the caste system itself, and related notions of purity and pollution. The fabric that emerged from the loom as one, finished, uncut fabric was seen as sacred fabric that was then worn by the body which itself was seen as a sacred instrument of god or the divine. Man's role there appears to be as a medium of transmitting a divine energy.

It seems that the kind of anatomical clothing we have discussed above, came to India through the Muslin invasions. There are various ways to see its origin, possibly in Central Asia, from where it travelled west-wards to Europe and then to the Americas, and east-wards to the Indian subcontinent, South-East Asia and the Far East. Some of them attribute the development of such body-hugging garments to the need to travel for military purposes, which necessitated the need to protect from weather as well as in times of battle.

While a more detailed understanding of such origins in all cultures is insightful in its ability to comment on the continuous traditions of clothing, I chose to point out some common aspects of all of them. The first is that of seduction, where the role of clothing-ornament can be seen as a way for members of one gender to attract the opposite in a sort of 'mating ritual'. Here, in both the gravitational and anatomical modes of dressing, we see distinct notions of such seduction – in the former, it is receptive and subtle and in the latter case, more geared towards exaggerating the idea of a self to become attractive. A second aspect common to all clothing traditions is the negotiation of the feminine and masculine, and of the thin to thick varying lines between the male and female gender. A third aspects is linked to the intrinsic and attributed value to the materials used, which can show class, clan, age, martial status and several other such distinctions.

A quick overview of changes in Indian clothing from the 1950s to present times, shows the shaping of a nation and the questions, dilemmas and resolutions of a people in transition. If the Fifties and Sixties began with the debate between modernism and revivalism, it was often punctuated by the older influence of India's princely states and nobility. If the Seventies reflected a conversation with the world through alternative lifestyles like the Hippie Movement, the Eighties pushed the aspiration to

absorb foreign influences through the use of imported fabrics through a time where such imports were severely prohibited. The Nineties onwards have seen, on the one hand an ethnic revival, and on the other faster westernization. It has also seen an increasingly common dialogue between people from different parts of the country and regional backgrounds, to create a common national identity.

The present understanding of fashion in India is led by an increasing consumerism which has allowed for unique versions of foreign-inspired garments to be made accessible to most parts of the country through large-format retail chains. At the same time, the assertion of an independent high-end fashion designer-led retail market has allowed for trade fairs like the Indian Fashion Weeks held in Mumbai and Delhi bi-annually, to create a sense of glamour and aspiration attached to the consumption of such fashion. The entry of international luxury brands in jewellery, foot-wear, watches, automobiles and so on goes hand in hand with the wedding-trousseau variety of Indian fashion, which keeps alive several hand-craft cultural industries. The role of Bollywood stars and celebrities in all of this, pushes the aspirational needs for fashion. With increasing globalization and interaction with the world, the role of fashion is beginning to seem similar in India, as anywhere else in the world today – to define identity vis-à-vis new wealth, social mobility- rising and cultural positioning.

But, perhaps the most interesting reference to understanding the origin of fashion today in India can be seen in the Bengal of 19th century, and the Bengal Renaissance, which saw new cultural forms and expressions arise out of the Mughal-British-Regional conversations. Like in Literature, Art and politics, the clothing styles of the Bengalis were reflecting the first, creative response by Indians to a European culture and through this both – a embracing of a universalism based on human values, but also a deep search for traditional roots. It was here that the Achkan or Sherwani developed as a way of providing an Indian ensemble closest to European formal coats, it was here that the decadence of traditional land-owners created rituals of elaborate dressing, it was here that the style of wearing the sari as it is widely worn today was created by Gyanonandini Tagore.

If it was the fast-adoption of European dress by Indian men which was showing the fundamental shifts that such British, colonial rule was engendering; it also took Khadi, and M K Gandhi's experiments with clothing to create the first-ever mass symbol of protest and fight for independence.

