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DESIGN REVIEW

### DESIGN REVIEW; Inventive Garments Designed to Go With the Flow

By ROBERTA SMITH

The clothing designer Issey Miyake is some kind of artist, although which kind is not always clear.

As you walk through "Issey Miyake Making Things," the impressive and aptly named exhibition of his work that originated at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris and is now at the Ace Gallery New York in the South Village, his persona seems to change from room to room. He alternately comes across as a brilliant inventor, elitist haute couturier, artist's collaborator, origami master, generic surrealist, high-tech impresario and occasionally as someone who does very good store-window displays.

In the two big galleries that make the most lasting impression, however, there's not much doubt about Mr. Miyake's originality. With the help of a studio that includes talented fabric designers, he has made some of the most radical clothing of his time -- if it is not ahead of his time -- introducing synthetic materials and initiating or perfecting new techniques: most notably, his signature pleating and wrinkling processes.

If in these instances Mr. Miyake isn't a fine artist, he has no need for the term. He has transformed the making of clothing into such an elaborate, deliberate and thoughtful applied art that it encompasses most other artistic disciplines, painting, sculpture and architecture included.

The weight of his ambition can sometimes make his clothes conceptually heavy. To wear many of them, or at least many of the ones in this show, you have to be willing to make a statement, to stand out in a crowd, even a New York or Paris crowd. But once you put these garments on, their engineering tends to win you over: they are usually weightless and effortless to wear, and they grant an amazing amount of freedom of movement.

Like much of the great clothing designs of this century, they combine elements of East and West, which also puts them in step with the multicultural globalism of the moment. And what is most interesting, they do not seem aimed at an ideal female body; they fit all kinds of shapes and sizes.

The first gallery in which Mr. Miyake's achievement shines is titled "Jumping" and has the feeling of an aviary or an elegant puppet show. In it are displayed 24 brightly colored garments that are made of parachutelike polyester and permanently folded, wrinkled or pleated in a stunning number of different ways. They hang from cables that raise and lower them and occasionally bounce them up and down like Halloween skeletons.

Some dresses are flat, caftanlike silhouettes, corrugated with tiny pleats that can run vertically or, more loosely, in burnished horizontal waves; also flat is a gray jumpsuit, except that its pants legs are edged with ziggurat steps. Others are adamantly in the round, erupting with curves and billowing volumes that evoke flowers, leaves, Japanese armor or kimonos; when bounced, they roll up and down with the liquidity of Venetian blinds. Moving with Slinky-like jerks are several garments that are both pleated and wrinkled, including a layering of four flared tank tops, each longer and brighter than the last.

The second gallery, a darkened space titled "Laboratory" where the technical wizardry verges on slick, gives some idea of how this, and more, happens. Here one can watch examples of clothing from seven different Miyake collections come into being. Around the room untouched fabric and the finished garment it became are displayed side by side. On the floor cleverly animated video projections illustrate the forming processes.

The before and afters are striking. In one area, pieces of fabric in colored bands hang flat on the wall; on video they are pleated and folded into accordionlike tubes that become a dress, displayed on a mannequin.

Elsewhere a gauze coat, dress and pants hanging on the wall seem designed for a stilt walker and look for all the world like an installation by Beverly Semmes. On video these garments are subjected to some ingenious shrinking process that brings them down to human size, while thickening the fabric helpfully.

In a demonstration of the series titled A-POC (A Piece of Cloth), a tube of cotton polyester stretch fabric made on a computerized knitting machine creates an entire outfit that the wearer simply cuts out with scissors, tailoring the details as she likes.

In other instances the display tactics have the familiar, hollow ring of well-orchestrated store windows. In two galleries, A-POC garments have been cut open and put on mannequins, but not cut apart, which means they are connected by long, trainlike swaths of fabric. This makes the customizing cuts hard to see and also creates an effect that might be called Surrealism 101.

Part of the same course is a presentation in which two mannequins loll about on pillows that are attached to their dresses in a field of video butterflies. And the hallway is lined with sheets of foil that have old clothes heat pressed between them, a method of recycling that, on the evidence presented here, makes the wearer look like a knight of old, at least until the foil wears off.

Of more interest is a gallery displaying Mr. Miyake's collaborations with the artists Tim Hawkinson, Yasumasa Morimura, Nobuyoshi Araki and Cai Guo Qiang. The result is for the most part novelty garments that are burned or imprinted with images or drawings.

The most interesting thing here is Mr. Hawkinson's large "Pneumatic Quilt," which incorporates fabric printed with the artist's eccentric figure drawings but not yet pleated. As in the "Laboratory" gallery, it illuminates the process, showing how the pleating process reduces both the fabric area and the images.

There is an element of postmodern irony to these collaborations that seems a bit out of character for Mr. Miyake. In a time of quotation and deconstruction, he has distinguished himself by being a staunch modernist, a sincere formalist you might say, who believes that new forms are possible and that they come out of a combination of historical consciousness and the deployment of new technology. His art looks forward, not back.

"Issey Miyake Making Things" is at Ace Gallery New York, 275 Hudson Street, at Dominick Street, South Village, (212) 255-5599, through Feb. 29. Admission: \$6; \$3 for students and the elderly.

Photos: A room in the exhibition "Issey Miyake Making Things," at the Ace Gallery. Aided by a studio of talented fabric designers, he has made some of today's most radical clothing. His garments are usually weightless. (Yasuaki Yoshinaga/Ace Gallery)