



Black Bossamer

Black Gossamer

November 17, 2011 – February 11, 2012

Glass Curtain Gallery
Columbia College Chicago
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DEPS Mission Statement

The Department of Exhibition and Performance Spaces (DEPS) is the student-centered galleries and venues of Columbia College Chicago. An extension of the classroom, DEPS fosters vibrant environments for students to interact, exchange ideas, view and showcase bodies of work within the larger urban community. The spaces provide students from every discipline myriad opportunities to gain essential, hands-on experience, stimulating artistic expression and professional development through collaboration.

DEPS incorporates the College's curriculum by partnering with academic departments and centers, the urban community and professionals in all fields, merging formal pedagogy with each student's individual learning path. In our commitment to produce the most innovative, distinguished and accessible programs, DEPS addresses contemporary issues concerning the diversity of thought, values and culture.



Curator's Statement

Camille Morgan

Clothing and textiles have long transformed from a basic need to an expression of self, tacitly signifying deep-set beliefs, pulling from memory (both tactile and cognitive), cementing our perceived social status, and declaring anything from gender to mood. *Black Gossamer* showcases eight black contemporary artists who use and draw inspiration from fashion to explore and uncover recent revolutions in black identity – even challenging the very concept of the “black artist.”

While not all of the artists' works deal directly with fashion or the fashion industry, we see the various ways the marginalized body must navigate through today's society under the overarching theme of fashion. Through a variety of artistic mediums, the works bridge motifs between varying areas of the industry, including home furnishing and apparel textiles to fashion magazines, branding, and imagined retail consumption scenarios. In this framework, layers of meaning inform ideas on class and power, economics, beauty dysmorphia, and gender envy. Overall, there is a sense that the socially-constructed parameters of black identity are expanding and evolving.

The present is arguably the most freestyle moment people of color have ever had with regard to how they express themselves through dress. In Monica Miller's accompanying essay we learn that these windows in time are historically cyclical and that black style can be a powerful indicator of an entire culture's psyche. Her discussion of black people's impetus towards dandyism is fascinating as it illustrates the unwavering societal expectation to perform, explain and react to the prevailing construct of Blackness.¹ Together, the exhibiting artists further the conversation through their deft handling of this gossamer identity – creating a gauzy yet substantial fabric just sheer enough to be revealing.

¹ Hall, Stuart, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage Publication Ltd., 1997. 233-290.



"Fix up, look smart"

by Monica L. Miller

Black people are known for "stylin' out," dressing to the nines, showing their sartorial stuff, especially when the occasion calls for it and, more tellingly, often when the occasion does not. In contemporary culture, this "stylin' out" takes a number of forms and happens in multiple locations, from the high style seen at hip-hop fashion mogul Sean "Diddy" Combs' famous "White Parties" in the Hamptons, to any black church on Easter Sunday, to the locker room after the Superbowl championship, when a winning player positions an oversize baseball cap 45 degrees off center on his head before the television camera turns to him. In all of these situations, different signals are being sent about how each dresser sees himself and how he wants to be seen by others. For Diddy, wearing an icy-white haute couture Valentino suit after a lifetime in track suits and sneakers signifies his success as a businessman and arrival on an exclusive social scene. Yet, in the black entertainment industry, some form of dandyism or play with costume and couture has always been de rigueur. For those attending church services, a smart three-piece suit, a hat, gloves, maybe even a pocket square communicates self-respect, community pride and an appreciation of the joyful solemnity of the occasion. The spiritual has always had a sartorial dimension for black people in America, as many slaves were allowed to dress in their finest clothes but once a week, on Sunday. For the football player, donning the outsized baseball hat modified out of its functionality to become a fashion accessory, at once establishes individuality within a larger group of teammates and belonging to an urban, edgy subgroup of black athletes who, along with hip-hop and rap musicians, have been instrumental in transforming sports clothing into a billion-dollar fashion industry. In each of these cases of celebrities and ordinary people, the dandyism practiced is both personal and political, about individual image and group regard, and begs to be read from both an intra-racial and inter-racial perspective. "Stylin' out," like any performative act, needs an actor and an audience; this audience can be anything from the self in a mirror to fellow strollers on Harlem's 125th Street to the international media. The messages sent out by the black well-dressed must be interpreted by their viewers; black dandyism takes on meaning as black style communicates moments of mobility and fixity, depending on who is looking.