Fashion Today One of the chief ways of seeing fashion today, is through the process of fashion being created primarily by the acceptance of a trend or idea by a large number of people. In this way, fashion becomes a truly interactive way of enabling conversation in society. In this way, it also allows for a fascinating means of observing tendencies towards exclusivism and democratization. As it functions today, fashion represents a massive industry, employing hundreds of millions of people across the world. In many countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey it suggests an industry which leads the entire economy of these countries. Through more than two decades of emerging international politics and negotiations, this industry further has played an important role in trade relations between countries. A case in example is China, which has emerged as the world's largest country of import of mass garment production on one hand, and on the other one of the largest importers of expensive luxury brands.

The Fashion Designer

Within the fashion industry, the fashion designer has emerged today as an important figure. On the one hand are face-less designer brands like Zara, French Connection, Muji and so on, known for their products, design philosophy and style. And on the other hand are the emergence of the iconic fashion

designers-label-brands, who create a way of looking at the body and a role for fashion itself. An example of this can be seen in the way many Japanese designers like Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo (Commes de Garçon) stormed the Paris couture scene, in the 1980s, with their anti-form ways of draping garments. Drawing from their own continuing traditions of the Kimono and androgyny in clothing, they allowed for the female body to be seen differently than the usual 'hour glass' figure, where the body was to be accentuated to be seen as beautiful. The rise of such Japanese sensibilities in contemporary fashion then, allowed for their work to be seen as radical or anti-fashion, and also paved the way for designers from other countries to start attempting such culture-specific international brands. Dries Van Noten from Belgium, Manish Arora from India, Victor and Rolf from the Netherlands, can be seen in this light. At the same time, the choice of designers to lead heritage international brands also comes from their ability to address a global audience, and their talent to produce brand specific design which also caters to the widest range of markets. Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton and John Galliano for Christian Dior, are such cases. While both brands draw their origin from a French lineage, their success as international brands which cater to tastes from the Mediterranean to Japan, is based on the designers' ability to produce a sort of 'mass' aesthetic which can be universal. Sometimes, as one saw when Louis Vuitton entered the Chinese market in a big way, the international advertising campaigns also reflected such a specific addressal.

While one can see, therefore, the role of fashion designers in such a context as those who produce trends, in many ways they also chose to see themselves as artists. To capture the attention of the imagination of the consumers, in highly competitive markets, their runway presentations - often the garments presented here – are theatrical and provocative. This ensures front-page headlines, as well as positioning of the medium of fashion garments as an art in itself. mention here, must be made of artists from early 20th century like Gustav Klimt, who also designed garments for their clients, as well as of early couturiers like Elsa Schiapirelli, who functioned in relation to art movements and their protagonists like the Surrealists in her case.

Art and fashion

The need to create a conversation between art and fashion in an Indian context, comes from several needs. Firstly, as contemporary art engages with diverse media and practises, it is only natural that it allows itself to converse with fashion as an artistic practise. Secondly, increasingly as art subjects turn towards the self of the artist, materials like the body, identity, sexuality, media explorations and so on begin to become important subjects which are the main materials for fashion. Thirdly, in more recent contemporary art practice-market-driven sales of art/art becoming investment, the question of branding and the artist as a label has developed – where the artist may be seen quite alike a fashion designer – exploring how to maintain a philosophy of his/her work, while allowing evolution within that.

Further, in India, the need to study fashion as an artifact in society becomes important as nothing indicates the sociology-psychology of a time better. This creates the need to allow for ways in which to study it - with a paradigm of design-history too - apart from anthropologically and sociologically. And finally, the need comes from the emergence of the fashion designer as an artist in his/her own right.

If we look at art as something which is created for itself, for contemplation, with its poetic qualities and as an end in itself, fashion may be seen as design – a product made for an intrinsically utilitarian purpose to being with. However, both deal with a manipulation of media, shifting perspectives and an articulation of human attitudes. And in this sense, the premise of the residency we are discussing at

the moment at Khoj, becomes to allow for an open discussion between two – considered - different practises, and an enquiry into their similarities and differences.

Choice of Participants

The idea to invite a mix of fashion designers and visual artists to explore this theme, for obvious reasons, was expected to allow the group to see at what levels and in what ways these two practises converse with each other.

