

# A-dress: states of being. Winnipeg Art Gallery. Winnipeg

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

One of the interests of "A-Dress" is the kind of similarity within difference that calls attention to the formal side of art-making, how no two artists paint the same tree. Despite the vast difference in treatment, for instance, both [Alice Maher] and Chafe think of a dress as armour. There are many other cross-overs of materials and intention. Where Maher uses honey bees, in *The Wall of Ascending Angel*, Jan Fabre of Belgium creates a Victorian form from large beetles, appropriately called *Juwel Beetles*, glittering and glossy, like large green sequins. Fabre and Maher fit into a larger use of natural materials. Both Yong Soon Min (California) and Wanda Ellerbeck (Calgary) use coal and earth. Min's Korean dress with its outstretched arms lit from within by a red light, is a crucified form sinking into flames of physical desecration; it memorializes Korean women who were forced to serve as sex slaves to Japanese troops during WWII. In Ellerbeck's she... through the earth rising, the coal represents the source from which female strength is born. Like Min, several of the artists create forms lit from within, some seeming to symbolize inner light, others sexuality. Kati Campbell and Judith Dimitria Fleishman (American) use dressmakers dummies in surrealistic installations that recall Magritte. Barbara Hunt's *Root*, leaf and web dresses are large laser-cut steel pieces which have a fili-greed airiness that belies their materials. Against these is the Flemish artist Carlo Mistiaen's wedding dress, an intricate tour de force of cut-paper lace. Two artists create works out of elements which are underneath or within the dress. David Eckard makes a series of corset-like constructions, while Cecile Clayton-Gouthro creates a dress out of shoulder pads. A disturbing, moody piece in purples, blacks and blues, her *Black Dahlia* hangs by strings from wooden cross-pieces, like a marionette, its absent head an empty head-band suspended above the dress.

## FULL TEXT

An exhibition devoted to women's clothing as a metaphor for the body could hardly avoid political texts and subtexts. The *Guide to the Artists and Their Work* which accompanies this exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery lists some of the themes which occupy artists who use clothing as a "surrogate for the body": "race, class, popular culture, ... feminism, academia, subcultures." And yet the overwhelming impression left with the viewer of "A-Dress" is not the politics of culture and the body, but the transformative powers of the visual and tactile imagination. There's similarity of form--a dress--but a richness of materials and treatments reaching back into a culture of art-making that antedates political and conceptual art, and provides aesthetic satisfactions absent from much contemporary art. In some cases, the professed intentions of the artists seem to have been overtaken by their own instincts for the transformation of materials into beautiful objects. Christine Lo Faso's *Shift* is a simple, long form constructed from vellum printed with computer-generated text. For Lo Faso, the word "shift" suggests how "the female image has been shifted, or distorted throughout history. The text on the dress is taken from Freudian psychoanalytical writing." But this is not what we see. The pun on shift is not manifest in the form of the work itself, and the politically charged Freudian texts are virtually invisible. What the viewer sees is something out of nature, the papery, tawny chrysalis of some insect that has re-emerged and left behind the delicate case of its transfiguration, which is something of what has happened here: the final piece is a transformation of the materials that has even left behind the message required for its birth.

One of the most beautiful objects in the show is a small form constructed from honey bees built up around a netting of wire and cotton. *Bee Dress*, by Irish artist Alice Maher, is like a myth-charged mound of earth and brown moss

which you might stumble upon in a forest. The evocation of the legendary is intentional, but Maher also intends the work to represent the dress as armour. Yet the tiny honey bees, hardly distinguishable at first as bees, are woven into a nap of mossy softness that seems fragile and harmless and far from protective. Again, with Susan Chafe's *Untitled (un dress)*, we are told in the Guide that "the recycled tin cans act as a metaphor for armour" and that the piece represents the contemporary woman as a knight struggling in a male-dominated world, "stoic and defiant." Yet the dominant mood of this piece is play, governed by the artist's delight in shaping objects out of the salvageable and the quirky. Not stoic and defiant, but partly painted in pink and black, looking as if its paint has worn away, this large tin form recasts for us the pleasures of a child's toy from an age that predates electronics.

One of the interests of "A-Dress" is the kind of similarity within difference that calls attention to the formal side of art-making, how no two artists paint the same tree. Despite the vast difference in treatment, for instance, both Maher and Chafe think of a dress as armour. There are many other cross-overs of materials and intention. Where Maher uses honey bees, in *The Wall of Ascending Angel*, Jan Fabre of Belgium creates a Victorian form from large beetles, appropriately called *Juwel Beetles*, glittering and glossy, like large green sequins. Fabre and Maher fit into a larger use of natural materials. Both Yong Soon Min (California) and Wanda Ellerbeck (Calgary) use coal and earth. Min's Korean dress with its outstretched arms lit from within by a red light, is a crucified form sinking into flames of physical desecration; it memorializes Korean women who were forced to serve as sex slaves to Japanese troops during WWII. In Ellerbeck's *she... through the earth rising*, the coal represents the source from which female strength is born. Like Min, several of the artists create forms lit from within, some seeming to symbolize inner light, others sexuality. Kati Campbell and Judith Dimitria Fleishman (American) use dressmakers dummies in surrealistic installations that recall Magritte. Barbara Hunt's *Root*, leaf and web dresses are large laser-cut steel pieces which have a fili-greed airiness that belies their materials. Against these is the Flemish artist Carlo Mistiaen's wedding dress, an intricate tour de force of cut-paper lace. Two artists create works out of elements which are underneath or within the dress. David Eckard makes a series of corset-like constructions, while Cecile Clayton-Gouthro creates a dress out of shoulder pads. A disturbing, moody piece in purples, blacks and blues, her *Black Dahlia* hangs by strings from wooden cross-pieces, like a marionette, its absent head an empty head-band suspended above the dress. Two other pieces aim for psychological disturbance--Wendy Wersch's *Untitled (Effigy)*, a tattered pink gown that looks like a one-legged figure and Joan Kaufman's chilling *Hung Like a Heart*, in which a half-concealed red body turns above a stainless steel surgical table in a heart-like bag.

Two works are associated with performances. There is Shawna Dempsey's and Lorri Millan's *Arborite Dress*, a witty cross between an A-line skirt and an A-frame house made of the pink arborite you might find in your mother's (or your grandmother's) kitchen. Finally, there is the blood-stained gown of Totentanz worn by Sharon Alward in an AIDS awareness performance at Plug In in 1990 during which she mopped up a mixture of blood and semen, on her hands and knees. After the performance, she hung the gown behind a Plexiglas panel, creating the object that hangs in "A-Dress." Behind the Plexiglas, alternating hypnotically in green and blue neon, are the words "Expiration/Expiation." On the Plexi itself, in a chiselled Roman font (as on a tombstone) is a text relating the reaction of an audience to a mediaeval mystery play in which Mercy lectures her uncomfortable auditors on Good Works. The blood-stained dress in this context becomes a crucified Christ. The monotonous buzzing and pulsing of the two large switch boxes that control the neon testifies to the meaninglessness and futility of a world without the workings of mercy. A complex fusion of historical and modern, this is one of a small number of works in "A-Dress," and the most interesting and visually impressive, that rejects a materials-based aesthetic and seeks to redefine the object in post-conceptualist terms.

## DETAILS

Publication title:

Border Crossings; Winnipeg