While we are all familiar with contemporary examples of black high style (particularly black urban style), we are not as familiar with the history of black dandyism, a history that begins in part in the contact between Africans and Europeans that initiated the trade in slaves. Young black boys were sometimes acquired as luxury items and used in ostentatious displays of wealth, other blacks, while laboring on other shores, found themselves in a very different relationship to adornment. The 1732 travel journal of William High Grove records a scene of contact in Virginia in which clothing (or a lack thereof) communicates a great deal about status:



"The men are stowed before the foremast, the Boys between that and the main mast, the Girls next, and the grown Women behind the Misen. The Boyes and Girles [were] all stark naked: so Were the greatest part of the Men and Women. Some had beads about their necks, arms, and Wasts, and a ragg or Piece of Leather the bigness of a fig Leafe. And I saw a Woman [who had] Come Aboard to Examine the Limbs and soundness of some she seemed to Choose. Dr. Dixon bought 8 men and 2 women and bought them on shore with us, all stark naked. But when [we had] come home [they] had Coarse Shirts and afterwards Drawers given [to] them." ¹

While the diary entry hardly seems anticipatory of any contemporary moment of black sartorial agency or stylin' out, it does, in fact, contain important elements that transform degrading aspects of this scene into a story of black dandy origins less obvious than, but similar to, that of the dandified blacks depicted in paintings of the elite. "Some had beads about their necks, arms, and Wasts, and a ragg or Piece of Leather the bigness of a fig Leafe"; while not clothing proper, these pieces of jewelry and other accessories hold within them the power of memory, of a place of autonomy as the only material retention from former lives in Africa. It is small objects like these, precious or shiny bits like beads and ribbons, that slaves often collected and used to augment their standard issue "Coarse Shirts and ... Drawers" in gestures of memory, individuality, and subversion.

The accumulation of objects of personal adornment and the nature of their display mattered to those as materially deprived as were African captives. This is as true for those who were deliberately dressed in silks and turbans, whose challenge was to inhabit the clothing in their own way, as for those who were much more humbly attired, who used clothing as a process of remembrance and as a mode of distinction (and symbolic and sometimes actual escape from bondage) in their new environment. That the procurement of fine clothing and accessories could be important to African captives is evidenced by the necessity of a "traveling wardrobe" to those who absconded. In 1769 Virginia, a mulatto man named Joe, a "genteel and active Fellow," who "has always been kept as a Gentleman's waiting Man, his Hair comb'd very nicely, [who] can write a good Hand," left his master on a fine horse with "a large bundle of Cloaths and other things with him," including, "a blue over coat and Breeches, a Lead colour'd Cloth Coat and Vest, with Metal Buttons, and Silver Lac'd Hat, several summer vests, white Shirts and Stockings, of which some are silk." Clad in such finery, Joe rode toward the shore, where, as he told some people he met on his journey, he hoped to get a ship to London and live as a free man.² Here, we see that dress and fashion are practically and symbolically important to a slave's sense of individuality and liberty; those captives described as "remarkably fond of dress," often style out to signal or to reach their own imperatives.³ As the Atlantic began to connect black and white in unprecedented ways, black people expressed their own sense of style in relation to that which they perceived was operating in the European societies with which they



traded or in which they lived. On the backs of those on the African coast and those imported into America and England, a negotiation of identity was taking place, a visual and visible sign of how Africans cast into a diaspora would have to construct their identities literally and materially.

When theorizing about black popular culture, Stuart Hall asks us to notice “how, within the black repertoire, style— which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating on the pill—has become itself the subject of what is going on...think of how these cultures have used the body— as if it was, and often it was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.”⁴ By analyzing manifestations of black dandyism from Enlightenment England to the contemporary art worlds in New York and London, we can see that the vicissitudes of black style result less from fashion or the simple turn from consumption-fueled trend to trend and more from the constant dialectic between both black and white efforts at black representation and intra-racial or intra-black conversations about self and racial identity and representation. As such, black dandyism images survival as well as a transcendence of the overwrought debate about stereotypes versus more “positive” images, stylized versus self-styled images, often simultaneously. The impossibility of defining black dandyism as a wholly or completely transformative act should not lead to conceptions of its failure as a strategy of identity formation; rather, its status as a ubiquitous and popular performance full of ambivalence should teach us about the myriad contexts in which black identity formation takes place, should visualize the limitations that black people must negotiate and recombine as part of the act of self-definition. When black people use the body as cultural capital and clothing as a necessary but unstable currency of self-worth, a dandy’s style reveals the value of “blackness” in a global market of identity formation in which, at different times and in different places, the cost of embodying or performing “blackness” can be both too cheap and too dear.

