

Plastique: a coincident of mind and materials
Anna Clabburn

“Plastic: adj. Having power to give form: shaping, formative: of or pertaining to molding or modeling; modifiable; capable of permanent deformations without giving way: capable or, or pertaining to, metabolism and growth: made of plastic – in composition, growing, forming, as in neoplastic.” (Chambers English Dictionary)

Plastic is not something we often think of in an adjectival sense – that is, as a ‘doing’ word. In a cultural context, it is usually envisaged as a noun, most often associated with the ever-proliferating field of disposable gadgets molded in gauche colours and designed for singular domestic purposes. In the contemporary world, it is also a word deeply embedded in the realm of technology where it has become synonymous with aesthetic sophistication, exquisite functionality and - according to its manufacturers - ubiquitous necessity.

This exhibition pays simple homage to the power of plastic in its adjectival form –as a material for ‘*doing things with*’. Here, in the context of Melbourne’s Fashion Week, we witness the medium transformed by the skillful hands of an artist and two fashion designers. Their game is one of playful experimentation, underscored with more complex symbolic intent. So sit back, relax with your (plastic) glass of vino and read on to synthetic enlightenment!

Not quite collaboration ...

Conceived by Melbourne artist Irene Barberis, *Plastique*, was expanded by its curator Rachel Young, it is an opportunistic meeting of minds and materials,

brought about via a recognition that art and fashion often overlap, both in the halls of high art and at street level. Young observed some stylistic simpatico between Barberis and a relatively new design duo Six (Denise Sprynskyj and Peter Boyd) some time ago. Barberis and Six had not met prior to this occasion and had little consciousness of each other's work, despite their respective reputations both in Australia and overseas. In spite of starting out as relative strangers, all immediately warmed to the idea of a joint show on the grounds of the material inducement. In actual effect, it was the plastic that brought them together!

Positioning is everything...

Six and Barberis share more intellectually than may be apparent on first viewing of the installations on exhibition. Each is keen to position their work at a pivotal point between classical tradition and the spirit of a contemporary present. In Six's case, their debt to fashion's past filters through in an overt sense of formal tailoring, which they marry unashamedly with strong templates of stylistic incursion: dramatic disruption in fabric surfaces; blatant combinations of sassy colour with impossibly delicate material; or quirky detailing using a grab-bag of disparate imagery. Knowing that true 'originality' can only ever be a façade these days, Six remain candid in their whimsical appropriation of form, borrowing equanimously from European haute couture as well as from the less self-conscious palette of Melbourne's inner city ambience.

Barberis asserts a firmer position for herself in the lineage of art historical evolution. Her literally 'breath-filled' and transparent assemblages act as an ideological conduit between recent past and present ideas about art's materiality and meaning. The 1960s are a key reference point for her, in particular their generation of women who made art directly relating to and co-opting techniques and materials traditionally labeled as 'craft'.¹ It was at this time that plastics were

being used as part of a vocabulary of 'new materials', in strong contrast with the parallel development of conceptual and minimal art. The rationale behind linking these two movements lies in the dual nature of Barberis's own practice where two usually diverse elements are combined (as in her previous work where figuration and abstraction and their inherent differences sit together) and where apparently discarded lineages are reassessed and presented in an alternate language. The discarded element in this work is the lineage known as "scripture spreads" where biblical texts are used and are literally made to cover the body. This particular lineage, as far as Barberis is concerned, was overlooked when feminism utilized the processes and yet seemingly discarded the context of devotion and meaning.

So what of the plastic itself?

The use of Cutting edge technology in soft plastics allows experimentation in contemporary transparent and holographic colours and surfaces. These new creations resemble her earlier series works and were made with the help of an assistant. The *Spreads* represents a reflected reference to previous dimensions within the artist's overall body of work, as if extending an ongoing single statement about faith, form and feminine essence.

