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Nathalie Du Pasquier

Konstantin Grcic constructs the future. The new Medici. Remembering Lina Bo Bardi. The importance of colour. Boudicca reshapes couture. An essay on forests and design. Azzedine Alaïa on the legacy of Charles James.



Boudicca's Liquid Games

The experimental fashion studio's latest work is a multimedia installation as challenging and singular as its abstract couture.

WORDS Felix Chabluk Smith
PHOTOS Ben Ingham and Boudicca

Boudicca's spring/summer 2007 Couture 01 collection was shown at the Romanian Embassy in Paris. Boudicca was the first independent British label to become a guest member of the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris. PHOTO Ben Ingham



¹The Stanley Picker Gallery is part of the Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture at Kingston University, Greater London.

“I don’t want to be liked by a hundred people, I want to be loved by one,” says Zowie Broach. It is a contrary stance in a culture where success is increasingly measured by Twitter followers, Instagram comments, Tumblr reblogs and Facebook likes. “I mean, how many people have even gone there?”

“There” is a tiny, leaf-shaped island in the middle of the Hogsmill River, Kingston upon Thames, where the Stanley Picker Gallery¹ stands like the cabin of an ark. Sliced in two by the sharp prow of the island, the water is the colour of caffè latte and swollen after a winter of heavy rain. The island is lush and green on a saturated day in mid-February, but despite the daffodils sprouting through the grass there is a smell of rot.

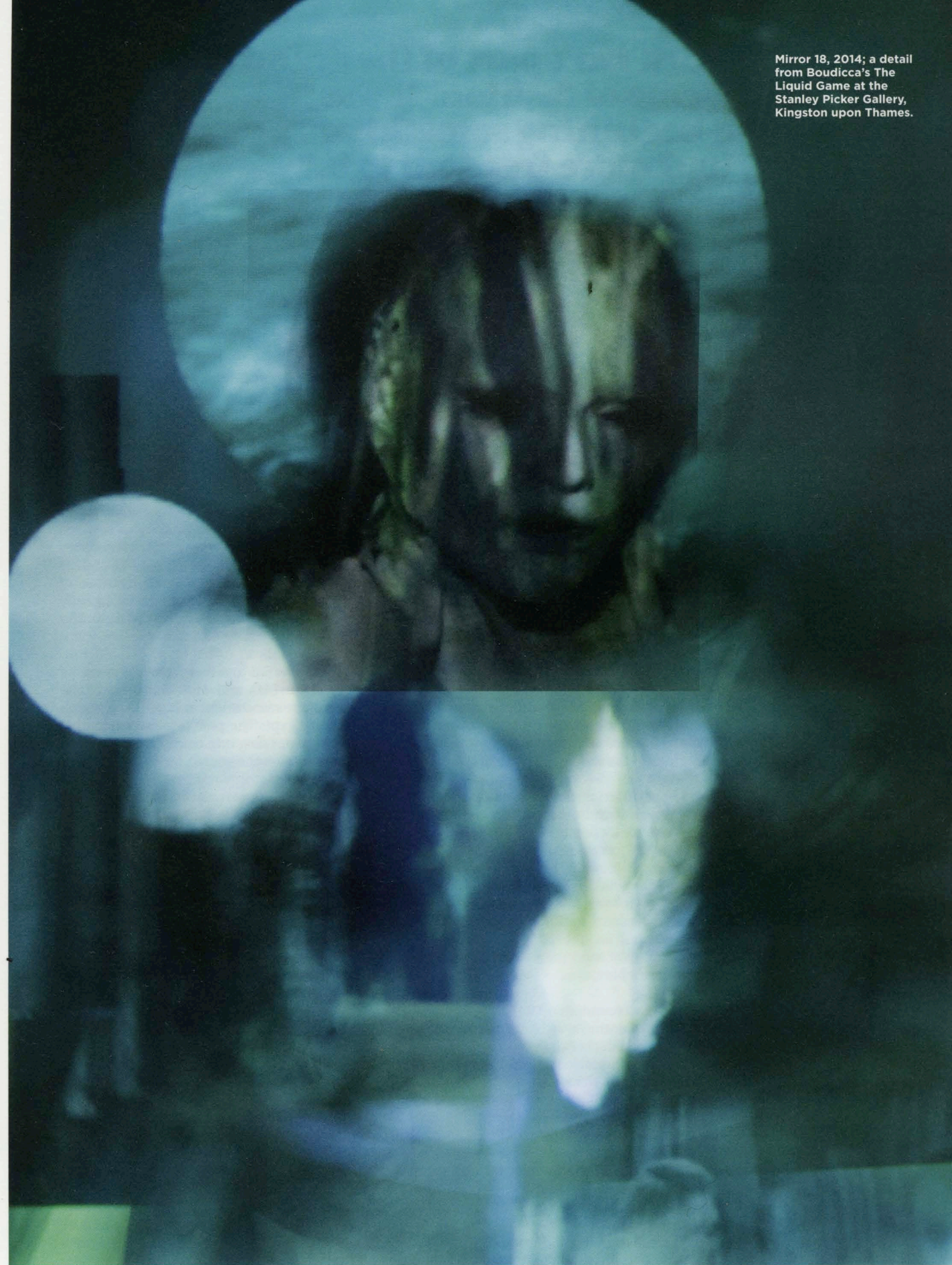
“The island is a bizarre place,” agrees Brian Kirkby. Together, Broach and Kirkby are Boudicca, a London-based design studio whose 17-year body of work encompasses film, photography, sculpture, collage, perfumery and choreography. Yet while Boudicca is most renowned for its work in fashion, it is characteristic that the studio’s latest output, *The Liquid Game*, contains absolutely no clothing whatsoever. Just as characteristic is Broach’s apparent satisfaction that hardly anyone will see it. “What’s nice about it is that it is quite couture, which means less people will come and visit, but maybe they are good people. Instead of having a party you can have dinner. For us, that’s more appealing. You can’t have a conversation at a massive party.”

