

Modern Japanese fashion (and other textiles) at the Powerhouse



Fashion garments in progress and a dummy, a blank canvas for an exciting new outfit

Whenever I visit the Powerhouse Museum in Darling Harbour, Sydney, I always find some interesting textiles or clothing on display, and my last visit on Friday 30 September was no exception. There was not one but three textile-related events.

The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan was an inspired (and inspirational) exhibition of clothing by 19 Japanese designers. Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons are perhaps the best known, but it was the work by the younger generation of designers that captivated me: the imaginative (and probably unwearable) shoes made by Tokio Kumagai from the plastic ‘fake food’ found in the display windows of Japanese restaurants; Hiroaki Ohya’s ‘Wizard of Jeanz’ series of books that transform into amazing clothing; the ‘vending machine’ skirt of Aya Tsukioka for women who want to visit the city incognito; and the modern-art-looking framed shirt and dress of Shinichiro Arakawa—just remove from the frame and wear.

The innovative fabrics displayed separately were small in number but exciting in their use of unusual materials and treatments. I wish there were more of them, but there were enough new ideas or variations on current textile arts techniques to make me wonder ‘what if I did...?’. The most striking aspect was the ‘high fashion’ look of the fabrics, especially those that used techniques with which we are very familiar and which are usually treated as craft rather than fashion.

Many of the fashions are on loan from the Kyoto Costume Institute, so see the exhibition while it is here if you can—it ends on 29 January. The catalogue, too, is worth buying as the photographs are superb. For more information, see the website at www.powerhousemuseum.com.

An event held in association with the exhibition was the **Tokyo Recycle Project #15**. The team of ‘recyclers’, led by Japanese designer Masahiro Nakagawa, recycled clients’ favourite, but worn or outdated, clothing into new fashion garments.

Before the event, the Powerhouse Museum asked members of the public to bring along their clothes for recycling—for a fee, of course. The team set themselves up in a temporary workroom in the museum, with large cutting tables, sewing machines, dummies and all the other paraphernalia of the fashion studio. It must have been like working in a goldfish bowl, though, as museum-goers could sit and watch the garments take shape.

This ‘Recycouture’ was a rather lengthy process. I watched a client being extensively interviewed: what she liked to wear; what events she enjoyed; what the original worn clothes meant to her; and her lifestyle, hobbies and interests.

The designer planned the new garment on the dummy, using the clothing as is or after being carefully cut or unpicked. Each design was original, and specific to the particular client, her lifestyle and interests. Other members of the team, fashion design students from a local Sydney TAFE, sewed the garments—it must have been a wonderful opportunity to work with an experienced designer.

The finished garments on display were unmistakably high fashion, with a distinctive Japanese edge. The team hoped to end the Tokyo Recycle Project #15 by holding a fashion parade the following weekend, with clients modelling the recycouture clothes created especially for them.

Another exhibition, unrelated to the Japanese exhibitions, was **Morris & Co**. This travelling exhibition from the Art Gallery of South Australia showcased the textiles, books and furniture of William Morris, his daughter and others who subscribed to his ideas and worked in his workshop.

It was fascinating to see the patterns, so familiar to me from books and printed Liberty cottons, in the original tapestries, curtains, chair-covers and wallpapers.

The exhibition has now finished, but, as it is a travelling exhibition, may be on show at another museum in the future.

I would like to thank the staff of the Powerhouse Museum and the designer at the Tokyo Recycle Project #15 for allowing me to take photographs. – Ann Parkinson