The choice of fashion designers – Arjun Saluja and Kallol Datta - was informed by the need to include designers who are engaged with work that is uncommon to the more mainstream fashion expression in the country. Having studied and practiced abroad before starting their own line of garments in India, has allowed them a unique way of interacting local inspirations with international questions related to fashion design. It has also allowed both of them to create a niche within the Indian fashion space, as experimental designers often pursuing their practice as art.

The visual artists invited were seen to have already enquired into the area of fashion, even if in their own unconscious way. Since an understanding of Indian clothing is incomplete without going into its textile heritage, and since cloth becomes the main 'raw material' for fashion garments, visual artists were sought whose work reflected tactile inclinations. Both Manisha Parekh and Mithu Sen became natural choices, as their work reflects a certain manipulation of materials for chosen, diverse effects. The choice of Anay Mann came from the need to include a medium – which along with the products – is an integral part of fashion, photography. In the communication of a sense of a time, the outreach of trends and in creating fashion constructs, the use of photography is vital.

Earlier ideas for the choice of participants had suggested the inclusion of more diverse media practitioners like architecture and writing. This was seen as a way of exploring what fashion means to a variety of creative practises, towards an exploration of 'what is fashion'. The final choice of the group allowed the focus of the residency to become a conversation between art and fashion. The residency was entitled 'The Idea of Fashion', to reflect Khoj's own enquiry into a new subject.

Process of the Residency

The residency primarily progressed in five distinct stages. The first three days were spent in presenting to the participants and the Khoj team, a general history of fashion from an international and Indian perspective, and a discussion of major fashion designers' work. This was preceded by each participant introducing their own work to the group. This was followed by the artists working in their studio leading upto an exhibition of their work at the end of the residency. Mid-way into the residency, a panel discussion was organized which would help the residency participants as well a general public, hear perspectives on how they could see fashion. The discussion included David Abraham, who spoke about the questions and processes he goes through as a fashion designer 'creating' fashion; Parmesh Shahani, Editor-at-Large of the Indian fashion magazine – Verve – on the kind of thought and intention that goes into communicating such fashion to the reader and market; and Santosh Desai, social commentator and head of Future Brands, who spoke about more conceptual ways of looking at fashion as an idea in contemporary Indian culture. Moderated by me, it was followed by a discussion with the audience. One of the important threads that this discussion brought out was how similar fashion and art become when they enter the commercial space of the markets. For instance, how for both the artist and fashion designer, the exploration of how to change

within a style of expression that the market gets used to/becomes commercially viable for them is a constant.

Participant journeys

For Arjun Saluja, the residency started out as an opportunity to connect with a number of other individuals and to know them through who they are as people, and their process of work. Arjun's work reflects an important qualitative aspect of India's fashion-design scene and business, while representing a small minority : Termed 'conceptual' as different from 'commercial' – to use more common use of the fashion-industry language – it explores different ways in which the body is presented through garments. It moves from being anti-'fit', to enhancing body features that are otherwise more commonly attempted to be made 'lean'(the hip for instance), towards androgyny.

In what may be defined as a high-end fashion market in India represented by the few stores that carry such designer-wear, clothes reflect more a wearers ability to spend (through the amount of embellishment used and the name of the designer-brand). It is not surprising that he therefore functions in an-almost private space, finding comfort in a small – even if increasing – number of like-minded designers and creatives. He belongs to a group of designers who may also derive their legitimacy by being in a 'different' minority.

A fine line borders the individualistic aspects of his work and a creative process which may be seen as indulgent in that it serves its own purpose. I wondered how to see however the angst and dogged determination of him to consistently expand the market for this products both within the country and abroad? Had he never been tempted to 'compromise' and push such work towards an almost couture, one-of-a-kind product while making money out of more commercial work? And considering that continuing to be in the Indian market, rather optimistically, meant also educating-cultivating-creating a market that does not exist at the moment, but also addressing a crowd that may have more in common with each other across countries rather than in one's own?

