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Tom Roberts' Trousers - making a space for the new fashion literate art histories in Australia - paper

Once the relationship between art history and fashion history was purely functional. Old paintings provided pretty coloured illustrations for popular histories of dress. Occasionally the detailed empirical knowledge of a costume curator assisted in the evaluation of a painting suspected of being a later forgery. However the developments of new theoretical practices of writing around both fashion and art history over the past twenty years has allowed many spaces of interchange and productive dialogue. The so-called “new art histories” that seek to place a painting in social, gender, economic, political and racial contexts beyond connoisseurship’s traditional cross-references of provenance and iconography has co-opted a knowledge of dress practice as essential to the reassessment of historic artworks. Artmaking has opened up to fashion, particularly through the admittance of techniques and strategies from retailing and commerce into artists’ technical and stylistic portfolios and the perennial, almost clichéd ongoing interest in 1930s and 1940s surrealist practices and writings. In turn fashion history has acquired a more acidic, probing and entrepreneurial intellectuality through alignment with art theory.

In terms of current Australian art practice the most obvious re-alignment between art and fashion is through present day artists who use costume elements/media in their work such as Rosslynd Piggot and the strong generation of “post feminist” women artists of the 1980s and beyond. However the complex imbrication of social history, fashion theory and art history that is seen in such overseas publications as *Whistler and Fashion*, or *Painted Love*, is denied/overlooked in the limited outfields opportunities for publication around and close institutional/elite auditing of interpretation of significant historic white Australian art. Given the usually flat, predictable and hagiographic discussion, can fashion theory destabilise or diversify accepted knowledge of Australian art? Can prehistories for the current fashion literate and accepting Australian contemporary art be found?

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