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ART REVIEW

Serious Side of an Infatuation With Fashion

By ROBERTA SMITH

Maybe even important artists can miss their true calling. This idea may cross the mind more than once during "Art/Fashion," a sometimes wonderful, spiffily turned-out exhibition of art-related fashion and fashion-related art at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo.

The notion registers in the show's first gallery, where a bright, dynamic vest designed by the Futurist Giacomo Balla may strike some as more appealing, in a Paul Smith sort of way, than his paintings. It pops up again in a gallery dominated by the boldly geometric clothing and designs of the painter Sonia Delaunay. It is stunning to see Delaunay transpose the ideas of modernist abstraction onto women's backs; a similar translation occurs in the emblematic, paper-doll-like fashion drawings of the Russian Constructivist Varvara Stepanova.

The show has been organized by Germano Celant, a curator at the Guggenheim; Ingrid Sischy, editor of Interview magazine, and Pandora Asbaghi Tabatabai, an independent curator and director of the Prada Foundation, and its beginning is thrilling. Designed by Arata Isozaki, who has credibly broken up the monotonous rectilinearity of the Guggenheim's SoHo galleries, it recalls a time when modernist artists and designers alike sometimes saw garments as just another surface for

painting or carving.

It can make fashion design seem as vital and creative as any art form, and both an expression of and vehicle for social change. It continues the reshuffling of the art-media hierarchy that started in earnest with the Museum of Modern Art's "High and Low" exhibition. And it infuses some welcome seriousness into the season's most prominent craze: the mutual infatuation of art and fashion.

Last fall, that infatuation spawned the first Biennale di Firenze, subtitled "Looking at Fashion." The Florence show seems to have been a three-ring circus of six or seven exhibitions — including ones devoted to Bruce Weber's photographs and Elton John's costumes — plus 18 installations by big-name fashion designers who were set loose in some of the city's most venerable museums and buildings. (Valentino, for example, surrounded Michelangelo's "David" with five mannequins in red dresses.) "Art/Fashion" is a condensed version of what was probably the most restrained and thoughtful segment of the Florentine extravaganza. In its first half, it surveys the interaction between art and fashion down through the 20th century, although it has (understandably) a bit of an Italian bias, and is hardly exhaustive. (Exhaustive would require something like the Fashion Institute of Technology's superb "Fashion and Surrealism" exhibition of 1987 applied to the last 97 years.)

There is a crisply Minimalist dress designed in 1952 by Ellsworth Kelly, and two "slit" ones by Lucio Fontana

seen beside three of his paintings. Andy Warhol does Pop, making a dress printed with "Fragile/Handle With Care" labels, while Getulio Alviani does Op stripes. Elsa Schiaparelli of course does Surrealism: her famous "Tear Dress" of 1937, made with fabric by Salvador Dali printed with trompe l'oeil rips, is on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Certain moments in performance art are recaptured: by Nam June Paik's "TV Bra," worn by the cellist Charlotte Moorman, and, more obscurely, by three found-object hats made by the Pattern painter Robert Kushner in the mid-1970's. The Camille-like sensibility of Colette is summed up by a nearly picture-perfect mannequin of the artist swathed in satin flounces. Displayed publicly for the first time in years are drawings proposing "wrapped" dresses and jump suits by Christo; also on view is his "Wedding Dress," a highly symbolic tableau that consists mostly of a large wrapped bundle pulled by a female mannequin.

As the exhibition moves into the present, further away from wearable garments and closer to art, it gets weaker and weaker. Sparsely installed, it maintains its elegant store-window look but barely scratches the surface of a very robust trend in current art. A tired Surrealism alternates with an equally empty formalism: Jana Sterbak's organza "Nightgown," which has a patch of curling chest hair, and Wiebke Siem's geometric hats; Jan Fabre's sinister suspended gowns made of real scarabs, and Judith Shea's sculptures of

simplified pants. In front of works like these, one longs for something by Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo or Martin Margiela, designers whose idiosyncratic garments may vary in wearability but usually bristle with artistic ambition.

Only Charles LeDray's strange little groupings of miniature clothes, magazines and accessories achieves real emotional resonance. Laid out on the floor like stolen goods displayed for sale on an East Village sidewalk in Barbieland, its compressed panorama makes one think of fashion's changeability, of economic desperation and of the artist's own compulsive love of sewing. Mr. LeDray made every last tiny item in the piece, which bears the title "Workworkworkworkwork."

The show ends with a gallery documenting six collaborations between artists and designers seen in Florence, including Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst, Helmut Lang and Jenny Holzer, and Azzedine Alaïa and Julian Schnabel. These are conveyed by big, backlit color transparencies placed in reduced replicas of the one-room wood buildings that Mr. Isozaki designed for the Biennale. Maybe one had to be there. Here, these concoctions form a vapid, frivolous final note that contradicts most of the exhibition by suggesting that art and fashion should be kept as far apart as possible.

"Art/Fashion" remains at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 575 Broadway, at Prince Street, through June 8.