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ART'S SEDUCTION BY FASHION  
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# FORM AND UNIFORM

TED: I CAN'T BELIEVE  
YOU'RE WEARING THAT  
UNIFORM. ARE YOU OUT  
OF YOUR MIND?

FRED: THIS IS THE  
CORRECT UNIFORM

Whit Stillman,  
screenplay for *Barcelona*, 1992

right

**Beverly Semmes**

*Big Silver, 1996*

Lamé cloth, motor, hardware

A convergence of fashion and the dancer's body, endlessly repeating its manoeuvres, Semmes's work entertains us by continually shifting its position. The sculpture continues the dance by other means, beyond the limits of its space.

below

**Beverly Semmes**

*Red Dress, 1992*

Velvet, wood, metal hanger

An almost preposterous grandiosity of the body, its impossible scale deflated by 'normal' arms; a 'dress' formally stunning in its colour and shape, which nonetheless invites us to compose our own narratives about what kind of body might inhabit it.



below left  
**Beverly Semmes**  
*Haze*, 1994  
 Crushed rayon velvet

Fashion as the abstract expressionist sublime: the second skin of clothing flattened and smeared into a field of shimmering colour.

below right  
**Beverly Semmes created in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia,**  
*Watching Her Feat*, 2000  
 Nylon, stuffing (installation view with guard in matching dress)

Fabric is used for formal sculptural effects – shape, texture, dimension, colour – then compromised by its equivalence with the 'ordinary' body clad in the same material.



At first sight Beverly Semmes's installations of dresses, flattened against the gallery wall, hung high, their fabric trailing and pooling on the floor, can be understood as allusions to an absent body. Some body! What is evoked in pieces that may fall ten or fifteen feet is a body on such an improbable scale that we might read through its dimensions into a new domain – that of doubt. What bodies might inhabit these massively oversized garments? Semmes's clothes are larger than life and so come to assume lives of their own. They command attention to such a degree that, overwhelming the space which should structure and condition them, they initiate their own narratives. These stories may take their lead from the imagined body, in scenarios where the fabric, enlivened, comes to play a separate role, or, increasingly in Semmes's recent work, they may be based upon a contest, a formal engagement between volumes of fabric (which are also volumes of colour) and an almost encompassing space. To begin with there were bodies – the models in Semmes's photographic works of the late 1980s and early '90s who drifted through gardens and constructed landscapes in exotic, oversized hats and coats, becoming part of the environment through the agency of the clothing.

The use of fabric as story in itself is exemplified by the 1996 installation *Big Silver*, a vast dress in crushed silver lamé, raised and lowered against the gallery wall by motor-driven pulleys. Commissioned by the Smith College Museum of Art, this work was made in the wake of a collaboration between Semmes and the Mathilde Monnier dance company in France. In the summer of 1995 the artist made three sculptures inspired by movement in space. One of these was a long orange gown hung at the back of the stage, its fabric trailing towards the audience across the dance floor. Linda Muelhig noted that, 'As the dancers interacted with the dress, portions of the skirt were designed to detach and come away and, in a sense, to become part of the dance.'<sup>1</sup> Muelhig interprets *Big Silver* as a revival and transformation of Semmes's original intentions for the other two sculptures made for the Monnier company. Here the work becomes 'the active agent and locus of performance. Separated from the actual content of the stage, *Big Silver* can be seen to refer to the dance by enacting the repetitive regimen of the ballet barre in perpetual, deep pliés from floor to ceiling.'<sup>2</sup> There is a playful linguistic convergence in the plications of the rising and falling fabric and the exercises of the dancer which the cloth mimics. Other works, such as the massively proportioned *Red Dress*, 1992, with its 45-foot-long train flooding fabric across the gallery, are not only similarly spectacular in both colour and scale, but similarly solicitous of narratives to make themselves intelligible. However, as Margo Crutchfield observes, there may be a degree to which the work is 'comical, even ludicrous, with its grandiose posturing, as if pretending to be something it is not'.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps the paradoxes inherent in this Brobdignagian escalation that have guided Semmes towards an increased abstraction of material forms and a less pronounced emphasis upon the overtly corporeal. If Semmes's earlier works had appealed to an exaggerated (absent or absenting) body as armature, in much the same manner as Judith Shea – working on a human scale but away from the unstable materials of fashion into the permanence of the monument – the tendency towards formal emphases can be understood as abstracting *into* the very stuff of fashion. The questionable utility of garments on such a scale, with such internal structures, begs another question – that of form versus function. So it is that a work such as *Haze*, 1994, invokes a Rothko-like sublime. Just as Rothko spoke of his flat-field paintings as 'skins hung on the wall', so Semmes pushes the object – the second 'skin' of clothes – beyond its recognizable limits. *Haze* is still strangely pellicular, but barely recognizable as three conjoined dresses, their distended arms just breaking from a flattened, vertical plane to fall in a horizontal rectangle of compressed material. The flat field of shimmering colour is not, of course, manifold veils of translucent paint: Semmes conjures a similar abstraction from crushed rayon velvet, with a pattern... Nature from culture indeed!

Semmes's exhibition at Lesley Tonkonow Gallery in spring 2001 further emphasized the degree to which her employment of fashion's materials had shifted from concern with their representational, narrative possibilities towards more formal interests. *Watching Her Feat*, 2000, consisted of a large coil of luminescent yellow nylon, filled with styrofoam pellets, and occupying the main part of the gallery space. It was as if the pooled, crumpled trains of earlier dresses had become detached – as in Semmes's piece for Monnier – and formed the sole object of attention. As if to redress the balance, Semmes insisted that the gallery staff wear matching outfits, of normal scale, throughout the exhibition. Where previously the artwork had spoken of the body in its absence, through scale, shape and colour, here there was a separation of form and function, on one hand returning utilitarian value to clothing, on the other emphasizing its properties of colour, texture and shape through abstraction.

If Beverly Semmes has, over the last decade, increasingly privileged form over function – partly by representing function as improbable – Karen Kimmel, over much the same period, has used the form of fashion to interrogate, and ironically mimic, social function. Making the audience smile, or even laugh, is an essential component of Kimmel's work. In an interview she commented, "My art is meant to be humorous. When people look at one of my installations and say, "That's kind of silly," I say, "Exactly!" I don't expect to explain my work to someone and have them say, "Hmmm. Interesting. Profound." I expect them to laugh, smile and say, "How did you come up with that stupid idea?"<sup>4</sup>

Is Kimmel's work, then, nothing more than a mime of an essential frivolity which haunts fashion (a mime which in the last two years has extended into fashion itself through her partnership in the exclusive Los Angeles clothing store K-Bond)? Kimmel's statement is itself permeated by a self-deprecating irony that extends the 'stupidity' of her work. Any accomplished writer of fiction will admit that often the most serious commentary can only be freighted into a text under the guise of comedy. Kimmel, too, is acutely aware of the overbearing profundity which can be escaped, and the subversive seriousness which can be communicated, through playing 'dumb', through making us smile at 'stupid' ideas. A stock more of literature, such strategies remain unusual in contemporary art. Despite the alleged frivolousness and parodic tendencies of postmodern culture, art remains a serious, unfunny practice, its very earnestness deterring public engagement. Kimmel is one of those rare living artists – with John Currin, perhaps, or Paul McCarthy – who can efface a serious critical imagination behind the mask of dumb humour. We laugh at the performance, and only later, slowly, does it dawn on us that the over-emphatic attention to detail, the exaggeration to the point of ridicule which amused us, carries with it the burden that these details are components of our quotidian lives to which we readily surrender.