The gallery is small, but Boudicca has made it much smaller. A billowing corridor of cloth consumes the majority of the space, leading to a tall, narrow chamber. The floor ripples with a bluish light around which are eight thin panels of blurred imagery. Above to the left and right – and consuming the entire main wall – are dreamlike films of stuttering, contorting forms, of imagery set on and smeared by black shadows and projections. There is an indistinct sound of water, but given the geography one isn’t sure if that comes from without or within. The result of a year’s residency, it is no retrospective at a major museum – and initially it is modest to the point of being underwhelming.

“Last year we made a decision to try to be more experimental and less engaged in the catwalk calendar, which was killing our company and killing our own enthusiasm,” says Kirkby about their application for this out-of-the-way residency in the suburbs of Kingston. “The work isn’t part of the grand PR scheme of fashion,” agrees Broach. “It was about beginning something that had more freedom to it. We would press flowers, make things out of clay, all sorts of odd things. It was about trying to let go.”

The outcome of the residency feels somehow right, a fusion of Broach and Kirkby’s magpie-like collecting and linking of fragments, their abstracted thought processes, and their preoccupation >

Mirror 18, 2014; a detail from Boudicca’s *The Liquid Game* at the Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston upon Thames.



“The work isn’t part of the grand PR scheme of fashion. It was about beginning something that had more freedom to it.”

> with concepts of identity and time. Travelling between London and the venue gave them a familiarity with the island’s geography, but also an outsider’s viewpoint. It was in these waters that Millais drowned his Ophelia² in 1851-52 and indeed there is a languorous, sinking feeling to The Liquid Game. The installation can be seen as a concentration of the identity of a place, distilled through Boudicca’s ongoing fascination with experimental imaging techniques as antiquated as Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography,³ or as modern as laser mapping and 3D computer modelling. Most of the imagery in the show was produced through amalgamations of these techniques. The still images give the impression of movement, or scans of figures digitally manipulated like twisting cloth, reinterpreted and magnified over and over again in what Kirkby refers to as “cyclonic feedback loops”.

