

**W**hat does it mean when fashion goes sculptural? Viktor & Rolf bring out womenswear that hangs off metal frames: the model has to be literally strapped into a frame and the clothing hangs off it. Hussein Chalayan comes out with a range of skirts that's also a furniture collection: a model steps into a coffee table and wears it - and it turns into a skirt, even though it's made of wood.

Fashion writers will sometimes express horror at the pretentiousness of haute couture aspiring to the condition of 'wearable art'. Believe me, fashion definitely doesn't have the monopoly on pretentiousness. Fashion is always allied to art, so it's unsurprising that it should sometimes enter its realm completely. At the moment, art is going through a crisis about the role of visual pleasure, and the result is that art has become almost the least visual thing there is. In this climate, fashion's hold on sheer beauty is a relief, while art's lack of visualness can make it a vacuous experience. But if we stick with art that really does have some substance - what is it that fashion does that is truly like art?

The answer is a range of things, from tortured existential wondering about what a body is, to trendy riffs on new materials. Fashion is just a means of creative expression. In sculpture in general, there is often a bit of playfulness about what form is - and fashion designers are playful in exactly this way. Fashion may remind you of art styles, or a particular art object, but it could be that someone has got to the same place simply by the logic of their playfulness.

#### Dream-like forms

In life we learn to categorise; we take it for granted that there are psychological cut-off points between things. But in art, as in dreams, we accept a more fluid universe - things can alter and become strange. Gareth Pugh's new collection, for instance, goes in for the un-normal. Think of artifice based on nature, of leaf forms, body armour, segmentation, breastplates - a carapace for the body - or a creature emerging from a chrysalis.

What is it that Boccioni does with his sculpture in London's Tate Modern, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, or Jacob Epstein does with *Rock Drill*, at New York's MoMA (both made in 1913)? Man as machine, man moving through space - as if when an artist conceptualises human movement, he comes up with a form that looks a bit machine-like.

The pleasure of Gareth Pugh's outfits is different in that he's ironic where modernists in the 20th century were



## THE SHAPE OF THINGS

Matthew Collings on why Dior and Kapoor are cutting from the same cloth

#### INTO THE FOLD

Above centre, Gareth Pugh's body armour-like forms for autumn/winter 2008 recall man-as-machine artworks such as Jacob Epstein's robot-like sculpture, *Rock Drill*, 1913 (left). Above right the large, wrap-around collar on Jill Sander's coat folds into itself in ways reminiscent of Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* sculptures, 1997 (top).

sincere; they were influenced by the threat to nature of new industrial forms, but Pugh seems more influenced by the movies, by the sub- or superhumans in *Edward Scissorhands* or *Alien*. Those films draw attention to the body's dynamism and power in a twisted way, and so does he, but in a more exquisite, crafted way.

#### Body of evidence

A lot of art today is about testing taboos: what society accepts as normal, what it finds unacceptable or horrifying. When I think of the main names in sculpture today, I see elements of creepiness, of sci-fi, of genetic mutation, but also of primitive totems and exotic 'otherness', a weird new spirituality, and often a dream element, the uncanny, the anxious: tangible objects breaking down and changing. But the vehicle of expression is often the body, because sculpture is about form and the one form everyone identifies with is their own physical being.

The contemporary emotional tone might be 'disturbing', accompanied by ironic blankness, whereas there was

a different mood in the era of high modernism. When Picasso's sculptures, for example, distort the human form, it's because he was experimenting with forms seen from different angles simultaneously. In today's postmodern age, sculpture is much more likely to be fascinated by oddness for its own sake. And sculptural fashion seems to be influenced by this, so you get the beautiful mixed with the freaky.

#### Topping it off

Elephant Man-esque bulbous uglification: what exactly are those black things on Junya Watanabe's models' heads (see our article, page 098) in his autumn/winter 2008 show? It seems unlikely anyone is expected to wear them, but on the catwalk they are not a pointless extravagance, they are structural, they comment on what's going on below.

In one particular outfit, the jacket is long by conventional standards and the dress is long too, so extending the model's head in a weird way could be a mannerist riff on the theme of 'length'. The head thing - let's call it a hat - contains structural clues about the main event. Part of the jacket is designed to fall into folds, and parts of it are taut, while the skirt is all elegant, flowing movement; the hat echoes all this with loose, folded parts and a taut, stretched part.