From the Introduction to *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, Monica Miller. Copyright 2009, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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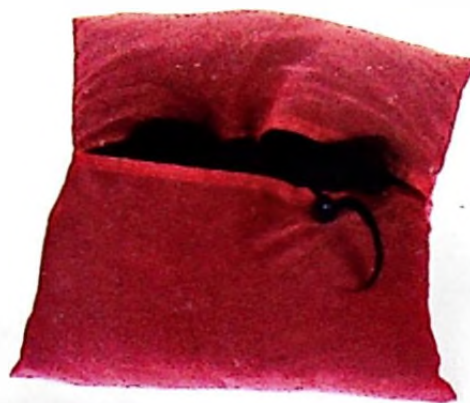
¹ “Virginia in 1732. The Travel Journal of William Hugh Grove,” eds. Gregory A. Stiverson and Patrick H. Butler III, quoted in Baumgarten, “Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia,” 28.

² “Runaway Slave Advertisements”, compiled by Windley, 78.

³ Ibid, 167.

⁴ Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in *Black Popular Culture*?” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, 27.

Myra Greene, *Untitled* (pillow from the *Hairy Projects series*), 2001, mixed media



In her *Hairy Pillows* series, **Myra Greene** stuffs black women's hair into decorative throw pillows of various sizes and fabrications. Some cascade with braided tendrils working as "fringe," while others are more discreet, letting only a plastic hair-tied ponytail peek through the split casing. "The pillows range from the tidy and styled to the overt and unruly, mimicking the everyday states of black hair," Greene notes.¹ These "good vs. bad" hair issues are hidden and hideous, yet sickly comforting in their perpetuity – they are pillows, after all. Greene explains that she created these objects during an artistic endeavor to settle the hair debate for herself, although she surmises that the "Wannabe/Jiggaboo" dance-off scene from Spike Lee's *School Daze* does it best.²

¹ Greene, Myra. Artist's website. 27 Oct. 2011.

² Greene, Myra. Personal interview. 28 Sept. 2011.