The physical space Boudicca has created in the gallery was gathered together from fragments of serendipity. Kirkby happened upon panel paintings from the 14th and 15th centuries at the National Portrait Gallery,⁴ while Broach found photocopies of the same works in an old sketchbook. Further inspiration came from a documentary on Ancient Egypt. The pair became enchanted with the interior architecture of tombs, of long, high passages opening into empty chambers, the only clues to the long-gone incumbents being the hieroglyphics on the wall.

But before entering the tomb-like main space at the gallery, the visitor encounters a close-up slideshow of found objects. Shown dispassionately against a chill white background, a chip of stone, two milky petals or a cluster of withered acorns are presented as if under a microscope, although the occasional crumb of mud or grit seems to suggest forensic samples recently gathered, still damp. The exhibition notes claim that these represent fragments of imaginary bodies – the petals are eyelids, the acorns breasts. There is a counter in the corner of the screen rapidly progressing from 0 to 2,428, and the film begins with a smeared SIM-card microchip and ends with a shard of flint. One gets the sense of a post-apocalyptic prophecy, of a rejection of modernity and an embrace of the Stone Age as the centuries progress. At around the 540 mark a cracked lump of waxy pigment appears. Brighter than Yves Klein’s blue⁵ but not quite cobalt, this is Boudicca’s blue.

Boudicca was founded in 1997, and by the early 2000s it seemed as if their blue might become as iconic as Valentino’s red.⁶ With clothes less indulgently theatrical than those of Alexander McQueen⁷ and darker than those of Hussein Chalayan,⁸ Boudicca’s output was as sharply cut and cerebral as either. Broach and Kirkby’s shows became some of the most eagerly anticipated of London Fashion Week, albeit with a reputation for difficult collections presented in dark and dingy venues. Still, the label was invited by the British Fashion Council⁹ to show its autumn/winter 2003 collection on the official Fashion Week schedule. It remains Boudicca’s most successful collection by far. Called We Sell Disguises, it earned a spontaneous standing ovation. Sarah Mower’s¹⁰ review was gushing; the audience was in raptures. “We’d wondered what we would do if we tried a ‘proper’ fashion show,” says Kirkby. “So we had it all – the high heels, the lace, the make-up, big hair...”

“...With rock music on the soundtrack, and I think it ended with a cheesy piece of classical,” continues Broach. The title made Boudicca’s point emphatically clear. What do fashion designers do but sell disguises, costumes for fake identities?

Yet it would seem that fashion journalists don’t get irony. “The next season someone came up to us and said: ‘Why didn’t you do what you did last time? That was great!’” Kirkby throws his hands up in amused exasperation. Perhaps partly in response to this lack of understanding at home, Broach and Kirkby moved their show to New York in 2005. However, two seasons later they were invited by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture¹¹ to be part of the couture schedule in Paris, the first British designers to receive this honour.

Fashion at its most technically and artistically intricate, couture seemed a natural fit for Boudicca, although even it had its stifling limitations. It is the worst-kept secret in fashion that without duty-free perfumes and licensed sunglasses, Chanel, Dior and every other fashion house would not be able to afford to produce their couture collections. “But we went into couture to sell clothes! How naive was that?” laughs Kirkby. The expensive fabrics that are a prerequisite to couture – combined with a self-perceived inability to achieve the desired construction and finish, and a creeping dissatisfaction with the circus of runway shows – drove the pair to turn to paper and card to create the garments shown in their 2009 Essays couture collection. Essays’ gravity-defying forms seemed to reference extravagant High Victorian Gothic and mannered Jacobean costume, filtered through the soaring pathways of particle physics – particularly the skeletal, almost wire-frame structures that had the same loops, spirals and curlicues seen in images taken in particle colliders. Instead of a catwalk show, Boudicca produced a haunting amalgam of digital transitions and still photography, brought to life as if in a flick book. This radical break from the norm, while alienating, paved the way for the studio’s future work.