I wondered if Arjun would see this residency as a pause to reflect on his own work, as an artist and designer functioning in a certain context of a fashion-industry? If he would use it to further his conviction in the kind of work he does? Could the existing work he does find relevance in an art-gallery space or can such work command prices that art does? Or be seen as art?

Arjun's final installation attempted to use the format of a space of his studio in khoj, as different from the runaway where he usually makes his statement. This allowed him both a comparative permanence of allowing his work to evolve, be seen over a longer period of time, to be conversed with by viewers for as long as they chose. As someone seen as creating 'futuristic' work, he chose to work with the idea of what it would mean to 'regress': Four identical garments were distressed in succession, in a space orchestrated to evoke the feeling of a stagnant museum in decay. In this way, he also questioned the idea of the sacrosanct museum spaces which become non-conversant in the 'revered' pieces of art they show.

For both **Manisha Parekh** and **Mithu Sen**, fashion presented itself as a new world. In allowing themselves to immerse in such a journey to learn something 'new', they constantly related their own artistic practises with this; allowing a wider opportunity for art itself to converse with a seeming 'other'.

While I have been more familiar with Mithu's work, I remember a show that Manisha had done at Gallery Nature Morte in 2009, where - upon seeing her work - I was struck by its ability to evoke a

journey of endless inner possibilities. Invoking a tactile world so primal in its ability to suggest a universal sameness and humanity, it also provoked the question of how such apparent sameness contains – intrinsically - possibilities of its own individualities. Forms that appear similar, buzz with their own independent desires to become something else. Textures - that ostensibly emerge from grid-like patterns - whisper anarchic intentions. Her work defies definition and yet exudes a feminine knowingness of elemental affirmations in human nature : In her use of materials it suggested to me 'woman's work' - an insistent passivity – hearing paper, ropes, ink, fabric; which allow them to converse with her, making the maker somewhat a medium of an expression much larger than herself?

It was therefore not surprising that upon seeing a range of international and Indian fashion work, she was drawn to Japanese sensibilities.

In the 1980s, a number of radical Japanese designers almost stormed the Parisian fashion scene with their avant garde designs for the female form, which challenged its 'hour glass' notions. New in the western traditions, they however drew from ancient traditional eastern ones where a certain androgyny – an amorphous play between what are seen as 'male' and 'female' energies – allowed a modern questioning on the very role of clothing and adornment to engage 'genders'. Aggressive ideals of dress to 'establish' and elicit reactions, were countered by more receptive ways to 'assert' and intuitively respond. The more technology pushed the emergence of radical materials that did never-before-seen things, it furthered an enquiry into the past and its affordances for a contemporary definition of what it meant to be 'Japanese' in both a local and global way.

In how it required its success in Paris to enter the imagination of an international audience, is the story of how the process of fashion at all level creates centralizing tendencies. However the success of such Japanese experiments during those times were also informed with the need to address its own country, creating the foundation for what has become one of the most original cultures in the world.

In exploring a contemporary materiality, it was also not surprising that her first questions in the residency were related to how she could explore the 'making' of fashion in her own way. She was drawn therefore at first to work with draping and pattern-making on body-forms, basic processes which go into making garments.

One of my main questions at the start of the residency was to look at fashion as not only synonyms with clothes and an artifact with an end in itself; but also as a broad way of understanding, engaging-with or thinking of anything. When we talk of a certain way of eating, living, talking and so on as being 'fashionable'; we are also referring to something that is more of a human phenomena - something that is amorphously dynamic in its ability to converge many factors – imbued, with a certain perception of time.

Manisha and Mithu's shifts took place when they freed themselves from a limited sense of fashion as clothing: Manisha began to see that much like art – where an artist attempts to create his/her own mark on/with a material - fashion too represents a very basic human nature to personalize anything/everything. Mithu, enclosed within the vacuum (and limitless possibilities) of an empty room, began to see how the constant creation/ re-creation of identity through clothing also represented a basic human nature to enquire beyond visible exteriors towards a core. Here, the peeling/shedding of

each layer to reveal the next explains the motivations of exploring life as a continuous process of showing us something new.