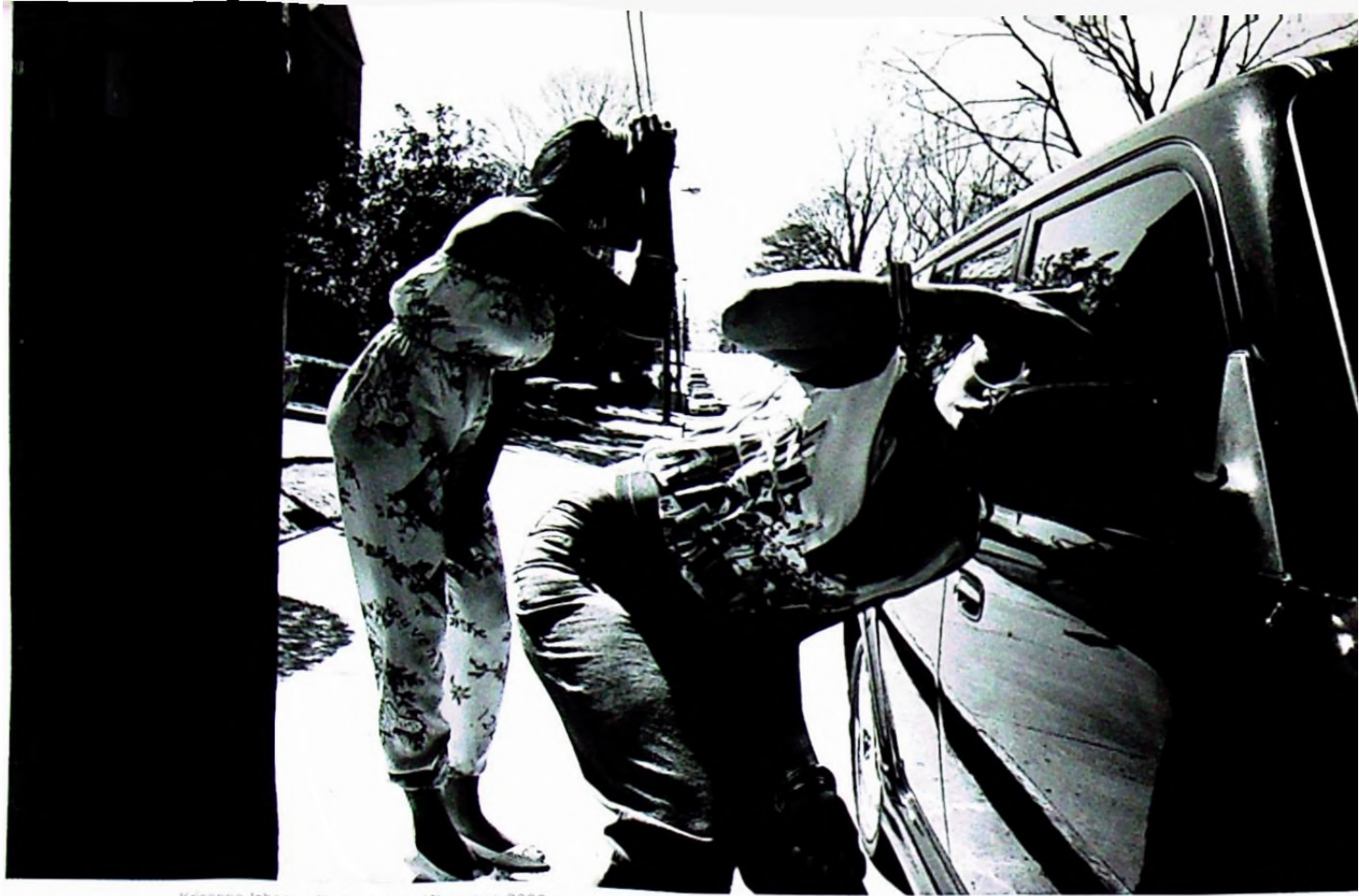


Sheila Bridges. *Harlem Toile de Jouy*, 2010, hand screened paper

Textile and interior designer, **Sheila Bridges**, re-imagines scenes from American slavery as idyllic vignettes in her *Harlem Toile de Jouy* wallpaper. "Idyllic" and "slavery" are not terms frequently used together, however, Sheila is winking a dark eye at the audience. "...I created *Harlem Toile de Jouy* initially as a wall covering [for my own home] and later as a fabric to thread my own satirical story that lampoons some of the stereotypes deeply woven into the African-American experience."³ As a textile design popularized in 18th century France, it is amazing to see something so staidly European expropriated to tell a new story to a modern audience. It is especially sobering to realize that at the height of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, toile was in its heyday - literally in the drawing rooms of those who perpetuated it.

³ Bridges, Sheila. Artist's website. 20 Sept. 2011.





Krisanne Johnson, *Untitled (from ATL series)*, 2008, digital pigment print



Krisanne Johnson, *Untitled (from ATL series)*, 2008, digital pigment print



Krisanne Johnson, *Untitled (from ATL series)*, 2008, digital pigment print



Krisanne Johnson's ATL series exists in an imaginary world, or rather a world the fashion industry neglects to depict. First published in *FADER Magazine* and later shown in the International Center for Photography's 2009 *Fashion in Photography Now* exhibit, this work provides a rare occasion to see a high-end fashion spread consisting purely of women of color. This series plays with context and expectations by capturing the easy exuberance of black southern college students partying and hanging out in designer garb ranging from Betsey Johnson and John Galliano to Fred Perry and Just Cavalli. At once delightful, surprising and raw - it vibrates with possibility. As a documentary photographer, Johnson focuses on African cultures and African Americans living in the United States. She continues to break barriers by being the only white artist in this exhibit - forcing us to consider the ambiguity inherent in our definition of the "black artist."