In 2010 the pair exhibited Dresses the Colour of Time in the Cupola Room at Kensington Palace.¹² Similar to their paper couture, the collection featured cogs, crinoline hoops like clock springs, and golden ribbons of saw blades suspended from chandeliers to form dress-like silhouettes. Kirkby christened these sculptures “mechanical sketches” and he sees The Liquid Game as akin to sketching. “Our way of working now is a direct response to the idea of a collection every six months. We want this to be an increment on a journey. You have a trajectory but instead of having a stop point, you leave it open-ended and it takes away the shackles of it having to be finished,” he says. “It’s a bizarre mentality to have in design, which is always about A to B, but the space between the zero and the one is something we’re both interested in. If you have a binary situation, what is the 0.5? We see it as a quantum mentality; things don’t have to be so fixed anymore.”

Kirkby isn’t just at ease with this lack of coherency or resolution, he welcomes it. “When you’re younger it is terrifying to admit ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’, but when you’re older it is actually really liberating,” he says. “The confusion is the most exciting part. The old-fashioned way of looking at design was to solve problems and when you didn’t know what you were doing it was a failure. But actually it is all those conflicting weights, angles and ideas that are really fascinating. We can say now that the confusion between us – between male and female and all these counteracting forces – actually is our language. That is not seen as a design mentality, but there is a more emotive and poetic side of design that overrides that. When someone sees your work and asks what it is about, for me that is more intriguing.”

Hearing Kirkby speak about conflicting ideas, feedback loops, identity and counteracting forces, one realises what a perfect manifestation of such abstract concepts Boudicca’s garment design >

² Pre-Raphaelite artist Sir John Everett Millais (1829-96) used the Hogsmill River as the setting for his painting of Ophelia, who drowned in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

³ French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904) coined the term ‘chronophotography’, a technique that captures moving objects across several frames of print.

⁴ Founded in 1856, London’s National Portrait Gallery holds the most extensive collection of portraits in the world.

⁵ French artist Yves Klein (1928-62) registered his International Klein Blue, a deep ultramarine shade, in 1960, creating multiple works using the colour.

⁶ Italian designer Valentino (b. 1932) became known from the late 1950s onwards for his signature red dresses.

⁷ British designer Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) founded his label in 1992 and became known for flamboyant and controversial collections.

