

Fifties, fashion and emerging feminism [a contemporary response]

Iconic **John French** prints, from the V&A Archive, alongside highlights from the **Museum and Study Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design**, bespoke visualisations by **FABRIC**, work by **WESSIELING** and **Carole Evans** plus new commissions by artists **Alice Angus** of Proboscis with **Fee Doran (aka Mrs Jones)** and **Freddie Robins** responding to the world of fashion.

26 May – 21 September, 2011

Private View: Wednesday, 25 May, 6 - 8.15 pm

Collyer Bristow Gallery, 4 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4TF

John French (1907-1966) created some of the most iconic photographic images in British fashion. Developing techniques that highlighted contrast, to work with the new mass media printing of images in newspapers, he secured fashion imagery a consistent place on the front page. In the early 1950s his jauntily posed models reflected the mood of buoyant confidence being promoted and spun by the British government. The 1951 Festival of Britain provided post-war Britain a conduit to re-secure its international standing through a celebration of new technologies, science and culture.

At the same time women, who had been essential to the war effort, were expected to return to the home and rebuild family life. 2011 marks 60 years since the Festival of Britain. Looking at the 1950's as a starting point this exhibition considers the implications of those changing times, including the beginnings of feminism. The Museum and Study Collection at Central St Martins holds printed fabrics and items that document the beginning of women becoming stakeholders and gaining creative freedom within the fashion and textile design worlds.

Artists Freddie Robins and Alice Angus have been invited to respond to the impact and images of photographer John French, the Festival of Britain and the emerging shoots of feminism, with access to the Central St Martins College of Art Museum and Study Collection to support their research. The exhibition navigates a narrative around the 1950's burgeoning optimism in the face of drastic economic times, and an irreversible societal shift towards feminism stemming from the tensions of women returning to the home having been "equals" during the war.

Freddie Robins is known for her extraordinary textile works that manipulate material and imagery in subversive narratives. Through a new work commissioned for the exhibition Robins explores the flip side of the story being projected through the periscope of the Festival of Britain. "The stereotypical image of the fifties is of a modern, clean world where glamorous women flit around homes filled with contemporary, colourful design by the likes of Lucienne Day. The truth for most women was quite different. The shadow of the war still loomed,

rationing for textiles and clothing hadn't ended until 1949" (FR). This piece, a quiet, unassuming cupboard, contains the ghosts of that time. "He's behind you", is a reflection on those other stories that came out of the 50's that precipitated the yearning desire for sexual liberation synonymous with the following decades.

Alice Angus creates projects in response to a particular location, community or question and, similarly to Robin's, is interested in the relationship between the 'myth' and the lived experience. For this exhibition she is collaborating with the designer Fee Doran (aka Mrs Jones) to create garments from her works on paper that have been printed onto fabric. The fabric and garments reflect the idealised glamour of 50s fashion against the experience of everyday life, and incorporate traces of embroidery and snippets of conversation sewn into folds, pleats and hems - past oral histories are captured and archived, albeit invisible to the eye.

Carole Evans and WESSIELING's work both look at style and the fashion industry from a contemporary perspective that resonates across the decades. Evans shows a selection of works from her series 'Retro Girls'; portraits of women who dress in the style of the 1940's and 50's. Despite being 21st century women: ambitious, driven, and dedicated to their careers, they make the effort to put their hair in curlers and recreate the look of the glamorous 50's housewife every day. These women are part of a specific sub-culture which has become a lifestyle choice: their clothes are originals from the era or vintage inspired, sourced from vintage shops and eBay. Many do this as a conscious comment against mass production in fashion and the throw away culture of the 21st century. The tension in these images, where mid-century meets the present day suggests an ambivalence with the idealised, spun notion of the 50's and what we know to be the reality.

Placed within the context of the Festival of Britain WESSIELING's 'Fashion Chess' offers up an intriguing conversation around the complex economic and cultural relationships between modern cities that have developed over time. The cultural capital of fashion is a continual thread in her work. These stunning chess tables in high gloss lacquer, whose chess pieces are iconic buildings of fashion capitals positioned as if in play in a chess match present Modernity, East V West and a struggle for power. They convey the hierarchical system and competition between fashion cities, mingling with troops of mannequins. The work is a visual metaphor for cities at war and globalisation within the fashion and textile industries.

