

Culture: THE ARTS

Highbrow Meets High-End

At Bal Harbour Shops, art exists without an agenda

By Anne Tschida
BT Arts Editor

One of the most exciting trends in the cultural sphere is the move toward multidisciplinary creativity sited in unconventional venues.

We'll always need structured institutions, such as museums and performing arts centers, as anchors that bring us major works and prestige, and that serve as educational foundations.

But increasingly, those involved in the arts have come to realize that in order to progress, and even survive, they can't isolate themselves by relying on a single audience.

We're seeing interesting hybrids, such as dance in a museum exhibit, or poetry readings on boats — there's even an upcoming series mixing craft beer and Brahms, to take place at cultural centers *and* bars.

A perfect example of these merging forces is the Fashion Project at Bal



Day Dress made of Tyvek fiber, by Judith Clark and Rosie Taylor-Davies, British, 2015.

Harbour Shops. Inaugurated in April, the project combines fashion, design, dance, art, and various other media — in exhibits, talks, and demonstrations, and



Exhibition photos by Steve Piro

"FP02: Morphing" incorporates highlights accessories and couture, including a headdress from Jean Cocteau.

in partnership with other groups — in a space on the third floor of the high-end shopping center. It's an ambitious venture and pushes the boundaries of a traditional cultural outing.

Using fashion as the stepping-off point, the eclectic programming explores other fields as they relate to, or are influenced by, the fashion industry. For instance, this is a taste of what will be happening in July through August 10: the exhibit "FP02: Morphing" in the 1000-square-foot space incorporates cabinets and mannequins highlighting accessories and couture, both unique contemporary designs and, in a nod to 20th century avant-garde, a headdress from Jean Cocteau.

The exhibit includes an afternoon sketching class led by artist Carlos Prado; a demonstration from designer and performance artist Karelle Levy of her "QuickeeCouture," in which she makes a garment in an hour; and a talk by the director of the Miami City Ballet, Lourdes Lopez. Actually, the last event

will take place in the neighboring Books & Books store, a partner with the Fashion Project. Those are quite some pairings.

The concept behind the project comes from Cathy Leff, former director of the Wolfsonian-FIU museum. She was asked by Matthew Whitman Lazenby, the CEO of the company that owns the Bal Harbour Shops, to create a cultural initiative that would work within these rare confines.

"The idea of placing culture — especially high-level exhibitions — in commercial spaces is common in Japan, which is what inspired me," says Leff, who stepped down from her position at the Wolfsonian, after 18 years, in April 2014.

"It seemed obvious to me to take on fashion and the culture surrounding its design, exhibition, dissemination, and consumption," says Leff. "It not only is the DNA of Bal Harbour Shops, but also there seemed to be a unique opportunity to undertake a project that no one in the

community is doing on an ongoing basis."

She reached out to London-based curator Judith Clark, who is known for her off-beat, varied-venue exhibitions, and is a professor of fashion at the University of the Arts London.

"I knew a fashion initiative would need to be anchored by a physical space and a serious, museum-quality curatorial agenda," Leff explains. "I also knew that I am not a curator and needed a reputable fashion curator."

Clark says that Miami was a place she'd always wanted to visit, and that Leff's invitation to explore both the area and the project was great timing. "It is a place like no other I have visited," Clark says in an e-mail from London. "It is wonderful working in an environment that is exotic to one's own, so that work can be re-invented for a new context."

Clark decided that the project should be fluid and fast-paced, an idea that galleries have latched on to as well, with one-week exhibits or one-night performance-based events. She was inspired by the gallery she ran in the tony district of Notting Hill, "the first independent gallery that looked at exhibiting dress," she says. "I loved the idea of doing small exhibitions in close succession, and allowing them to be experimental and fast and responsive to what was going on. It is difficult to plan an exhibition about fashion over three years when the visitors' taste will have changed."

Leff agreed with the idea of a kinetic element to the project. "The Fashion



Bird Dress by Felicity Brown, British, 2011; wig by Angelo Seminara, British, 2015.

Project was intended...to be anchored by rapidly changing exhibitions," she says. "So it will maintain the same pace of offering a new exhibit every two months, with concurrent, regular, and ongoing public programs examining the broader culture of fashion."

The two also stress the multidisciplinary aspect and the emphasis on working with other cultural groups in order to broaden the parameters for everyone. For instance, according to Leff, the project will be collaborating



Cathy Leff: "The idea of placing culture — especially high-level exhibitions — in commercial spaces is common in Japan, which is what inspired me."

with AIA (American Institute of Architects)/Miami Center for Art and Design, ArtCenter/South Florida, the Bass Museum of Art, the Miami City Ballet, and LAB Miami, among others.

The interaction with dance, and the ballet, is especially intriguing; on the one hand, when a dress or a necklace is displayed, it's inanimate, the opposite of the display of movement in dance. On the other, costuming is integral to all performance.

"I'm interested in the relationship between bodies and sets, bodies and space, mannequins and gesture," explains Clark. "You can see the connections."

After the July programming wraps up with a knitting circle, taught by fiber artist Dawn Rattinger, the Fashion Project space will reopen August 15, converted into a chic living room.

This will be a partnership with the Coral Gables Art Cinema, and the designer digs will become a salon to focus on the "symbiotic relationship between fashion and film," says Leff. It will be curated by Nat Chediak, co-founder of the Miami International Film Festival and new director of the Gables cinema.

In September, the Fashion Project will launch a monthly book club led by Cristina Favretto, director of the Special Collections at the University of Miami Library; the October exhibit and programming

will concentrate on fashion from 1914 to 1964.

Hard to get more eclectically mixed than that.

"I couldn't think of anything more exciting or more interesting than taking on what Bal Harbour Shops is all about," says Leff. "The art, design, exhibition, and selling of fashion — without having any commercial agenda."

For more detailed information on events and programming, visit www.fashionprojectbhs.com.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com