

PEOPLES Sharon (Aus)

The avant garde – military uniforms and the seepage into popular culture - paper

When we think of modernism we generally don't think of highly decorated military uniforms, for in the arts the linkage of decoration and modernism has been obscured by the conceptual invention of the nineteenth century: the idea of the "avant-garde". As its military derived name suggests, the avant-garde (literally the "advance guard") imagined itself away from home, marching towards the glory on the battlefields of culture without the trimmings.

My own arts practice involves the salvaging traditional textile practices. As a maker I don't perceive this as nostalgia however I do accept that often contemporary art textiles eventually filter into fashion for general consumption. The initial critical thinking becomes lost once textiles are popularised and nostalgia can be used as a marketing tool.

My current written work looks at uniforms, at this point, more particularly military uniforms, which are an extreme and exaggerated form of clothing. This paper explores the way in which visual imagery is used to exert power and control through military uniforms, a thin layer between the private and the public.

The use of a uniform, indeed all clothing, is a communication tool and can be used as a marker of status, of ritual, of recreation and it can be used to mislead. Authoritative powers, such as the military, when clothed appropriately, prompt people to respond in ways that they would not otherwise act. Clothing embodied with power develops a system of semiotics. The extremity of design and exaggeration of the body were of foremost importance. Uniforms were designed not for the wearer but for those that wield authority and for an audience. The decorations of uniforms were technically complex textile techniques.

This paper looks at the evolution of military uniforms and their seepage into popular culture. The use of uniforms or parts thereof when used as political or fashion statements can carry with it the strength or power indicated by the visual imagery. However, like any translation, the subtleties may be lost and in its new context, in a different parade ground, it is open to other interpretations and uses: be it the avant-garde or those left behind: sentimentality or nostalgia.

My interest in that thin layer between the private and the most public of all systems of clothing, the threads between the internal and external that layer of textiles that can affect behaviour began with an exhibition titled *Possession* where a 'magpie' suit, a convict suit was shown. I had never seen these black and yellow suits and I looked closer at the relationship between clothing and behaviour. I continue to look at convicts but it has been the contrast of the military which has attracted the eye of the maker in me.

I am an artist and academic working the textiles area, with a strong interest in the relationship between the body and clothing. The highlights in the last ten years have been completing and MA in Visual Art, the commissions for the new National Museum of Australia, Canberra and the vestments for St Patrick Cathedral, Sydney. I live and work in Canberra.