In her *Pin-Ups* series, Kenyan artist **Wangechi Mutu** imagines a Frankenstein-future quartet of brown girls fashioned by a slavish adherence to beauty fads: collagen-plump lips and long blonde hair extensions today; amputated limbs and reptilian tails tomorrow. In a culture obsessed with laser-and-scalpel carved beauty, her visions rendered in vibrant watercolor and collage comment on the extreme lengths people will go to attain "true beauty." Although Mutu does not necessarily see her works as being about fashion, related elements (magazine clippings, fashion poses, rich fabric-like canvases) run through them. Historically, the "pin-up girl" was an attractive female model or starlet created to fulfill the playful yet sexual desire of the male gaze. Still pin-ups of color have rarely been featured in mainstream outlets. So, in a time when *Psychology Today* can publish "scientific" data that find black women to be the least physically attractive when compared to women of other races, Mutu's grinning monsters viciously give the people what they don't want.⁴

⁴ Kanazawa, Satoshi. "Why are Black Women Less Physically Attractive than Other Women?" *Psychology Today*, 15 May 2011 [online blog posting]. Special Note: One day after this article was published it was removed from the *Psychology Today* website after overwhelming contestation from readers. To read more about the debacle and excerpts from the original post visit: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/between-the-lines/201105/beauty-may-be-in-eye-beholder-eyes-see-what-culture-socializes>



Wangechi Mutu. *Untitled (from Pin Up No. M)*, 2001. gouache, watercolor, ink, graphite, and cut paper collage on paper



Wangechi Mutu. *Untitled (from Pin Up No. O)*, 2001. gouache, watercolor, ink, graphite, and cut paper collage on paper



Marlon Griffith, LOUIS (from the Powder Box School Girl Series, 2009, digital print on gator board)



Marlon Griffith, BLOSSOM (from the Powder Box School Girl Series, 2009, digital print on gator board)



Marlon Griffith, TRIBAL (from the Powder Box School Girl Series, 2009, digital print on gator board)

In his ongoing *Powder Box School Girl* series, **Marlon Griffith** applies ephemeral patterns to the neck and chest of his model. Through careful application of handcrafted stencils, he marks the model's water-dampened skin with white cosmetic powder – a trick women in the Caribbean use to stay cool and dry in the high heat of the region. During our interview, Griffith explains that in his native Trinidad the only people who continue this powdering tradition are those from the poorer or working classes – a callback to their long colonial history which only spurs contempt from the wealthier factions. The most powerful pattern in this series is also the most recognizable – Louis Vuitton's iconic latticed LV branding. For Griffith, the luxury brand stencil democratizes conspicuous fashion consumption and becomes a way for the socially disenfranchised to empower themselves.⁵

⁵ Griffith, Marlon. Personal interview. 9 Jun. 2011.