The whole outfit, as in a sculptural assemblage, is about a play of differences. The structured cut of the jacket set against the material of the skirt, made to resemble robes, such as those seen on marble statues in the Parthenon, makes up one contrast. Modern stylishness and classical drapery. And then, on top, there's an outburst of grotesquery, seeming to deny both but actually containing sly references to each.

The whole thing is a totem pole of differences. Its sculptural counterpart might be Brancusi's *PnncessX* in the Guggenheim Museum, New York. In a lively conversation, differently treated elements oppose each other or agree, with their separate natures subtly changing all the time. You see a female figure, head and shoulders, gentle and calm, while the limestone block beneath is all hard masculine lines. But then the reading flips and the cool, absorbent stone below is placid and the phallic figure above is not only dynamic and loud (with its polished reflections) but utterly masculine.

It's not just modern art that delights in collage - one thing juxtaposed with another of a separate aesthetic. A statue of Athena, in the Capitoline Museum in Rome (it's a Roman copy of a Greek original; few original Greek statues survive), demonstrates the same principle. A masculine, architectural form. »

Athena's helmet, opposes the feminine curves and a simulation of rippling fabric.

The effectiveness of art is all in the detail. Whether the subject is shocking or conventional, the reason it's pleasurable to look at and the reason the idea is believable are the same: precision. You're looking at something that couldn't be anything else. For the Greeks, this insight became codified in the reverence for proportion, the perfect balance of elements, which reflected a humanistic ideal, a balance of mind and body, passion and reason.

With Watanabe's design, the hat takes the overall effect into another dimension: not just different kinds of beauty (lovely greys and brilliant cutting, an accent of black), but also the postmodern irony of elegance contrasting with nuttiness.

**Distortion racket**

Modern art is full of disguised classicism. Picasso's passionate distortions always have an underlying geometric design. When he made a sculpture of a girl in the form of a pair of buttocks that's also a bead with a bun of hair - with a nose that might be a shoulder - he was attacking logic, but respecting it at the same time. Because it is undeniable - you can deliberately challenge logic but you're not defeating it as such, just following a new logic. What turns us on is not chaos but order; we're hard wired to enjoy symmetry and pattern and shape and balance. But we're always looking for new contexts for beauty.

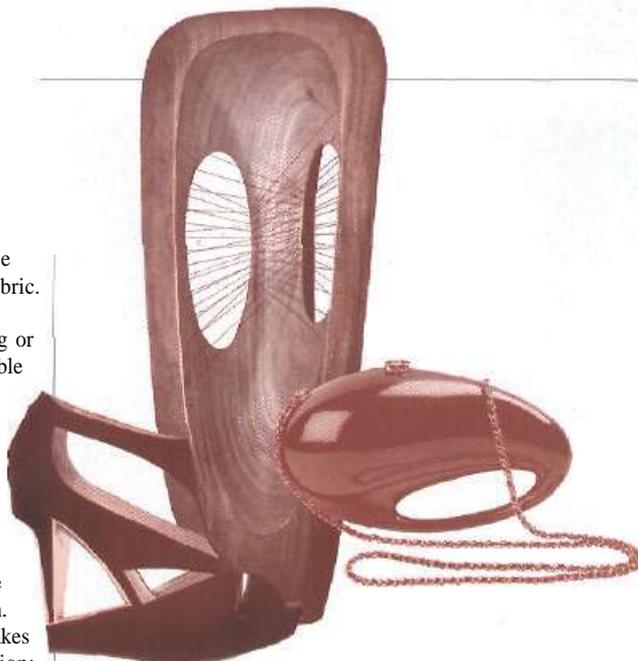
When we look at the autumn/winter Maison Martin Margiela outfits and see shoulders so exaggerated it's funny, it seems the design continues or extends the body. And behind that notion is the idea that clothes *contain* the body - here you are inside the clothes, and there's the body, only just poking out of the clothes.

Why draw attention to the obvious? But this is really what art does all die time.

In a Picasso sculpture the features are distorted, not because he was a git or an attention-grabber, but because art states the obvious in order to renew it, to make it vital again. If the lovely features of a girl are distorted, it's because we only ever see anyone as a series of slipping glimpses, and a portrait is always the result of endless changed perceptions. Art tells us what we already know because we know it without knowing it, and art's job is to make us see the ordinary with new eyes.

