

HEMMINGS Jessica (UK)

Hybrid Sources: Depictions of Garments in Postcolonial Fibre Art - paper

Postcolonial theory and its attention to material culture, hybrid identities, and the ensuing Diaspora has influenced the work of contemporary fibre artists worldwide. In today's atmosphere of globalisation – through positive agents such as communication networks as well as negative ones such as the refugee crisis – the national and cultural identities projected by dress embrace increasingly complex influences. The garment, both as motif and sculptural form, is an area of growing involvement for contemporary artists working in fibre. Such works attempt to negotiate conflicts between language, culture and history which the postcolonial world must now reconcile.

In the work of artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Elaine Riechek, Erica Rasmussen, Buseje Bailey, Paula Santiago, Doris Salcedo, Sharon Peoples and Sue Blanchfield several recurring themes appear. The empty garment acts as a canvas upon which narrative content with strong historical references is displayed. Secondly the garment is distorted, damaged or rendered in materials that evoke the flesh and blood of the absent wearer, to reveal histories of violence and the burden of conflict still very much alive today. Thirdly, the garment pattern can act as a map of sorts, evoking the trade of objects which underpinned the colonial quest. Mapping and renaming also appears throughout the selection of works to evoke the divide and conquer mentality that made colonization so ruthlessly effective.

In this research the garment plays a non-functional role, but derives much of its symbolic weight from an understanding that dress and fashion clothe a vital site of negotiation between individual and national identity. In the postcolonial context, dress reveals that the intersection between nation and individual continues to search for a balance between the burden of the past and the hybrid present.

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Jessica Hemmings wrote her Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh on the role of textiles in the fiction of contemporary Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera. She currently teaches in the Liberal Arts Department at the Rhode Island School of Design and works as a freelance writer for several textile publications including *FiberArts*, *The Surface Design Journal*, *Selvedge* and *Craft Arts International*. Research interests include the relationship between textual and textile production and postcolonial theory.
