LEHMANN MAUPIN

540 West 26th Street
New York NY 10001
Telephone 212 255 2923
Fax 212 255 2924

201 Chrystie Street
New York NY 10002
Telephone 212 254 0054
Fax 212 254 0055

lehmannmaupin.com

The New York Times
October 8, 2009

Beyond a Simple Fashion Statement

By Roberta Smith

In David Rosetzky's video portrait of Cate Blanchett in "Dress Codes" at the International Center of Photography, this Australian actress looks startlingly ordinary, if not frumpy. She wears clunky boots, unflattering slacks and a sagging black tank top. So attired, she moves around a raw, cavernous offstage space, picking up a chair, putting it down, sitting on it, getting up again, occasionally moving her hands in small, dancelike gestures. All the while we hear her talking intently, on the voice-over, about the craft of acting.

At one point Ms. Blanchett dons a loose, sleeveless dress; another top; and a well-worn bomber jacket, creating the impression of someone traveling without benefit of luggage, wearing all her clothes at once. She stretches out on the floor, then rises and sheds the added clothing. Finally, to tinkling vaudeville music, she does some nimble soft-shoe steps. This piece seemed pretty mousy for an exhibition about garments in recent photography and video. But then I realized that the lack of sartorial display was a kind of deprivation that made me embarrassingly aware of my own superficiality: I'm afraid I like famous movie stars, especially female ones, to dress the part.

"Dress Codes" is the third triennial mounted by the International Center of Photography. It is also the third and final phase of the center's Year of Fashion, hence the theme. Perhaps predictably, this show isn't as good as the previous Year of Fashion exhibitions: exhaustive surveys of the fashion work of Edward Steichen and Richard Avedon; the extraordinary "Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now"; and a display of works from the center's collection called "This Is Not a Fashion Photograph."

But triennials and biennials, being dedicated to new art, are harder to do well. "Dress Codes" is better than most shows of this kind; the good work outweighs the weaker. The exhibition raises the question of whether biennials and triennials should have themes or just select the best work within their designated area of concern; its answer is to stretch its theme so thin that it all but disappears. You begin to feel that just about anyone working with a camera could have been included. After all, most images of people involve some form of dress, and where there is dress, there are dress codes.

Clothing is a language that we study carefully and read almost reflexively, like the expression on a person's face. What we wear is an interface between our bodies (and our selves) and the world, a form of privacy and perfection as well as a public statement. In the catalog these points are illuminated with quotations isolated on pink pages.

From Oscar Wilde: "A history of dress would be a history of minds; for dress expresses a moral idea; it symbolizes the intellect and disposition of a nation."

From Diane Arbus: “Everybody has this thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way, and that’s what people observe.”

And from the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, writing in 1908, comes a brilliant progression of observations on the human desire for recognition and esteem within one’s social environment (which dressing, nicely, partly reflects). This desire can transmute into a need for “attention that others do not receive,” then into the desire to be envied, and finally into the will to power. Nathalie Djurberg’s colorful clay animation “New Movements in Fashion,” from 2006, captures something of the violence that an obsession with clothes can cause, but it’s only the will to power as shared by five garment-grabbing women.

More seriously, “Tagged,” a 2003 three-channel video by Julika Rudelius, a German-born artist based in Amsterdam, documents young, Dutch-born Arab men discussing the importance of appearances while modeling the designer clothes that consume most of their — or their family’s — meager earnings.

“Dress Codes” confirms that the camera arts are alive and well and are being deployed by artists who alternately extend or subvert traditions of portraiture, still life, documentary and storytelling, often adding permutations to the surprisingly vital postmodern strategies of photo appropriation and setup photography. The important influence of the Pictures artists, who emerged in the early 1980s and were often women, is tacitly acknowledged by the inclusion of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, Laurie Simmons and Silvia Kolbowski. A few of these, especially Ms. Sherman, are doing some of their best work right now.

The inclusion of others feels reflexive and obligatory. Important as she is, Ms. Rosler, for example, should take a time-out and come up with fresh ideas; her incongruous juxtapositions via photo montage — here, men in Dolce & Gabbana suits inserted into a flaming Middle Eastern battlefield — have developed little since the 1970s.

But inclusions that feel obligatory are not limited to women: Stan Douglas — another ubiquitous presence in shows of this kind — is represented by a gorgeous, and seamless, composite photograph, “Hastings Park, 16 July 1955.” It shows a crowd of people in period dress and attests primarily to the skills of wardrobe, hair and makeup crews.

Most of the show’s best moments are provided by relatively young and/or unknown artists. One of the strongest impressions is made by a German named Thorsten Brinkmann, who disguises himself with strange mixtures of everyday garments and objects to evoke terrorists, knights and video-game rogues. His face is never seen, and he often covers a hand or a leg with a box or cylinder. The unexpected geometry has a powerful effect, at once abstract and monstrous.

Yto Barrada, born in Paris to Moroccan parents, deconstructs a more utilitarian form of masquerade in a grid of nine images. They show a Moroccan woman shedding the layers of textiles she wears under her robes in order to smuggle them out of Morocco. Economic necessity generates a homemade fat suit.

Richard Learoyd, from Britain, pursues traditional portraiture in photographs of a

young woman named Agnes that are large, richly colored and finely detailed, and possessed with a wonderful gravity; each print is unique, improbably made with a room-size camera obscura.

Pinar Yolaçan — born in Turkey, trained in art in London and living in Brooklyn — seems to take inspiration from Rembrandt in her dark portraits of Afro-Brazilian matrons on the island of Itaparica. For each she makes a gown based on historical Portuguese fashions from vintage fabrics and animal products. At first the faces of these women dominate. Then sleeves of fish skin, a ruff collar made of livers and a tiered décolletage of animal organs come into focus, intensifying the women's already formidable presences.

Portraiture becomes wilder in the large color photographs of the Brooklyn artist Mickalene Thomas, with their overdone sendups of 1970s blaxploitation-film settings. Each focusing on a voluptuous woman who may or may not actually be female, these images are confrontational and dazzling.

Gender is bent less seamlessly in the jewel-like Polaroids by another New York artist, Jeremy Kost, which show the denizens of the city's club scene, often in full cry.
Meanwhile, Hu Yang, an artist from Shanghai, matches the edge-to-edge intensity of Ms. Thomas's works with small color photographs that are less about garments than about standards of living. They document Shanghai residents in their homes, meditating on class, longing and interior decoration as a form of dress.

"Mumbai: A Laundry Field," a four-channel video by the Korean-born artist Kimsooja, who is based in New York, examines the everyday life of fabric — from its intoxicating color to the low-paying, backbreaking labor of laundering it — on different levels of Indian society.

There's more to see. I recommend Hank Willis Thomas's altered photographs; the sexually charged yet chaste photo collages of Wangechi Mutu; and, for summoning the standards of decorum and beauty of earlier eras, Lorna Simpson's evocative found photographs of black women and Tanya Marcuse's grisaille platinum-palladium photographs of bustles, bustiers and armor.

"Dress Codes" has been organized by Christopher Phillips and Carol Squiers, curators at the International Center of Photography; Kristen Lubben, an associate curator; and Vince Aletti, an adjunct curator. It further departs from the biennial-triennial tradition, and many other museum shows, for that matter, with its demographics; an astounding 70 percent of the participating artists are women. Apparently, only 4 of the 34 artists in the show are both white and male.

"Dress Codes" runs through Jan. 17 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0045, icp.org.