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Special Issue (English)

Fashion Beyond Cloth

Portraits of Mannequins by Photographer Nicolas Descottes, Erwan de Fligué collection

Céline Mallet

Translated by Max Texier

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by **Céline Mallet**
porfolio captions by **Erwan de Fligué**
translated from French by Max Texier

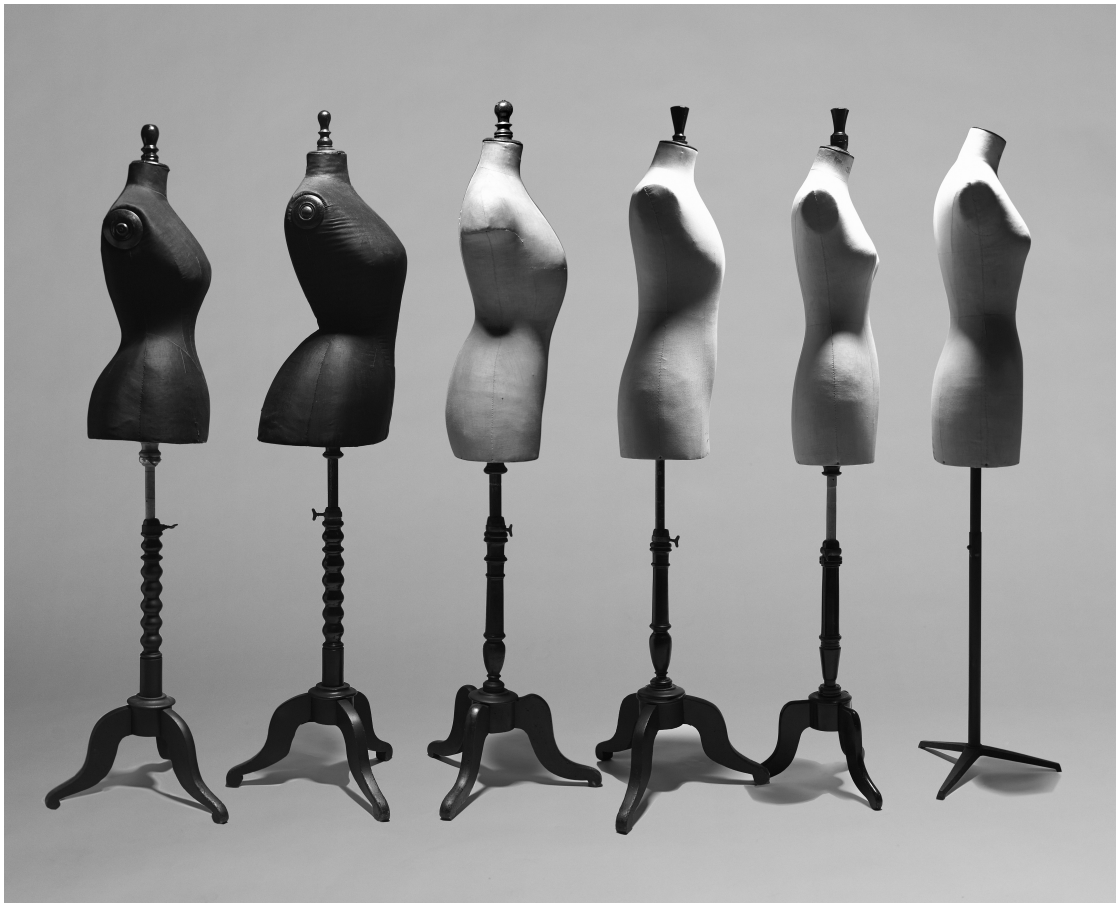
Fashion Beyond Cloth

Portraits of Mannequins by Photographer Nicolas Descottes, Erwan de Fligué collection

Without pomp and splendour, it is the body that must go on parade; without clothing, it is fashion that designs the body, or even reifies it, to satisfy the hunger of a society and the subtleties of its distinctive laws. Without the simultaneous nature of the gaze that bears it in its fancy/whim and its randomness, fashion of the past reveals itself in its otherness, its peculiarity. It suffices for a collector and lover of old fashion models and a photographer experienced in still life for the deportments, the attitudes, the airs and graces and the grins of an era reenact their aura like a final act.

"The look on their face, the precision of their expression can be so powerful that they leave us no choice but to angle the frame as a portrait, in order to give life by lightning. Because these bodies are almost alive. And I say this having touched them, carried them. Depending on the angle to which their head is slightly tilted, these characters seldom seem still. When paired there is even a connivance that is quite surprising." The bodies of which Nicolas Descottes speaks are those of the mannequins of men's, women's and children's storefronts, collected over time by Erwan de Fligué, antique dealer and expert in vintage clothing. "It's true that they are the finest women of their time, admirably getting on, and that always sport a smile." jaunts self-amused the above cited, while evoking his female models. The two men have met by Nicolas Descottes's editor's initiative. Together they project to work around these objects and their history, and are setting up a first photographic session at the Marché Dauphine, where Erwan de Fligué disposes of multiple spaces at his disposal. The mannequins date from 1851 to 1944. They are made of wax, "Cerolaque" (wax and laquer composition), plaster, their hair is of copper wire or is sculpted, the lashes that border their glass or painted irises are long, thick or ordinary; their traits are realistic or intensely stylized. Most are signed Pierre Imans or Siegel, Stockman's associate in the 1920s, both French companies hat held a creative monopoly in the twentieth century. Erwan de Fligué vows an erudite passion for these modern Pygmalions. Both firms collaborated with the artists of their time to capture aesthetic ideals, dispute the sophistication of poses, physiognomy, and cosmetic detail thus audaciously rivaling the modes

← 1910s Stockman woman with a wax head and an articulated wooden arm. Although the bust's shape was fashionable at the time, its general constitution dates back from the XIXth century. Dressed in a suit.