**Ceci n'est pas un bag**

Question: why have a handbag that looks like a polished egg? Answer: because of the pleasure of touching such an object; the smoothness; the illusion of rigidity (rigid is obviously the opposite of what you need a bag to be). The new Chanel bag



is a bag that questions bag-ness, like the new Dior shoe that seems to be upside down and the right way up at the same time - it's a shoe that questions itself.

The bag, called 'Organic' and inspired by Zaha Hadid's Mobile Art Pavi Lion (W\*108), also recalls the smooth, cool, rounded look of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures - Hepworth's typical surface is wind-blown and worn, like a pebble. Her work is natural and sincere where the bag is artificial and ironic, but they both have something timeless about them. They answer to the fantasies and ideals of their different times but are also honed, classic objects with an internal tightness. The Dior shoe is architectural, deconstructed and postmodern - it's asking you to think about shoes, it jokes about the meaning of shoes. It's postmodern because it isn't a sincere shoe but an ironic one, absurdly elaborated. It's a knowing statement about shoe-ness.

You get the same buzz of giddy idea-streaming and classical concentration from a sculpture by Anish Kapoor. You look into ablack hole in a blue surface: it goes on forever. A cosmic navel, a bit pretentious, a bit woo woo, a bit all sorts of things, but you're delighted because of the formal richness - every element is right. He's playing with the idea of religion, the cosmic plane, Indian spirituality, and at the same time he comes up with something that is genuinely contemplative. You're enjoying a set of abstract relationships, and the effect, which is both complementary to the semi-religious idea of the work but also, paradoxically, indifferent to it, is to wake you up, to make you see the world differently.

**The fabric of being**

Jil Sander's new coat (pictured previous page) plays with the idea of wrapping. When you look at the collar, a set of shapes that's really just a construction of fabric, you have a sense of all the extra fabric - but the apparent excess is not really excess; it's exactly the right amount

**GOODEGG**

Above, the smooth, polished aesthetic of Barbara Hepworth's Garden Stone Sculpture, 1966, also appears in Chanel's ironic 'Organic' bag, while Dior's seemingly upside down platform cut-out wedge serves to question the meaning of shoes. Below, Maison Martin Margiela's exaggerated shoulders, and Picasso's equally form-distorting Head of a Woman, 1932

for the idea. It's asymmetrical and folded on itself because it's not just a collar, it's a collar looking at itself being a collar.

The material's thickness and stiffness are being shown off, so that a sort of bundling of form at the top of the coat is contrasted with the straightness of the rest of it, its tulip-like streamlined beauty.

A good art analogy is Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* - towering, curving rusted sheet metal walls that tilt inwards and outwards, so large that to experience the shape of the sculpture you have to walk inside it. Serra made a sculptural form in such a way as to force you to think about materials: the nature of steel, its density, its movement. The point of the coat is the nature of the fabric and its display - you can wear it, of course, but also it's an imaginative examination of fabric-ness-

**Ripping the seams of convention**

The sculpture-fashion relationship is not all one way. Art often follows tricks that fashion has come up with. A cliché of contemporary fashion is stuff that should be inside being brought into the open - the hems and lining exposed instead of concealed, as if fashion's in net structure is being challenged, like an unravelled sense of selfhood. Answering this is Louise Bourgeois' *Spiral Woman*. It is created out of stuffed fabric - a pair of legs with the body replaced by an abstract, spiral form. The seams are left rough and inside out, as if the figure's inner pain is coming out.

Whether it's art or fashion, something can start out as a challenge to convention and then become a convention in itself. You don't want such ideas to be routine - if they're going to be there at all, you want them to be given new life.

Returning to Viktor & Rolf, when Rolf Snoeren was interviewed about the idea behind the metal frames show, he said, 'To turn every model into a fashion show of her own, to turn the fashion show into a look and to turn the clothes into a show, and really to get back to the core being of who we are and who we feel we are. So it felt like a self-portrait.'

I translate this as Viktor & Rolf wanting to use the actual structure of a fashion show as its subject matter. The underlying stuff is going to be on the surface. And because the designers identify their inner beings with fashion, this exposing process is also a self-exposure. The point is not the fabulousness of the idea, which we've probably heard before, but the surprise of its realisation. Every era is self-conscious in a different way. You could say the problem is art-about-art, fashion-about-fashion - where's the reality? But there's always reality: the reality of beauty and feeling, being in the world, the excitement of being alive. ✱

