

Tenant of Culture
– ‘*Eclogues (an Apology for Actors)*’, Nicoletti,
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Reviewed by
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Tenant of Culture is the name of the artistic practice of Hendrickje Schimmel, who uses methods of construction and deconstruction to interrogate the ethics and politics inscribed in garments and fashion. Schimmel’s latest exhibition *Eclogues (An Apology for Actors)*, was held at Nicoletti Contemporary, London. As outlined in the press release, the exhibition looked at commercial fashion’s fascination and romanticization of the natural and pastoral through the figure of the milkmaid (Houzé 2019). The milkmaid embodies the narrative of the pastoral, a genre in art history, literature and music that presents rural living in an

idealized manner typified for urban audiences. Depicted as domestic and virtuous, Johannes Vermeer's painting *The Milkmaid* (1657–1658) is an example of how the pastoral conjures ideas of feminine purity, virginity and fertility. Absent is the reality of intense manual labor and hardship.

The installation consisted of a series of garments and accessories handmade by Schimmel that mimicked fashion's appropriation of the milkmaid imagery. In the context of the gallery, the artworks of milkmaid garments were used as a vehicle for exploring a "regression esthetic" to question the artifice of the "natural" (Houzé 2019). International fast fashion retailers, such as ASOS and Topshop, are corporations who have made products based on the figure of the milkmaid, encapsulated in virgin white, frilly off-shoulder cotton blouses. A web search for milkmaid-style garments includes dresses with ruched busts and puff sleeves and skirts in organic-looking, but often synthetic, materials and floral pleats. The milkmaid's presence and popularity in fast fashion highlights fashion's ability to aestheticise traits deemed feminine and to divorce clothing from a historical context for new fashions repurposing it to new ends. Through the form of the milkmaid, the exhibition explored this consumer trend and reemergence, to understand the socio-political function of the milkmaid and what it has become.

The exhibition was installed over three spaces. The first room (Figure 1) successfully introduced the visitor to the ideas of how fashion and clothing is produced (garment construction), circulated (milkmaid imagery) and marketed (retail strategy). It consisted of a single clothes rail suspended from the ceiling, laden with a number of works on wire hangers. Hanging were works in the form of garments and accessories that were constructed from recycled apparel, thread, various bonding agents, lamifix, padding, buckles, eyelets, cord stoppers, rope and elastic. A jacket was made from discarded sun hats and potato sacks and a green silk corded pouch, with vine-like tendrils made from draw cords, completed with imitation leaves. A white long sleeve H&M top was sliced apart at the front and sewn together with a green silk dress to create a *trompe l'oeil* effect and a bonnet finished off with various care labels on the exterior. The familiarity of the materials that employed recognizable brand labels, care labels, and clothing we are likely to own, created an immediate and intimate connection to the artwork that would be guaranteed for most attendees allowing a personal and symbiotic interaction with the artworks.

In fact, one could be mistaken in thinking that the exhibition was a concept store for upcycled fashions or a designer's showroom, as the viewer is immediately placed in a familiar retail experience. All the artworks were untitled blurring the boundaries between art and fashion. The mirroring of these experiences allowed for an easy comparison between the milkmaid imagery found in contemporary fashion and art. The space utilized the white cube esthetic favored by many contemporary galleries internationally, to create a minimal, stripped back space



Figure 1

Tenant of Culture, *Eclogues (an apology for actors)*, 2019, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Nicoletti Contemporary, London. Depicts clothes rail in the opening room consisting of a number of pieces created by the artist. Deadstock material utilised including sun hats, bed linen, silk scraps and elastic cord to create an apron, jacket, a pair of trousers and a bonnet among other pieces.

that isolated the work. Schimmel's work included retail techniques that reminded the viewer of how we buy into lifestyle trends. Some of the works were more obviously linked to the figure of the milkmaid than others, such as a bonnet, apron and *trompe l'oeil* dress that directly referenced the milkmaid's rural occupation. Other pieces seemed at first less clearly linked to the milkmaid. However, on closer inspection, the use of burlap sacks in the construction of the sunhat jacket for example were in fact akin to the milkmaid's occupation repurposed to create new garments. They were indicative of the wider world of garments and accessories that commercial fashion has appropriated in order to utilize rural imagery to signal femininity, rusticity and virtuosity. All of Schimmel's works were made with an obvious crude quality to them with exposed seams, unfinished hems and tears all present. The handiwork was visually evident that worked to show the constant flux that the figure of the milkmaid endures between its historical affectations and its contemporary esthetic positioning. Through reconstructive techniques, the tension between a mystified past created out of the pastoral and the present were embedded into the artworks. The dichotomies of

Figure 2

Rear view of a bust dressed in a deconstructed white shirt, bonnet and wig by Franziska Presche. In the corner of the room on the floor, one of the recast bucket bags is placed.



reality and fantasy, synthetic and organic, rural and urban all interplayed.

