

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Erotic Cloth: Seduction and Fetishism in Textiles, Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle (eds) (2018)***

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In her foreword, to *The Erotic Cloth: Seduction and Fetishism in Textiles*, edited by Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle, Mary Schoeser FRSA states that 'Such cloths can provide an erotic message that betters spoken communication: it can be "heard" at distance, no matter how loud the music, and only by people who speak the same language' (Millar and Kettle 2018). My own awareness of the erotic power of cloth was undoubtedly heightened whilst preparing this review. Aptly, attendance at the recent Rolling Stones No Filter tour underlined the book's ability to excite and surprise. It validated how a 74-year-old musician retained the power to eroticize. Music and performance were no doubt contributory, but the silk satin of the sensuous shirt, open to the breeze, gliding on and off the angles of Mick's still taut body and a skin-tight, almost transparent black vest, emphatically and evocatively, played their part. It confirmed that mass popular events can equally present cloth that is epidermic and suggestive, exciting the senses via an erotic power. It also confirmed Schoeser's belief that cloth can speak in subliminal, erotic tones to all who are receptive.

The Erotic Cloth is indeed a seductive read. It accentuates the bond between skin and cloth and the haptic charge that occurs through their intertwining. Editors Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle have

It proffers perspectives from the performer, the audience and again the performer, interspersed with conversations that explore the state of public and private dress and undress, and how the erotic nature of the enactment is managed by both performer and observer.

In their choice of contributors, Millar and Kettle have found the sensitivity as academic researchers and visual makers to seek out narratives that offer highly personal perspectives and carefully analysed observations. From Angela Maddock's obsessive fascination with Moroni's *Il Tagliapanni* to Masako Matsushita's interview exploring her *UN/DRESS* performance, the essays flow and delight. It is difficult to select a favourite transcript when the reader is repeatedly proffered new, altered or clarified insights that surprise, excite or trigger nostalgic experience. It reinvigorates our close association with cloth and activates a sensual understanding of its erotic potency.

### References

Jagger, M., Richards, K., Woods, R. and Watts, C. (2018), *No Filter Tour* (Live Performance), Rolling Stones, Ricoh Arena, Coventry, 2 June.

Millar, L. and Kettle, A. (2018) *The Erotic Cloth: Seduction and Fetishism in Textiles*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

### Contributor details

Patricia Dillon is a textile practitioner and industry consultant and holds a BA (Hons) from Nottingham Trent University and a Master's degree from Central Saint Martins, London. Dillon has worked in academia for 35 years alongside a career in industry as a designer and consultant. Her work covers textile and fashion design, forecasting, new technologies research and textile preservation. Through exhibition at the Indigo Salon, Paris, she has provided design and consultancy to clients that include Fendi, Stephanel and Donna Karan. She has undertaken research projects on behalf of the Taiwan Textile Federation and the Zibetti Textile Art Lab, Italy. Dillon retired from her post as head of Department for Visual Arts at the University of Wolverhampton in February 2016. She has supervised three doctoral projects and externally examined four Ph.D. submissions. Dillon continues to engage in textiles research, pedagogic consultancy and external examination of courses.

of men' (100). The erotic is described in a manner that heightens awareness of the transfer of skin and substances into the cloth from the body that holds it unto death. It confronts issues of politics, sexual divide, repression and martyrdom, ending by stating that 'it is the bodies performance below and beside these clothes that drives their erotic power' (106).

Wintersgill and Bartlett provide a new perspective on how eroticism is evoked through narratives in *Blade Runner*. Optical and haptic metaphors in cloth deliver sexual undertones and erotic meaning. Cloth and skin again become merged in the relationship between Human and Replicant. 'Skinjobs' (Replicants) are named for their associations with prostitution and slavery and for 'the crafting of their skin by designers' (115).

In the final essay, Dormor conveys eroticism in the caress of cloth and its essentiality to the artist with a commitment to transpose purpose. References to the warp and weft go beyond construction and present a consciousness of the point 'where cloth finds skin, skin finds cloth, skin finds skin, and cloth finds cloth'. This association with interlacing 'mutual exchange and erotic charge' (131) effectively increases the reader's awareness of the erotic connections between mind and body, cloth and skin and aptly prepares us for the final section.

The erotic behaviour of cloth in movement, as presented in 'Part IV, The Performing Cloth', emphasizes the 'fluid narrative between place, time, cloth, and the body' (133). The section commences with an interrogation of Hogarth's analysis of the *line of beauty*. Williams effectively illustrates the *line of beauty* and the erotic power of cloth in motion when interpreted by a masterful performer. The Serpentine Dance of Loie Fuller, staged in the late nineteenth century, emphasizes the manipulation of vast swathes of fabric that formed the erotic connection between the viewer and the viewed, diminishing the presence of the physical body. The ability of the dancer to move the cloth to reveal and conceal by means of the serpentine grace of her movements emphasizes the erotic state.

Rideal, in her chapter, illustrates the implicit role that cloth plays in rousing the erotic through film. A series of examples including *Singing in the Rain* (1952), *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958), *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *MOI NON PLUS* (2015) explain the suggestive power of cloth in stimulating imagined 'soft-focused erotica as opposed to that of explicit hard porn' (156). Rideal recognizes that 'Cloth can create mood and atmosphere, and indicate scene shifts, but with *context* it acquires narrative purpose. Cloth itself can become eroticized but only in conjunction with color, form, sound and action' (148).

