

FASHION SITES

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In the beginning of the twentieth century art largely abandoned one of its key -- if not the key -- functions -- portraying the human being. Instead, most artists turned to other subjects, such as abstraction, industrial objects and materials (Duchamp, minimalists), media images (pop art), the figure of artist herself or himself (performance and video art), or, most recently, data (net art). And when the artists did focus on the human figure (for instance, Picasso or De Kooning), often it was just an excuse to investigate the possibilities of painting, or the conditions of representation in general. Whose few (Kokoschka, Giacometti, Bacon) who went on to depict a human figure in order to register all the heaviness of "human condition," registered just that -- the dark site of this condition, rather than the whole range of human states.

It is the beginning of the new century, and after the end of Cold War, the exhaustion of post-modernism, and the invention of the Web, we want to feel optimistic. (And if you still feel alienated or simply moody, you are hopelessly behind the times -- so just take Prozac and join the global party!) We want to imagine ourselves anew. If visual art, hopelessly stuck in recycling its recent history over and over, can no longer help us, where can we turn to?

Enter fashion. Fashion is everything contemporary art is not: it is concerned with beauty; it is well aware of its history over many centuries, rather than just recent decades; it is more semiotically layered than the most complex Photoshop composite you ever worked on; and it has one ever present constraint (and only constraints can lead to great art) -- the human figure. This constraint gives the art of fashion its vitality, its optimism and its inventiveness. And while cinema, along with fashion, also can be called the art of a human figure, its representations are too realist, limited to life as it actually exists. In contrast, fashion, or at least its "avant-garde" wing, asks a more

playful, more optimistic question -- what else a human being could have been? What would have happened if Darwinian evolution took a few steps differently? So we don't have to wait until scientists start slicing our DNA to re-invent ourselves -- because fashion continuously spins out new definitions of the human.

www.firstview.com

One of the best features of Web media is its comprehensiveness. So if you are in encyclopedic mood, go to www.firstview.com, where you can look up the collections of hundreds of designers, from A A Milano to Zucca, and everybody in between, for the last five years. A separate catalog of video clips is also available. All the collections are free except the most recent (i.e., Fall 2001) which requires the small hourly fee to access. If you look at fashion as fashion, you may be intimidated by the fee; in my case, I simply browse the endless photographs as a kind of atlas of imaginary biology, not particularly caring about the designer or the year (one of my favorite collections on the site is Michiko Koshino Fall 1996 women's ready to wear.)

www.costumenational.com

For the ultimate in Web elegance Swedish style, head to Costume National site. Grey background and minimalist layouts create a stark contrast with colorful and theatrical fashion photographs (in "screenplay" sections). Seemingly simple at first, the site contains endless surprises, such as charming abstract compositions which introduce each of the collections. Here, the rich tradition of twentieth century geometric abstraction meet figurative imagination of contemporary fashion presented through the Web design at its best.

www.vuitton.com

Almost as inventive as the site by Costume National and equally elegant (although in distinctly French style), this site for Louis Vuitton luxury creations presents everything from accessories to Vuitton's new collection of travel guides. Although Vuitton's collections themselves are too classical for my taste, I feel renewed just by navigating

through the site. It proves that interactivity itself can be as sensual as the best underwear designers by a renown French designer.

nikeid.nike.com

For one possible future of fashion, head to NIKE iD part of NIKE Web site. While personalization rules new media where you can construct your own path through a narrative or customize your home page, in the world of manufacturing it still remains largely a dream. NIKE ID takes a step towards making personalization a reality: the site lets you build your own "unique" shoes by choosing color combination and your ID (a combination of letters and numbers) which will appear on the shoes, a kind of custom license plate. Once you enter all the information, the customized shoes are delivered to you within a few weeks. As the site boldly explains, "self-expression is at the heart of human nature... And with NIKE id, when you define who you are on your personalized shoes, you add a little soul to your soles." In the realm of consumer culture, Picassos "originality" wins over Duchamp's "ready-made."