This newness often also reveals itself to be a product of a past, so can we see fashion as something therefore that provides us the connect between a real/imagined history-future, creating a memory-anxiety as a reflection of a constantly shifting now?

Does it not, then, become a way of capturing a moment understood and experienced only by its very true essence?

Manisha took on three journeys through the residency. The first was to directly, in a hands-on way, attempt 'learning' draping of fabric for garment construction. This allowed her the chance to get into a medium she had not dealt with before. While making her usual drawings, I was drawn to think of another way to conceive of garment forms. Another, was to work with new or old garments and intervene in them – she saw how, whether it was fashion or artistic expression, they both become ways of the maker 'leaving their mark'. Her small interventions - painting on old denim with bleach to discover new surface effects or cutting small punctuations in fabric to applique them – allowed for her own work to start acquiring a new form. And third, fascinated by the shapes of patterns used for making garments, she used such patterns to create visual effects, making one of the ingredients of garment technology into beautiful objects.

Mithu, taking the cue to see fashion as a 'verb', undressed the studio walls and play a game of seduction with them. Known as an artist for her provocative drawings, she moved into a distinct, complete, abstraction; and peeled away layers of her studio wall. Revealing the history of the room itself, from past works on the wall, she spoke of feeling the elation of removing layers of previous occupiers' egos and identities, towards a naked vulnerability. This study of the process of dressing down, instead of 'dressing up' was a novel way of looking at the room as body, and her work as such disrobing.

Anay Mann - through photography – tries to understand himself and issues that concern him, and has left behind a past that tried to capture 'other' people and their moments. He has, for the past few years, been involved in a journey that can transform photography into an art form, from being an instrument of observing realities around and its documentary idiom. In this very distinct shift he made; I find an exploration of the very role and purpose of art for its maker: to reflect on oneself, to enquire into our motivations, to discuss our desires, to reveal our core. And through such self-reflection, to observe our own shifting identities.

These self-portraits provoke a rather direct, sudden response at first. This provocation however leads to a deeper engagement with the work, which draws one further to the complex emotions at play in them, as well as multiple layers of meanings-questions.

A very necessary part of how fashion gets created at any given point of time is how photography conveys its products, how models carry these products and converse with a viewer, and the kind of platforms such photography gets shown in. If fashion be seen as a way of creating an image that builds or breaks the notions of such a time - then photography allows for both a creative as well as activist role - in that it can suggest its poetry, politics and propaganda. In a consumerist culture it plays an important role in creating aspiration – a quest for something/someone one does not have,

and exists in a necessarily never-achievable space – to sustain a mode of production which requires its products to remain constantly in demand.

It drives an obsolescence which can be driven primarily by a shifting idea of oneself, where the paraphernalia which constructs such self-hood – clothes, verbal language, the use of digital technology and so on – acquires an identity by its 'date-hood'. Since its invention, the camera allowed for different parts of the world to share different realities with one another. In today's world, it can be used to further a commonality that is often associated with 'universal values', which further promotes the idea of a shared-humanity where people across countries may have more in common, than their neighbours in their own cities.

However, photography also captures – beyond a visible sameness in the way people look around the world – their unique stances; the confidences-doubts of their assertive-apologetic shoulders, of their upheld-bent spines, their stimulated-tired eyes. It can capture aspects of human temperament that reveals its constructed performances and natural manifestations.

My questions about Anay's journey through this residency become about how he may play with overt/inert suggestions to human nature? Can the move of photography to an art form play with seemingly unobvious motivations to emerge obvious truths? Can the obviousness in the way we look 'externally', hide the intentions behind? And in this sense, can fashion ever – if seen as a way of potentially providing the ability to 'change' our identities – allow one 'in reality' to erase a past sense of self?

Is it really then all that important?

Can its superficiality, allow us to see an aspect of human psyche which may further our understanding of it?