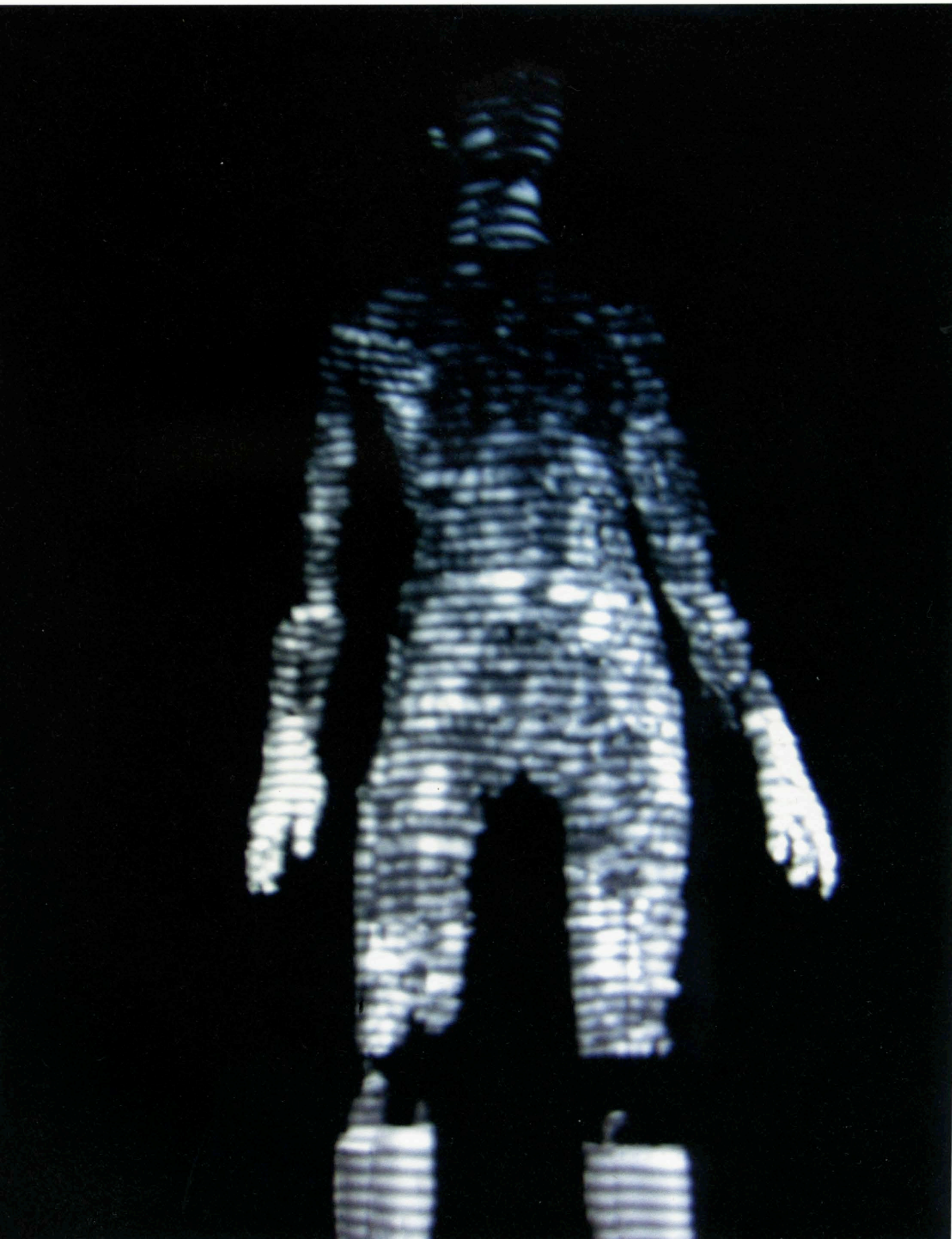
⁸ British/Turkish Cypriot designer Hussein Chalayan (b. 1970) creates clothes that integrate technology, science and architecture.

⁹ Founded in 1983, the British Fashion Council is a non-profit, London-based organisation that promotes British fashion around the world.

¹⁰ London-based journalist and fashion critic Sarah Mower is a contributing editor to American Vogue and currently ambassador for emerging talent at the British Fashion Council.

¹¹ The Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, (est. 1868) is the Paris-based trade union of high fashion, and is part of the Fédération Française de la Couture, which governs France’s fashion industry.

¹² The Cupola Room, designed in 1722, is the principal state room at the royal residence of Kensington Palace in London.



“The space between the zero and the one is something that we’re both interested in. If you have a binary situation, what is the 0.5?”



Opposite page: Privacy: experiments with a body scanning unit at London College of Fashion, 2010.
This page: A paper-and-card work from Boudicca's 2009 Essays couture collection.

“Through all the projects we do... we think that if you’re going to do something, you need to go deep.”

¹³ Many images projected in *The Liquid Game* were generated by imaging and rendering programs based on scans of figures. The digital images were then fed back into the same programmes.

¹⁴ Boudicca (d. AD 60 or 61) was queen of Britain’s Iceni tribe. Following her husband Prasutagus’ death, she led a Celtic revolt against Roman rule before her defeat at the Battle of Watling Street.