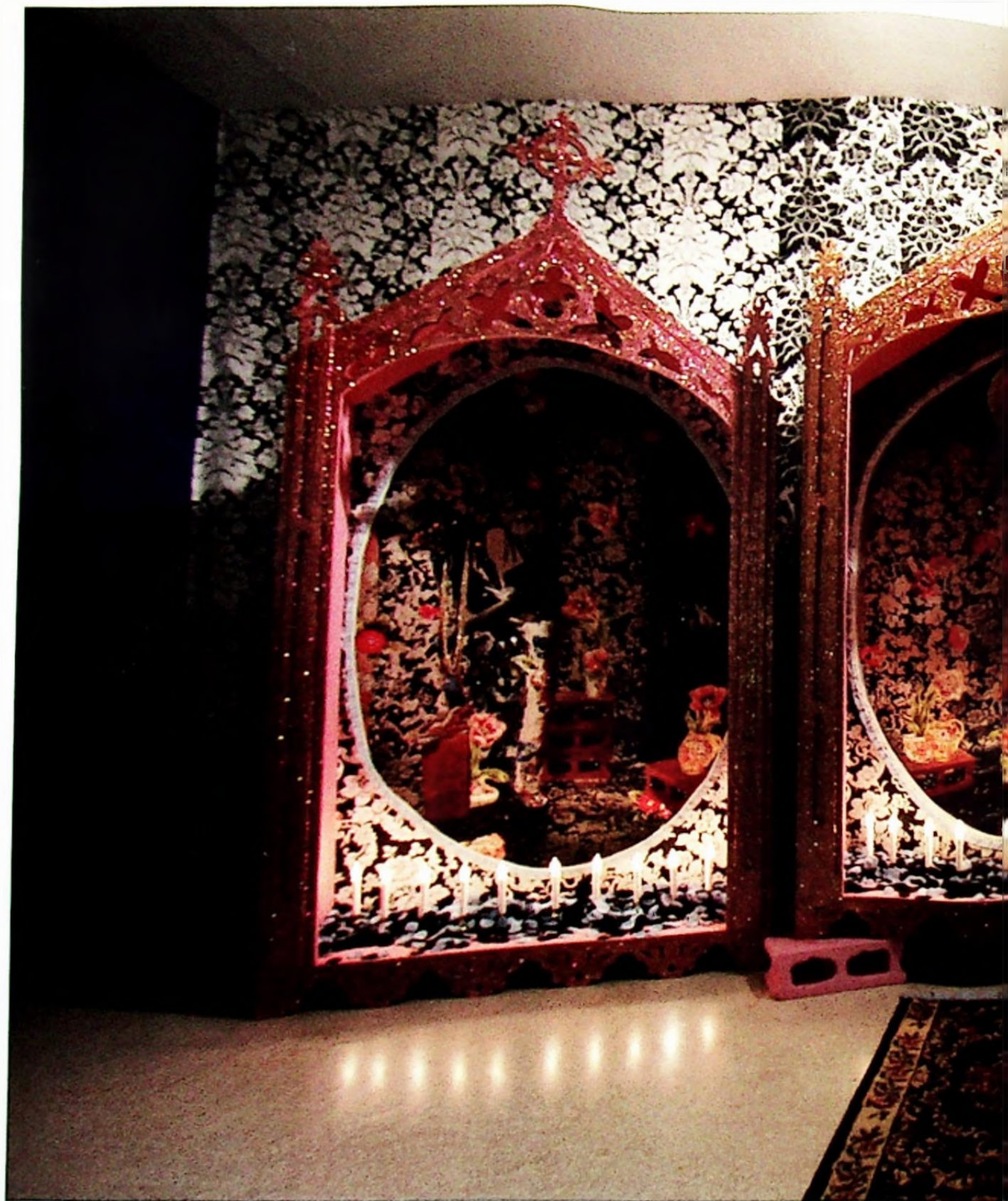
Chameleon, Aisha Bell's ongoing mixed media installation is aptly named – referencing the lizard that can cloud his skin with any color necessary to survive. Composed of various textiles in colorful patterns and presented in the silhouette of a kneeling woman, we begin to visually trace the complexities inherent in one person or culture. "This piece is about being true to and acknowledging one's many selves and many voices. Once we acknowledge this we discover there is power there," Bell notes.⁶ Phrases such as "keep it real" are often bandied about, sometimes with an undercurrent of contempt, as friendly warning, or as a way to defend oneself. Bell hopes to eliminate this static viewpoint by upholding the "real" as being fluid, freeing us from stereotypes and assumptions imposed daily.

⁶ Bell, Aisha. Personal interview. 20 Jun. 2011.



Aisha Bell, *Chameleon*, 2009 (ongoing). clay, fabric, tempera, and ink





First shown during the 2010 Biennial at the National Gallery of Jamaica, **Ebony G. Patterson's** installation, *Christ + Co, (Gonzales' Christ Revised and Extended)*, is worthy of worship. Upon entering the space, a triptych of glitter-bright shrines welcomes the viewer depicting three woven scenes of decadence. The story told in the jacquard-loomed tapestries and flashy accoutrements is that of Dancehall. In this poplar music form marked by its adherence to dance and reggae, a subculture of working-class men and women revel in cutting-edge fashions, slang, and gender-bending practices. As Patterson explains, "...Dancehall is the belly of Jamaican society that reaffirms, reflects and assigns labels as it relates to social norms or behaviors deemed deviant within Jamaican society..."¹ *Christ + Co* delves into what the artist calls "bling culture" and "camp-machismo" to confront the oft-lyrical hypocrisy of Dancehall music.

¹ Patterson, Ebony G. Artist statement. 6 Jul. 2011.





Ebony G. Patterson, *Christ + Co* (Gonzales' *Christ Revised and Extended*), 2010, mixed media





Kalup Linzy. *Sampled and LeftOva/Fuck U*. 2009. digital video. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

In the spirit of promotion, performance artist **Kalup Linzy** lent his artistic vision to fashion design team Proenza Schouler to help present their 2009 Resort Runway Collection in Florence, Italy. *Sampled and LeftOva/Fuck U* begins with Linzy slowly descending a spiral staircase dressed in a woman's leotard, crooning about the pain of scorned love. Later we see the subject of his musical lament. The scorned woman and sales girl (played by supermodel Liya Kebede) is put in the uncomfortable position of assisting her lost love's new girlfriend (played by indie-fashion icon, Chloë Sevigny). The subsequent scene at a fancy garden party allows Linzy and others to express the pain of these betrayals to the rhythm of a drum machine. Although black cross-dressing men are not Proenza Schouler's target market, their customer would "get" this bizarrely surreal video-art, fostering the best kind of brand loyalty – exclusivity.