The giant mock bedcovers are also an ode to the potency of plastic's many personalities. As forms, they soft and malleable and evoke fantasies of boudoir behavior. Yet their shapes remains fundamentally minimal and geometric. One piece is highly decorative, with numerous small hand-cut figures and shapes attached to the quilt and casting shadows across adjacent surfaces. Another glowing cross evokes Bridget Riley and yet another Agnes Martin, Each of these five works represent a reflected reference to further dimensions within the artist's overall work.

The purposefully minimal magenta crosses radiate florescent femininity and yet their grids of orange and pink line speak of formal construction and modular order. Underscoring Barberis' particular debt to artist Sol Lewitt, is a related series of cubic floor pieces, directly influenced by the older artist's geometric floor installation, *Incomplete Open Cube*, of 1974. This revision of Lewitt's work constitutes a transparent translation of the original piece, opening out a more playful terrain for minimal conceptualism.

Six use plastic's flexible nature to slightly different ends: to create a conceptual anomaly that complicates their already hybrid forms. The designers' fondness for deconstruction and reclaiming or recycling existing garments - for turning clothing inside-out and exposing its organic structure - becomes even more ironic in this context through the decision to seal each piece of clothing in vacuum-packed plastic. Positively neo-cubist in intent, their installation acts as its own iconoclast. Although the garments appear visible and dimensionally gutted, their true sensory essence, their touchability, is absurdly sealed. These are bargains shoppers can never get their hands on!

The busi-ness of creative existence...

In sharing the construction of this installation, Barberis and her companions mirror the physical toil involved in the making of their bodies of work. Six, for instance, do much of their own decorative detailing, including fine pleating, dyeing, printing, and sundry complicated methods of combining loose objects into the garments themselves. Likewise, evidence of Barberis' sweat is writ into the fabric of her floating wall pieces. Her handiwork is most obvious in the corridor of plastic materials, *Source Walk*, designed to resemble an Asian street shopping bazaar. It is through this work that we gain a glimpse of the process that lies behind the artist's more minimal *Spreads* – the chaotic studio of raw materials,

the many and multiple temporary collages she constructs along the way to the succinct final form. This is Barberis allowing us inside her plastic fantasy and to share her passion for the sheer pleasure of her ever-evolving stock of raw materials.

In this manner also, the commercial aspect of art and fashion is literally worn 'on the sleeve'. Six has pieces on show on the catwalk as well as in store windows around the globe – the exhibition being just one manifestation of their current output. Barberis, in a similar vein, presents the commercial viability of the very plastic materials with which she is so openly besotted and around which this exhibition evolved.² This open economic realism is refreshing in the context of a public art gallery, where too often the fiscal needs of the maker are camouflaged beneath the glamour of the creative identity.

As a point of conclusion, it is worth noting that the collusion between art and fashion is hardly a new phenomenon. European-based artists, from Matisse on, flirted with costume and set design throughout the twentieth century, while performance art, from its very beginnings, established a tradition of theatrical 'dress' particular to visual art's domain, yet still curiously close to the staged antics of the evolving fashion world. Many contemporary artists today also exhibit in retail shops alongside clothing and designware in between visitations to the gallery's white cube.

What is unusual about this exhibition and other similar ventures between designers and artists is the willingness of all involved to release their work to the process of a shared encounter. This generosity of spirit allows space to invite the viewer into a closer intimacy with the work than is possible in a conventional gallery exhibition or fashion display. As creators become more willing to move beyond the old fences of their professions, we are all able to participate a little

more fully in what they are doing and saying. In this case, it is the *plastique* that conveys the creators' meaning in a way that invites embellishment by the viewer. Indeed, the works seem to whisper quiet truths about their makers as well as their observers: *we are serious just like you, we are frivolous just like you, there is more to our synthetic surfaces than meets the eye!*

Anna Clabburn, March 2002

¹ Barberis takes note especially of the large plastic quilts made by American artist Patsy Norvel in the late '60s.

² She is also an importer of these materials