¹⁵ British fashion journalist Hamish Bowles (b. 1963) is *Vogue*’s international editor-at-large.

¹⁶ At the 27th G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, in July 2001, 200,000 anti-globalisation protesters gathered, leading to violent police clashes.

¹⁷ Both Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby tutor at London’s Royal College of Art, a postgraduate university specialising in art and design.

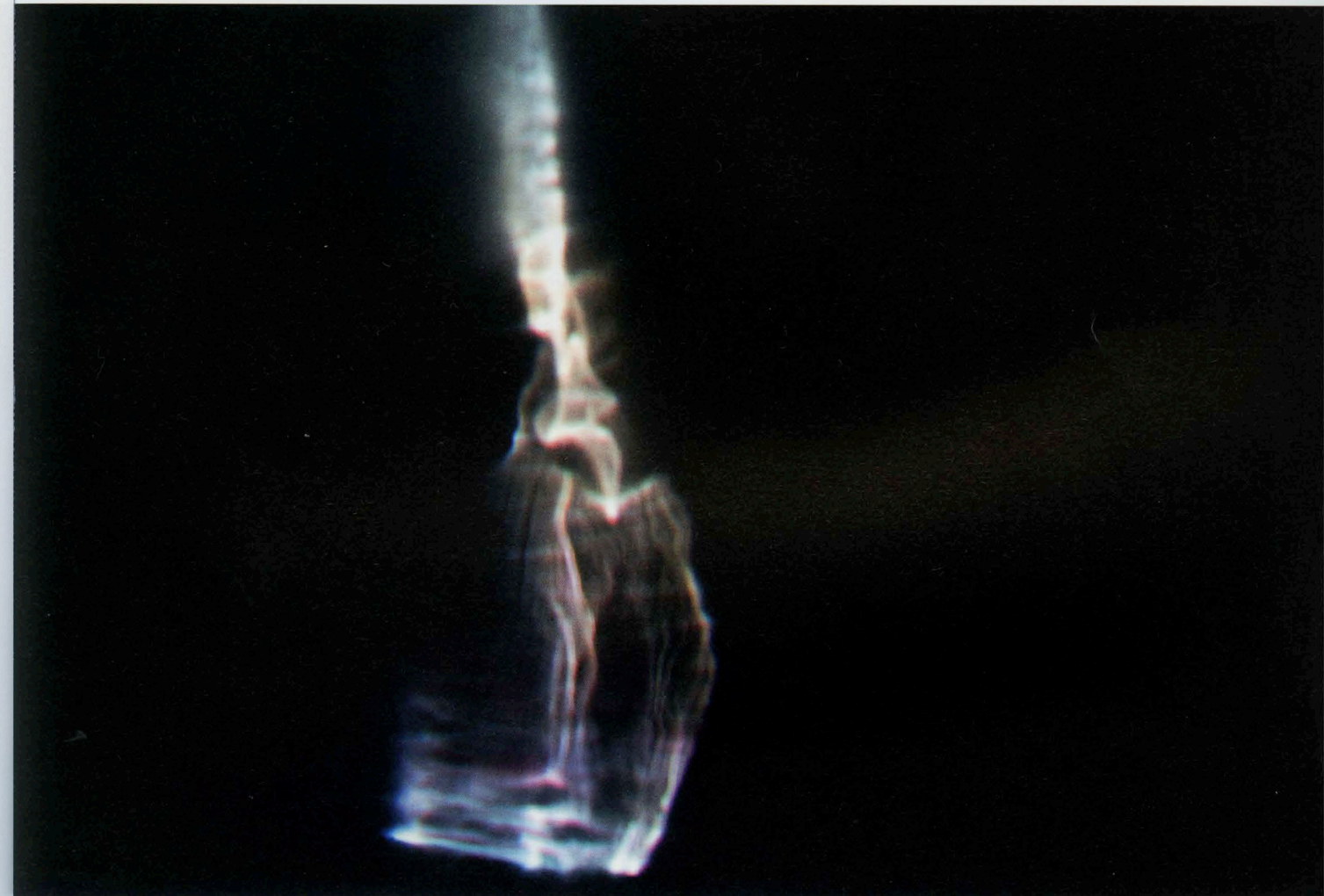
> actually is. The clothes are strikingly angular but always flattering, the body never ignored or fought against. Waists are frequently high and tight, but with a sense of comforting constriction rather than restriction. These are swaddling clothes rather than straitjackets.