The final chapter concludes with a conversation between Millar and Masako Matsushita that explores the dancer's performance, *UN/DRESS*. In this instance the cloth is as connected to the body as it can be and Matsushita's ritual of dressing and undressing questions the role of clothing and body in contemporary society. Matsushita describes how she gives herself up 'ecstatically to the immersion and fusion of the my-body with the object-body' (19). The chapter is sensitively presented.

and lace, alongside the use of pubescent females as models, accentuates the different relationship that emerged at the time between eroticism and sculpture.

'Part II, Making and Remaking the Cloth', explores a range of erotic encounters and exchanges that occur through the hands of the maker. The section adeptly shifts from Robert's description of the reworking of an eighteenth-century French court sack back dress into Hingston's response to time spent in a machismo Western Australian mining environment, ending with an interview between Kettle and first generation punk/graphic designer, Malcolm Garrett.

Roberts asks, 'What qualities of material can seduce?'. In her essay, she describes her discovery of a collection of antique cloth that inspired a determination to retrieve the dress that once was. Through careful reconstruction and the retracing and reworking of each discovered stitch mark, Roberts repositions the past and becomes immersed in the emotions that her actions elicit. She describes the haptic awareness that evolved with the cloth, the dress and its owner in the final sentence of the essay, 'Through my own actions of touching and manipulating cloth in order to recreate the sack-back dress, the "real" knowledge of cloth and its powerful haptic presence was revealed' (71).

Hingston's essay depicts 'an embroiderer's *jouissance*' as a direct reaction to the unforgiving, masculine, hostile context of her environment. Hingston describes how the occupation of stitching by hand imposed a level of seclusion and intimacy that stimulated a closer association with her brutal circumstances. She considers her state of *jouissance* as a secret shame or perverse pleasure leading to the conception of disobedient stitches.

The third essay in the section explores the impact of Punk on mainstream attitudes to fetish and sexually orientated clothing. It signifies cloth and clothing as a means of questioning ideas of morality, illustrating how clothing in the punk years 'simultaneously ignored and exploited eroticism' (87) The chapter emphasizes the growth of customization and the need for punk devotees to make their own original versions. It argues that whilst 'Anti culture has become mainstream', the legacy of the movement demands that we continue to question complacency and suggests that 'the anarchic rebellion of punk is needed on the streets again, arguably now more than ever before' (92).

'Part III, The Alternative Cloth', stimulates the senses from the outset. The essays 'explore the cloth/body narrative through the haptic, the tangible, and the transgressive on the skin, in the skin, and under the skin' (95) The subliminal is aroused by amplifying awareness of the physicality of eroticism. Harper uses the banality of the shirt to describe highly charged, passionate emotions that are excessive and triumphant, yet dissolute and painful in equal measure. References to *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) effectively use the shirt to describe mutual love; lover for a lover, mother for a son and describes the 'birth cloth to love shirt to death shroud' (99). Further reference to the female shirt makers of the city of Derry heightens awareness of women's stitches that create 'shirts for the backs

carefully compiled a collection of twelve thought-provoking essays using their extensive combined knowledge in engaging an impressive network of contributors. The editors have assembled 'the first critical examination of the erotically charged relationship between the surface of the skin and the touch of cloth, exploring the ways in which textiles can seduce, conceal and reveal through their interactions with the body' (inside front cover) This is essential research that whilst proclaiming a western focus purposely leaves the door open for 'further research into ways in which other cultures negotiate the relationship between cloth and the erotic' (2) It offers a perspective on our relationship with skin and cloth that explicates the instinctive bond that the maker has with materials and establishes a scholarly and research context that is timely and essential.

The introduction provides collective and individual observations from Millar and Kettle. Millar, the weaver, eloquently expresses her relationship with thread and its interactions, describing the point when the maker releases the cloth to others, enabling separate traces to mingle and new narratives to emerge. Millar stresses the intended objective to 'discover what is the role of cloth in the expression of the erotic, when the cloth is in the hands of others' (3) As complementary to this, Kettle describes the sensuous activity of making and the arousal that occurs through process. She states that 'In the stitching of cloth I discover a creative sensual self' (5) The research is cited from a number of perspectives and although difficult to accomplish, the editors have produced a volume that cannot fail to delight.

The book splits into 'four sections on representation, design, otherness, and performance' (inside front cover) that consider how eroticism is manifest in cloth from its historical, social, cultural and physical associations. The 52 beautiful colour illustrations vividly satisfy the curiosity aroused by the text. This anticipation is further consolidated by the insertion of seductive, short quotes by way of an introduction to each essay.

'Part 1, The Representation of Cloth', explores the exchange between the erotic in art and its impact on practice. 'They present the fetishistic nature of self display, of exhibitionism and of longing and desire' (23) A thoughtfully considered initial section explores memory and practice through associations with painting, film and sculpture, setting a foundation for recurring themes in following chapters. Maddock and Hurlestone describe their personal, elusive encounters with art and film and describe how their encounters are manifest in their textiles. The impact on their own practice is instantly recognizable. Their frankness and honesty as they describe their experiences resonate intensely, magnifying personal obsessions and stimulating an acute appreciation of past experience.

Jones discusses her preoccupation with mid-nineteenth-century Italian marble and concern over its historical representation. She highlights the change from 'ideal classicism to a new realism', and argues that 'one of the most transgressive aspects of this change is the representation of the everyday' (41) The reader is drawn to freshly contemplate detail in the sculptures, to rethink the rendition of clothing rather than cloth. This new representation of garment construction, stitch, folds, gathers