The second room more clearly focused on the milkmaid figure (Figure 2). Here, Schimmel worked in collaboration with the hair artist, Franziska Presche. Shown were a number of enameled featureless busts fixed with hairpieces and wigs positioned on tall, slender, metal pedestals sparsely placed throughout the room (Figure 3). Accompanying the busts were three buckets that were cast in cement, a parody of the classic sturdy, cavernous bucket bag with small handles. These bags are appropriated from the pastoral's nostalgia for an un-lived, mystified past and perceived simpler way of life turning a bucket into an accessory. In contrast to the works that were placed at eye level for ease of browsing, the bucket bags were placed on the floor. Rendered as sculptural assemblages, the bags are accessories that have become objects that we cannot touch within the gallery. This served as a reminder of the ways we study the objects as the viewing experience oscillates between retail and art.

Figure 3

An enamel bust in the second room dressed with a reconfigured bucket hat, a deconstructed suit blazer with dried flowers sealed in and hair adornments by Franziska Presche.



The busts were dressed in salvaged materials such as zips, suits, t-shirts that were sewn, smocked and rucked into ruff collars, bonnets and tops. All of the synthetic materials found in the salvaged materials like acrylic, polyester and nylon are products of the modern industrial age that has relegated the milkmaid into the past. The busts are silent and passive in their anonymity. The onlooker projects themselves onto the mannequins and views themselves in the attached adornments. This made the viewer aware of their role as actors and symptoms of consumption, free to pillage the iconography of the milkmaid and voyeuristically inhabiting the image, but not actually actively participating in the natural world. One bust had a dissected blazer inlaid with dried flowers that were sealed in vinyl. I interpreted this as a poignant comment on the fashion industry’s relationship to the environment where nature has become ornamental and esthetic, a resource to be pilfered rather than protected. The rendering of this idealized image in synthetic materials

Figure 4

The final bust in a separate room of paneled concrete. Hat, collar and epaulets made from salvaged textiles and elastic drawcords completed with yellow plastic lens and a wig by Franziska Presche.



exposes the artifice of the rural scene blurring it and making it feel like a decidedly *unnatural* symbol detached from reality.

The final room was narrow with panels of concrete in earthen tones. Inside was a single bust (Figure 4). The effect of its isolation and the departure from the white cube esthetic into a natural color palette was reminiscent of the milkmaid's origins in which the same natural color palette is used to depict bucolic environments. The piece was cornered in the room and evoked the e-commerce experience of image-browsing, allowing the urban audience to access and consume pastoral lifestyles at our leisure. The corridor-like room created restricted movement and served as a reminder of the mystified past from which this figure of the milkmaid has been de-contextualised. It successfully linked the milkmaid from its idealized past to its reemergence today.

Eclogues was a succinct and effective exhibition that in three small spaces demonstrated how values of authenticity and rusticity are inter-played with esthetics and virtue signaling of virginal purity. Under

Schimmel's deconstruction and reconfiguration techniques, the figure of the milkmaid was rendered in an upcycled esthetic. Seeing the appropriation and deconstruction of garments, from the original through to its re-utilisation so clearly, enlivened the tensions between the apparent call for a return to nature and conflicting ideas of progress. I was reminded that craftsmanship stands intimately connected to ideas of technological developments within the Western paradigm of modernity.

The milkmaid is a figure in constant flux and under continual reconfiguration. This exhibition successfully grappled with modernity's demands and ideals on this romanticized figure. The visitor was not simply a spectator, but an actor and symptom of this passive consumption of reactionary ideas, where ecological concerns facing the planet are highlighted, but nullified through dress. I left the gallery profoundly affected and aware of the powers at play that disseminate ideals as little more than consumer trends and an esthetic. Fashion has the effect of divorcing dress from meaning and co-opting an image, yet here the series of artworks succeeded in making the apolitical political again.

Reference

Houzé, Camille. 2019. *Tenant of Culture: Eclogues [An Apology for Actors]*. London: Nicoletti Contemporary.