Thanks and Acknowledgements

Thank you...

To all the artists for their vision and talent.

To guest essayist Monica Miller for her scholarship of fashion theory.

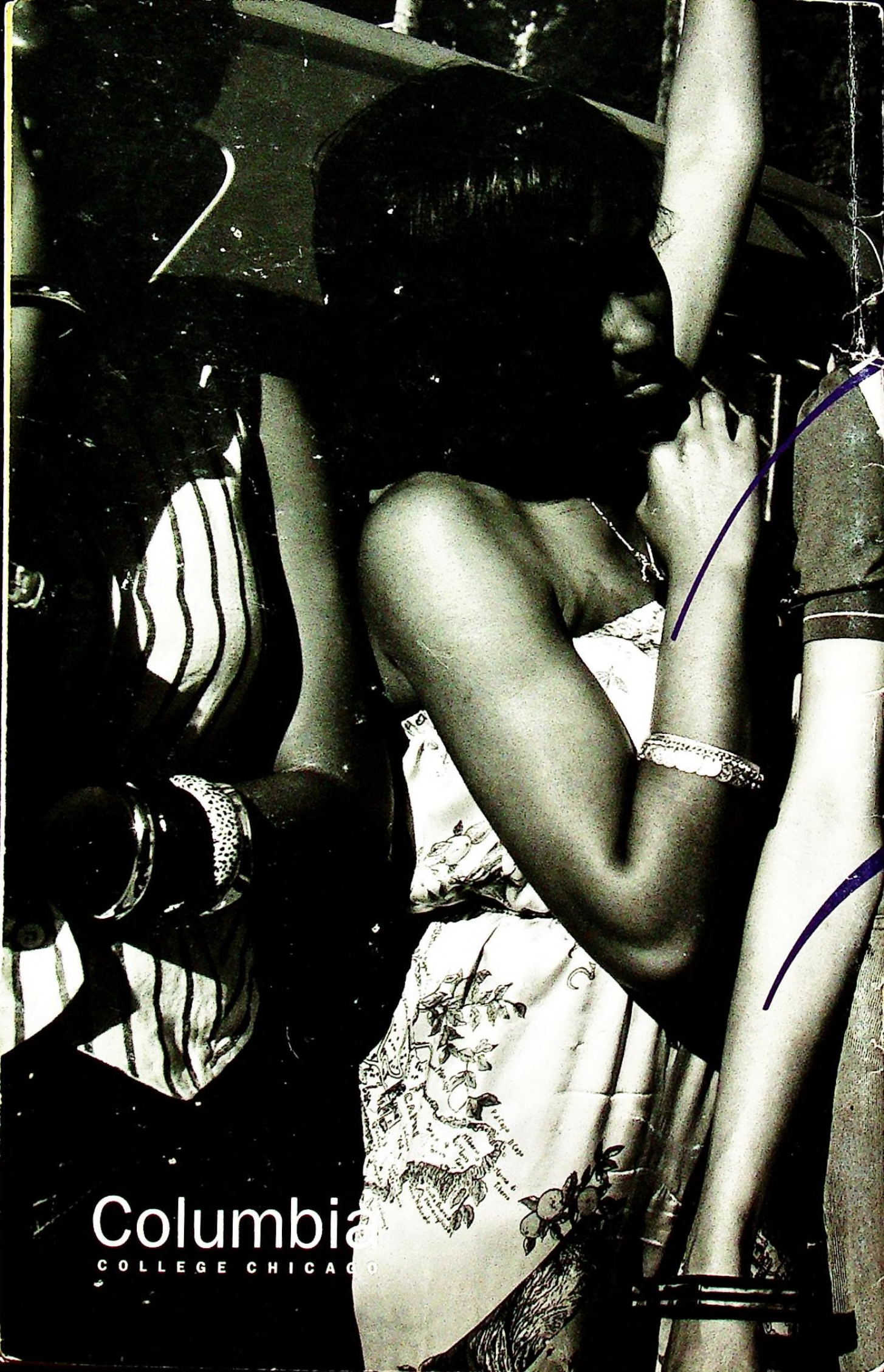
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