Bringing a contemporary twist via the latest technological research FABRIC (Fashion and Apparel Browsing for Inspirational Content) provides a background context to the unfolding fashion and print design narrative through a visual catalogue of four historical collections of print, textile and style: the entire John French archive held at the V&A Museum; garments across the centuries from the V&A collection and 1950's textiles and wallpapers from the Liberty archives.

Editors notes:

Alice Angus (www.proboscis.org.uk/about/people/alice-angus) is an artist and Co Director of Proboscis (with Giles Lane), an artist led organisation exploring the intersections of art,

community, knowledge, heritage and technology. Her work crosses art, illustration and design and recently work includes textiles and fabric design. Her process engages the social, cultural, natural histories and heritage of places. Projects include *As It Comes* (2010), about the heritage of trade in Lancaster; *In Good Heart* (2010) works on the idea and history of 'Farm'; *100 Views of Worthing Pier: Tall Tales, Ghosts and Imaginings* (2010) on the fiction and history of Worthing Pier; *Sutton Grapevine* (2008/9) looking at online and offline space in a rural village; *Being in Common* (2008) on the notion of common space; and *Perception Peterborough* (2008) a regeneration visioning project.

Fee Doran : (www.mrsj.co.uk) aka Mrs Jones, is one of Britain's most colourful, eclectic and creative individuals. Famed for her pop star creations Fee has worked with everyone from Giles Deacon to Kylie ('Can't get you out of my Head' white hooded catsuit), Goldfrapp, Madonna, Scissor Sisters, The Killers, Oxfam and Fred Perry.

Over Years specialising in the re-use and transformation of garments, the Mrs Jones label was born. Mrs Jones' ability to transform any garment, product or space into something new and highly desirable has been used in collaborations with brands, artists, stylists and designers around the world.

Carole Evans (www.caroleevans.co.uk) graduated from an MA in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster in 2007. Since then, she has continued to work on her own personal projects, while also working as Gallery Coordinator at Photofusion in Brixton, where she curates exhibitions and organises events. Carole is the co-owner of an original black and white chemical photobooth, and collects old vintage cameras, such as polaroids, and old high street studio photographs.

Fashion and Apparel Browsing for Inspirational Content (FABRIC) is a UK Technology Strategy Board-funded research project that is developing innovative computer software to browse image collections. This technology is being evaluated with images from the Victoria and Albert Museum for cultural heritage applications and from Liberty Art Fabrics for design inspiration within the textile sector. Visualizations of image collections using Computer Vision & Machine Learning are developed by the School of Computing, University of Dundee. Desktop and mobile applications are developed by System Simulation Ltd. Additional information may be obtained from: fabric@computing.dundee.ac.uk.

Freddie Robins has an extensive studio and exhibiting practice. In 2007 she exhibited in *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting* (Museum of Arts & Design, New York) and *Crimes of Omission* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, USA as well as a solo exhibition, *Body, Nobody, Somebody* (The West Norway Museum of Decorative Art, Bergen, Norway). Her work is in the public collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Crafts Council, Nottingham Castle Museum and Aberdeen Art Gallery. is also Tutor in Mixed Media at the Royal College of Art, London and is currently developing a new body of work funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council). (www.freddieRobins.com)

WESSIELING (www.WESSIELING.com) has exhibited widely in UK and internationally including in *China Through The Looking Glass* (Friday Late at the V & A Museum curated by Eliza Gluckman, January 2011); *Nothing Comes Between Me and My Calvins* (Pitzhanger Manor Gallery and House, 2010-11) and *Sweatshop* with Lisa Cheung, part of *Human Cargo* (Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2007). She appears in several publications including

Mapping Fashion, Cities, Identities and the World Fashion Conquest by Wessie Ling and Christian Huck, *The Measure* by Louise Clark and her work has been reviewed in Art Monthly, Textile Asia, New Weekly, LIFE and Lifestyle Magazines. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London.