

Tops and Bottoms / Outer Wear and Underwear

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European art traditionally portrays the human body in one of three states; either fully clothed, nude or partially concealed. Most works of art include figures dressed in clothing congruent with the artists' time period and geographical location. These paintings usually depict precise renditions of fabric types and clothing design, details that facilitate identification of the model regarding his or her social status, role or income level. Bodies are only partially revealed; occasionally some body parts may be visible through folds of cloth. Nudes are for the most part mythological images rather than figures from everyday life. In this artistic genre, nudity represents either natural, primeval forces, or sexuality and eroticism. And then there's a third possibility - partially clothed figures, certain parts of their bodies bare hints, covered by flowing white robes that conceal more than they reveal.

Underwear as we know it was invented a mere 150 years ago. Despite the sophistication and complexity of outer wear and the abundance of fabric devoted to its production, there was no real demarcation between outer garments and the bodies they were designed to conceal. This was especially evident in women's fashions; underneath all those layered dresses and crinolines the body was completely exposed. It was only when hemlines were shortened, initially among ballet dancers, that an additional layer aimed at protecting the body from prying eyes became necessary.

Underpants were invented in Europe sometime during the nineteenth century. In addition to concealing the intimate parts of the body from view, underpants had practical advantages such as warmth and distancing outer wear from the body's odors and secretions, functions that dictated the use of uniformly colored, densely textured fabrics such as cotton or wool. When synthetic fabrics such as Acrilan and Stretch appeared on the market, undergarments took on another role – that of accentuating the erotic; a development that led to the perfecting of a vast number of hues and textures that take advantage of that evasive border between concealing and revealing, and attempt to both capture the viewer's attention and lead him astray. Lace, for example, both covers the body and reveals it at one and the same time, while the glimmer of satin catches the eye, clings to the body and highlights its contours.

As time went on, undergarments became a form of nudity in Western culture. Outer garments reflect the way people perceive themselves and their role in society, while undergarments reflect the way they relate to their bodies; either ostentatiously baring the body and its sexuality, indulging and pampering themselves, or denial and contempt for all it implies.

Modern art deals widely with issues related to the representation of the human body. Since the 1970's numerous artists have expressed their objection to society's marginalization of the body by focusing on it in their work. Artistic representations of naked bodies pose a certain dilemma – nudity arouses associations that are primarily sexual in nature, while clothed figures are immediately categorized as belonging to a certain social group, thus eliminating issues related to the body itself. This makes it difficult for the artist to divert the viewer's attention toward the symbolism of the human body, particularly of the female body.

Artists have dealt with this issue in various ways. One trend common among modern women artists is the use of the body and of undergarments in examining questions related to femininity, proximity, distance, invasiveness and intimacy. Taking advantage of the photographic medium, these artists choose, each for her own reason, to portray their models precisely in that type of underwear that is opaque, white, loose and comfortable.

Lorna Simpson's Shifts

The American artist Lorna Simpson uses undergarments to protest against the situation of Black women, raising issues related to cultural biases regarding the female body and Black skin. Simpson believes that attitudes towards African-Americans, especially African-American women, involve superiority and even invasiveness.

In the photographic work "You're Fine", Simpson takes issue with society's right to determine whether someone is fine or not. The work portrays a young Black woman, dressed in a white shift and lying on her side with her back to the viewer. She seems comfortable enough, although the white examination table hints at a doctor's office,

and in fact a checklist of clinical terms for a physical exam appears to the left of the photograph. The list, combined with the title "You're Fine", objects to women being forced to submit to a stranger's view and touch during medical exams when applying for a job; in America job applicants are often required to undergo a series of physical exams as part of their application process, even if the position is not physically taxing and does not require any particular physical skills.

Many of Lorna Simpson's artworks portray young Black women clothed in simple white shifts. In all of them the women's faces are hidden from view. The concealed faces focus our attention on the women's bodies, but these are also mostly concealed by the shifts. The opaque white gowns create a sort of screen between the bodies and the viewer, who would like to see more than is visible. The artist creates a frustrating situation; she withholds the model's face, while simultaneously focusing on the body, and obscuring it. Naturally, if Simpson had made use of full nudity, her viewers would focus on the body's sexual aspects. And if her models were fully clothed, people would resort to a whole series of preconceptions regarding her choice of dress mode. Opaque, simple undergarments serve here as protection against prying eyes, and force the viewer to think about the issues that interest the artist.

Tamara Masel's Girl-Woman

The Israeli artist Tamara Masel portrays the lower torso of a woman wearing underpants. It's not clear if the model is an adult woman or a young girl. Sexy panties may be more suited to the slim body pictured, but Masel chooses to dress her in old-fashioned, waist-high, loose-fitting underpants, an indication, perhaps, of innocence or virginity. For all one knows, it may just be the moment before the young girl loses her innocence. It seems that Masel, through her portrayals of undergarments, is expressing her objection to the social norms that prematurely transform girls into women.

Proximity and Alienation in the Art of Tiranit Barzilay

It's not quite clear whether the scenes in Tiranit Barzilay's staged photographs of groups of men and women are intimate or alienated. The ascetic interiors depicted are sparsely furnished or, more often, completely empty, and the youths are dressed solely in white underwear—panties, undershirts and slips. Each one of the figures is

busy with something; most of them on their own, while a few seem to be communicating with the others. The scene depicted in the photograph is somewhat mysterious; the nonrealistic situation and the models' frozen countenances are confounding and viewers find themselves deliberating as to what exactly is being presented. In Barzilay's art, underwear takes on a dual significance; on the one hand, it increases the feeling of intimacy, as the figures' exposed bodies and their intimate underclothes create an atmosphere of close physical proximity. On the other hand, all of the undergarments depicted are similar, bringing to mind some sort of uniform or obligatory dress code, a uniformity that accentuates the non-personal, alienated atmosphere of the work and the discomfort it arouses.

The article appeared in the journal "Mishkafaim" 34, "Clothing", May, 1998

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