The conflict between masculine and feminine is an overarching theme within Boudicca’s work, with signatures of binary sexuality displaced in a constant exploration of the space between. While menswear is traditionally cut and constructed to emphasise the classical ideal of broad shoulders and a narrow waist, women have worn male tailoring for almost as long as men have. Boudicca’s tailoring is considered and its effect is fierce, reigniting questions of gender through its exacting, razor-sharp cut. As an opposing force, the 19th-century ruffle – a recurrent motif in Boudicca’s work – is not simple feminine decoration. In its isolation, fragmentation and displacement in the collections, it becomes a semiotic shorthand for a certain feminine identity.

Aside from late-Victorian frills, wider historical costume is another mine of inspiration for Boudicca. The pair frequently take this costume from portraiture, and celebrate its capacity to capture both the identity of an individual and an era. Costume for Boudicca represents specific points in time, but still serves as part of a wider continuum. The studio picks up early 17th-century splendour or strong-shouldered 1930s glamour, long spun out of the cycle of fashion, and feeds them back into the system. In much the same way, Boudicca’s experimental image-making is reprocessed by the same code that birthed it, producing the glitched, sluggish projections seen in *The Liquid Game*.¹³ Similarly, the gauzy, ethereal space at the Stanley Picker Gallery is the latest expression of a semi-permanence that the studio has returned to repeatedly in its work. This signature can be traced through Boudicca’s recurring use of layered sheer fabrics, infinitely adjustable tie-belts, and its dress that temporarily changes colour when its covering of double-sided paillettes is stroked. Then there is *Wode*.

Released in 2008 and named after the pigment that Boudicca’s namesake warrior queen¹⁴ wore into battle, *Wode* is a unique fragrance, a rarity in its field. It resembles a can of spray paint, complete with plastic cap and a rattling ball bearing, and applies in a cloud of vivid blue dye, saturating skin and clothes, spluttering and dripping like car enamel. The dye fades in seconds, but its application becomes an irrational act of faith, a bracing, strangely heroic gesture. The scent left behind has of a curiously melancholic tone. Rich saffron and creamy tonka bean have been somehow deadened but not flattened, while tuberose brings to mind a sad whiteness, of fleshy and turgid magnolia petals, damp and easy to bruise. That melancholia can be a difficult sell is freely acknowledged by Broach. “There have been dark moments in the life of Boudicca,” she says. “In the past, that melancholia is something that people have had an issue with, especially when it was more about the fashion.”

Melancholia aside, it is Boudicca’s conceptual rigour and insistent attempts to make audiences engage with their work on a higher intellectual level that seem a greater problem. Sarah Mower described Boudicca’s spring/summer 2003 collection as “torture-by-conceptualism”, while Hamish Bowles¹⁵ argued that cryptic references to the Genoa G8 protests¹⁶ in its spring/summer 2002 show “cannot have the same resonance for those who weren’t there”. Yet over a decade later, Broach is unrepentant about demanding so much. “We want to reach right inside someone and touch them. Through all the projects we do, from the most commercial, to couture, to teaching,¹⁷ we think that if you’re going to do something, you need to go deep. With our work we’ve only just scratched the surface. It wants to be something that disturbs someone. We put so much into it, it’s only natural to want this.” >



Outside, shown as part of the *Glasstress* exhibition at the Venice Biennale, 1 June – 26 November 2013.