Continuing with his self-portraits, Anay's early questions in the residency were aimed at seeing male sexuality. Observing symbols of such maleness changing over the years like the fast disappearance of the moustache among the urban elite, he was drawn to other such markers which signify shifting identities. Going deeper, he enquired into the rituals of such 'marking' which are an integral process of dressing up and creating identity and the universe of what they mean. The nude body, suggesting the art of dressing through only cuffs and collars, and tattoos all over the body, led for me to imagine fashion, again, as an abstract idea and not always synonym with garments. It pushed me to think of how aspects of garments and their detailing suggest the psychology of the wearers – a collar pushed up a bit, a cuff folded an extra time – and how such subtleties in fashion convey, possibly, the entire inner landscaped of a person's motivations.

In **Kalol Datta's** work I am struck at first by the sheer boldness of an aesthetic which challenges standard gnomes of how the body can be seen – anti-body-form silhouettes create a sense of drama on their own, and effect us with a new way of looking at 'beauty' itself. More so, in an Indian context where retail allows for a certain kind-of product outreach which caters to more conventional markets. There is strong intentionality in his work which attempts at creating an anti-fashion idiom: A response to a 'bling' mainstream pushes him to work with textures and prints; one season - other designers quoting their work as avant garde without really understanding the word's radical layer - prompts him to go back to 'basics' by working with simple patterns; An otherwise shy and introvert personal persona is disguised by a shock-creating provocative self-image?

Can one see him and his work 'political'? And can such a perspective allow us to observe the very nature of dynamics between an individual artist - his work, in relation to the larger fashion industry?

He confesses that back home in Kolkata, he has a small circle of friends and rarely converses its streets. Negotiating the narrow gullies of Chandni Chowk in Delhi, he shares a familiar experience of 'people' phobia, where on being thrown in such a mass-space, he tends to retreat to a cocooned sense of it. His work has often been seen as belonging to a context of the culture and city he lives in, so I find a fascinating irony in it: Large sack-like tunics hide clever churidaars, a risqué interpretation of Indian silhouettes take on a punk-like street demenour, a dark sense of humour rejects an outer world but also effects it; all, reflect also a background informed deeply by a western education and living abroad.

It helps me arrive at whether it is relevant at all to observe and comment on such inherent 'Indianness', and does not the equally inherent conversation between various influences create a 'contemporariness'?

And does this contemporariness essentially not reflect what is a 'vernacular'?

Through his work I searched intensely for the expression of an identity that cannot be typified in a general 'local-global' structure, where its individuality reflects diverse regional-national-international subjects but is also in some ways universal in its appeal.

I also wonder about our shifting sense of spaces and how it informs our work and what we do. If the body is seen as a space inhabited by itself without any space-time continuum, imagine the inner-outer dramas where what we wear creates all magic!

Creating for fashion and its time-ness, a certain timelessness.

Kallol created an installation which caged a blingy garment, to show how he asserts himself as a designer working in a non-mainstream space in Indian fashion. Surrounded by garments he himself stitched, dipped in Plaster of Paris, they shone as sculptural pieces and suggest a way for Indian fashion to reflect on its own ability to provoke new ideas by the use of the fashion form.

The way forward

The explorations and final outcome of the residency, reflect layered ways of creating a dialogue between art and fashion. While some participants created a direct dialogue with the other medium, some allowed to further entrench their own practice. A process like this is important less, for me, for the work generated, and more for the process it creates as way of thinking and generation of new questions. From the perspective of a curator, and critic-in-residence, this journey ultimately allows for one to see the enquiries into whatever media and forms of artistic practice one does engage with, as fundamental. The media and forms become incidental to a more urgent need to see artistic spaces and interactions as central to living, and not as functions meant only for a preserved few and as fringes of life. In its power to influence change, fashion has the potential to address large numbers of people. And through this, I propose the use of fashion as a way of seeing, relating, connecting, understanding, expressing and engaging with the vital issues of our time.

Suggested Readings

1. Cloth & Human Experience, Edited by Jane Scheinder & Annette B. Weiner; The Smithsonian Press, 1989
2. Clothing Matters, by Emma Tarlo; Viking Penguin India, 1996
3. Indian Costume, by G S Ghurye; Popular Prakashan
4. The New Look, by Diane Vreeland; Thames & Hudson, 1998