↟ A sewing mannequin's evolution. Profile shots of models from years 1890, 1900, 1915, 1925, 1945, to 1960.

of incarnation to the point of seizing the personalities of the epoch by furthermore delivering to sales uncanny lookalikes. Some models even being mechanical: shook their head, rolled eyes, powdered their nose, breathed with the aid of a bellow that would inflate their corsage...

"A vestment is a bit like fashion as a gap, the mannequins, fashion as full. That is, for what's left of it" suggests Erwan de Fligué. What's "left" is photography, that arrests in turn a presence and dialogs with the ghosts it would like to have the power to call back. Since Surrealism, Hans Bellmer and his fantastical doll, the mannequin object is like the unsettling double of the photographic gesture. And humans only intermittently appear in Nicolas Descottes's work: these are a few rare silhouettes taken from behind, opaque and silent, absorbed by the great wan of the port of Odessa, or the implacable archive of helmets and gloves, second protective skins and relics of a body more often than not absent from the image. This photographer put reality in check by bringing back drama shaped landscapes from European crash test centers, where true and false are intrinsically mixed. That he would confront the mannequin's ambiguity was, to sum up, a fatality. To today observe these Portraits, is to let oneself be immersed into the strange, even anachronistic seduction of an army of body doubles back from other worlds, but that populated at their time, to stoke the fever of urban crowds, the storefronts or new

museums of mercantile extravaganza. It's to bring to mind the work of another contemporary photographer, Valerie Belin, in who's work the frozen beauty of contemporary polyester mannequins, the aura of defunct pop icons, and the fragility of the living exchange their qualities in a vampire relationship. It's to contemplate what fashion desires of a body beyond clothes, what it requires of a smile, of the sketch of a hip. It's to at last verify the versatility of these same requirements and particularly regarding the female body, forced into tension by the different beauty cannons that irrigate history, molded or contradicted by the complexity of apparel, or modified by sports activities of the twentieth century. The upsets inherent to gender difference also plague doll land. Erwan de Fligué knows this for a fact, he who dresses and manipulates them, and ascertains about the female mannequins, that the difference between one's dream silhouette and another's can be such that it is impossible to put a dress from 1890 on a mannequin from 1900, furthermore uneasy to fit a 1950s dress on a mannequin from 1925... On the other hand, male mannequins will undergo, for their part, few changes in structure between the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the detachable hands and heads being interchangeable from one epoch to another as long as a build of immutable virility lasts. Images succeed each other, the envelopes and masks transform. There are the bowed silhouettes of the 1920s, shoulders drawn and dropped, narrow busts of the tomboys of the beginning of the thirties, slim mouths and pinched eyebrows, of which the androgynous grace exalts itself in an art deco abstraction. One recognizes elsewhere the voluptuous curves typical of the fifties. One scrutinizes with apprehension the hard-set traits of a little blond boy, his hair seam drawn impeccably to the side, built by an Austrian company right after the Anchluss. Here photographs do not need to be retouched, unlike those deployed by today's fashion press, that corrects and smoothes to its whim the bodies it submits to our illusions. Here tantrums and the changing tides of time immediately stylize anatomy and dress, and this figural art suffices for the show to go on, waving before us the tragic question of our resemblance. ■

recent publication
Une histoire du mannequin de vitrine / The Mannequin: A History.
(French/English) Stockman - Erwan de Fligué, Flammarion, 2017



‘70s Polyester Imans reissue of a model made for this creator in 1928 by art deco sculptor Léon de Leyritz.



1920s Siegel brand wax mannequin in a Madeleine Vionnet dress.



‘30s plaster boy, Siegel.



Fery Boudrot “Cerolaque” mannequin,
identical to an Imans model from 1948.
1950s Alix-Marcelle Tizeau dress.



Two of Iman's 'Cerolaque' gentlemen from the 1930s. One is stylized and the other hyperrealist, and yet they still share a family resemblance. Take notice of the eerie uneasiness of what André Breton called "eyes that open to no longer see".



Leroy mannequin from around 1937 with copper wire hair, wearing a Shiaparelli vest from 1939.



Plaster Imans mannequin from the late 1920s wearing a Chanel dress from 1929.



Composition of a young boy by Austrian brand Gottwald, dating from the end of the 1930s.



Imans plaster mannequin of a a little girl,
towards 1928.



1920s Siegel figurine hangers. The man happens to be Chilean actor Jorge Infante, who rose to stardom in 1927.