“Art and fashion are just words and words are so limiting. If you’re not one or another, you’re somewhere in between, and you can’t monetise.”

¹⁸ Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons (b. 1968) launched his menswear line in 1995 and is the creative director at Christian Dior.

¹⁹ American artist Sterling Ruby (b. 1972) lives and works in Los Angeles.

²⁰ Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí (1904-89) collaborated with Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) on works such as her Lobster Dress (1937).

READING LIST

Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund, Zoe Ryan. Yale University Press, 2012.

The Fundamentals of Fashion Design. Richard Sorger and Jenny Udale. AVA, 2006.

Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness. Caroline Evans. Yale University Press, 2003.

> This defiantly conceptual stance, allied to the studio’s intellectual and scientific explorations of abstract notions, and its hugely diverse output, means the spectre of the “fashion versus art” argument looms large. When fashion designers speak of their work as having a deeper meaning than, say, Wim Wenders’ 1984 film *Paris, Texas*, they have traditionally been seen as pretentious. On the other hand, when an artist lends their work for use on the runway, there is often a sense of selling out. Raf Simons¹⁸ has long used the work of artists in his menswear, culminating in his autumn/winter 2014 collection co-created with Sterling Ruby.¹⁹ These kinds of collaborations are nothing new however: Salvador Dalí and Elsa Schiaparelli worked together²⁰ in the 1930s.

Yet fashion design as a craft seems closer to art than most. It is singularly connected to intimate ideas of the self and of projected personalities, of memories, culture, conflict and allegiances; it is bizarrely detached from the problem-solving nuts-and-bolts world of product design. For Broach, it was Boudicca’s emergence at a unique time in British fashion that shaped the studio’s identity and which enabled it to work in the way it now does, yet this genesis was not without its costs.

“When we began as designers in the mid-1990s we thought fashion was art. It was really pure,” says Broach. “But no one would talk like that anymore. Fashion courses are different today but when we studied, it was all the odds and sods. There was no market, we didn’t even have a student fashion week. It was just an interesting group of people who were trying to form an expression of identity. Some ended up as great commercial fashion designers, some as writers, some as artists. It can go so many ways. We began by doing weird collections that were shown in galleries. You are what your beginnings are, what is around you and what you demand. Art and fashion are just words and words are so limiting. If you’re not one or another, you’re somewhere in between. But if you’re in between, you can’t monetise.”

Kirkby’s definition of what they do is simple but vital. “When anyone asks: ‘Are you fashion or are you art?’, I say, ‘We just make things.’” Just as Picasso’s diffuse output was united by its depiction of new ways of seeing as informed by the most ancient cultures or the most modern technology, so too does Boudicca’s work use varied media to consistently investigate and question ideas of identity and time. It is clear that garment design can speak these languages eloquently, despite the fashion industry currently making it unpalatable to do so.

“Fashion is the first thing you’re exposed to as a young person that really has an impact on you, how you think, what you read, what music you listen to,” insists Kirkby. “To me, identity was a wonderful escape route – you were constructing something around you, that’s why fashion was so important to me.”

To hear Kirkby speak of fashion in the past tense belies the room full of sewing machines, irons, cutting tables and mannequins to be found in Boudicca’s East End studio. Broach and Kirkby still produce fascinating collections and still sell beautiful clothes, but they do so on their own terms. Asked if they would ever return to on-schedule shows, one senses a real longing in their immediate and unequivocal “yes”. They just need to work out how. Things have been far from straightforward for Boudicca, but Broach would have it no other way. “I’m happy. The books I wouldn’t have read, the conversations I wouldn’t have had if we’d had a clearer run...” ●

Felix Chabluk Smith is a graduate of the Royal College of Art’s Fashion Menswear MA. His work can be seen on pp. 28-29 of this issue of *Disegno*.

An image from Boudicca’s solo show, *Isolated moments from a cycle*, hosted at Tel Aviv’s Beit Ha’ir museum in 2012.

