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VISUAL ART

‘Dressed Up’ exhibit showcases the complexity of contemporary portraiture

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BY ALICE THORSON

A quiet sense of unease permeates the main gallery at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, which is filled with striking portraits by four contemporary artists.

Assembled in the exhibit "Dressed Up," their works give new intensity to the expression "not comfortable in one's own skin."

Awkward poses, misshapen bodies, claustrophobic settings and a certain brittle theatricality confront the eye at every turn, yet these portraits also speak of friendship, awareness of cultural history and imaginative freedom.

The Kemper purchased Hope Gangloff's "Vera" (2013) and installed it at the exhibit's entrance. The painting is one of a series of large, acrylic-on-canvas portraits of the artist's friends, in which she highlights the physical individuality of her subjects, while endowing them with an impenetrable interiority.

Dressed in a ruffly white blouse and textured skirt, fishnet hose and herringbone-patterned pumps, Vera sits cross-legged on a wood chair before a stack of colorfully painted logs and a set of fireplace tools. All this detail contributes a sense of intimacy, yet Vera's pensive expression and faraway look keep us locked out of her private thoughts.

Gangloff is based in New York, and her subjects are sophisticates.

"Vio et Livres" (2011) could be a vignette from a cocktail party. Dressed in black with her shoes off, a straw between her fingers and a bottle of wine at her feet, Vio sits on a stool in front of a bookcase stocked with volumes that include "Reading Dance," "Pintur" and Virgil's "Aenid." Once again we are cut out of exactly what's going on. Vio seems to be assessing a conversation that takes place out of the frame.

Gangloff's portraits capture the everyday reality of her friends, male as well as female. In contrast, British-born Neeta Madahar transports her friends to a realm of fantasy. Her lavish photographic portraits focus on women, dressed in elaborate costumes and surrounded by flowers.

Madahar's staged images of role-playing women are inspired in part by the celebrated "Goddesses" series of portraits by English photographer Madame Yevonde, who photographed socialites in the role of goddesses in the 1930s. They also hark to the well-known self-portraits of contemporary artist Cindy Sherman.

"Sian With Bluebells" (2010) lies on the ground in a mysterious forest setting, a bejeweled spider in her manicured hands. "Suky With Cherry Tree" (2010) has the feel of an old film poster. With her cascade of dark hair and old-fashioned dress, Suky looks like a cutout against a backdrop of blossoming pink boughs with perching birds and a sky of impossible blue.

"Lee With Fuchsias" (2009)" appears in a bower of pink blossoms, wearing a dress that matches the shade of the flowers. The silver letter opener she holds in her hands lends an aura of threat to

this floral fantasia; in contrast, “Laura with Irises” (2010) has fun hamming it up, watering her dress of flowers with a silver watering can.

Madajar’s portraits are all very stagey and implausible, and at heart rather sad. Which raises the question: “What’s wrong with these women as they are in daily existence?”

Of course, the fashion and glamor industries thrive on female insecurity, a condition abetted by our cultural fixation on celebrities and movie stars. Madajar and her past-their-youth friends bring a touching absurdity to the issue that amounts to a form of resistance.

Nigerian-born Marcia Kure adds cultural and historical scope to this show with photomontages that combine contemporary hip-hop images and Victorian costumes. Her 2010 “Dressed Up” series, which inspired the title of this show, has humor and bite.

Kure’s positioning of black male faces and upper bodies above crinoline skirts and bustles asserts their cultural ascendance over a history of colonialism and oppression. But the pairing also serves to feminize these young rappers, in a kind of back-at-ya move against hip-hop misogyny.

In “Dressed Up #3,” a young man in a knitted cap and hooded jacket emerges from the stiff bodice of a Victorian dress, holding a net purse in one hand and a red leather glove in the other. In “Dressed Up #6,” Kure inserts a black-and-white image of a tattooed black man wearing aviator sunglasses into a ruffled skirt with an elaborately patterned floral overskirt.

Kure’s mashups highlight the fashion preoccupations of two cultures light years removed from each other. The pairing is most surreal in “Dressed Up #1,” in which the face of a rapper peers out of a furry hood above an enormous bosom. The figure incorporates an impossibly positioned hand holding a dollar bill, an allusion perhaps to the phenomenal income earned by rappers.

In a group of enigmatic watercolors that incorporate kola nut pigment, Kure stays with the human figure. But they have no faces, just poses and props and evocative titles like “Little Red Riding Hood, acting cool, carrying Big Bad Wolf in her bustle.”

In 2011, French diplomat Dominique Strauss-Kahn made headlines when a Guinean immigrant maid at a New York hotel accused him of sexual assault. The following year, Kure did a watercolor series, “The Diplomat and the Chambermaid,” in which the interaction of biomorphic quasi-figural shapes carries a hint of sexual suggestion.

Her most recent “Mask Series,” featuring collaged fragments of high-fashion images, are simple and striking, exacting a revenge of sorts on the shallowness of fashion magazines and the messages they send to women.

Texas-based Trenton Doyle Hancock is well known for his “Mounds vs. Vegans” narrative of good and evil. The Kemper exhibit focuses on his recent variation of the dome-like evil Vegans, freed from their role in the narrative’s battles and massacres.

In his earlier narrative, the Vegans played a malevolent role, but in the prints and paintings here they seem embattled and haunted. In the painting, “A Hello Hollow Lullaby” (2008), vacant eyeholes, like arched entryways, pierce a dome-like head, cut off at the bottom so that it seems to be sinking or rising from a watery horizon. Hancock painted the dome with festive multicolored daubs, as if the multicolored raindrops that fall from the sky had splattered and stuck.

Hancock has described his characters as projections of himself. In “Mold,” the dome head is ringed with scraps of fake fur and cutout bits of pink paper, and the eyeholes are surrounded by popping red veins. Frazzled is the word, yet he maintains his equilibrium while being pelted with green raindrops.

Perhaps for Hancock, the act of making allays fears and doubts, making his works testaments to the grounding power of art. One of his prints depicts a bucket filled with ribbons of color, one of the tools of his trade, each labeled by name. What eludes words — but not his powers of visual expression — is the complex of thoughts and feelings contained within those dome-like Vegan heads.

In some fashion, all of the “portraits” in this show are private and secretive. We leave this exhibit knowing none of the people portrayed.

It’s one of the many shared aspects that ties this exhibit together. It was co-curated by the museum’s executive director Barbara O’Brien, and Erin Dziedzic, curator and head of adult programs.

The installation, a succession of framed rectangles, is less than dynamic and might have been helped by the inclusion of some sculptural or installation work. As it is, the pace of the exhibit derives from the varied visions of the four artists and the dynamism of discovery they provide.