

## a paper dress to call her own dress ups: winsome jobling

24 HR ART, Darwin

In Dress Ups, Winsome Jobling has made a series of twelve archetypal dresses that interrogate the differences between fabric and paper and subvert the presentation of the feminine. These are modelled on real and very special dresses she has collected and they recall the dresses we all remember; our own dress ups, that were always too big and to wonderful to wear out, the ones that now reside in the collective female memory wardrobe.

Jobling's paper dresses are made from bleached banana fibre—"because of its inherent strength, its translucence and its appearance of fragility". The dresses are big, almost twice life size and their making has been a feat of technical virtuosity. The individual sheets used in the dresses are up to two metres by one metre, which required Jobling to develop suitable simple technology: "I have tried using the back of a ute as a vat...and draining the vat as opposed to lifting the heavy mould (to do so takes six people)."

The dresses are ambiguous and contradictory—the paper seems so fragile and ephemeral, like the tissue paper dress patterns that covered the floor and windows of the gallery, but it is stronger than it looks. Cut out Paper Doll Dresses are slight and flimsy but Jobling's dresses are monumental; fit for giant dolls who could only be dressed by Amazonian hands. They are flat and two dimensional—to be looked at from the front—and they have fold back tabs on the shoulders and the sides.

Unlike the originals, they are also meant to be looked through and seen with light behind: they are hung to cast shadows. They dwarf the viewer and we stand in awe looking up at them, just as we gazed at our mothers' dresses and dreamt of the day, when we would be grown big enough to fit them and grown up enough to carry off such marvels. The oversize scale makes us feel like Alice, shrunken and tiny, tiptoeing in a world of impossibly attainable femininity where womanliness is tantalisingly out of reach. The dress as a symbol of the feminine is celebrated and glorified, beatified by magnification and it takes on reverential meanings; the Frock Salon is seen as cathedral hung with fashionable shrouds.

Jobling set herself rules in the construction of her dresses: they had to be made in the way of paper—cut, folded, moulded and pasted together. They were to represent but not imitate fabric, they were not sewn and even gathering and zips are held fast by glue. But among the interesting and paradoxical things about them is the way the relationship between flatness and fullness, two dimensionality and three dimensionality, is constantly dissolving, and the play between paper that resembles fabric, and fabric which looks like paper viz Paper Taffeta, and flat paper dress patterns that create the third dimension when transferred to fabric and sewn.

The individual paper flowers that are scattered over *No. 8 Floral Evening Gown* are sculpted and bumpy and defy two dimensionality but they are moulded from paper, not made

as they would if they were handmade silk flowers on a real dress. Similarly the knife-pleats that form an underskirt on *No. 2 Cocktail Dress* are cut to match the scalloped edge of the overskirt and glued behind it. The stripes in *No. 5 Spring Dress* reveal differences in the density of the paper so these true self stripes are almost corrugations in the paper. The fringed hem is part of the whole mould rather than cut out or added on, and similarly the polka dots in *No. 6 Afternoon Dress*, are moulded negatively as you might make a plastic kitchen colander. So we are constantly being shown the things that paper can do differently and often better than fabric.

At other times just as in a Paper Doll Dress the illusion of three dimensions is made just by the shape of the outline like the bell lily sleeves of the medieval costume in *No. 3 Fancy Dress*, or the imprinting of lace into the mould to make *No. 12 Brocade Gowns*. In some of the dresses the paper fabric is imprinted with its decoration in the process of moulding so that *No. 11 Wet Weather Gear* is literally rain spotted paper an ironic reference to hailspot fabrics, and *No. 10 Underwear* is inscribed with egocentric sentences about self love.

So while apparently two dimensions with a right and a wrong side, they are actually often three dimensional; but only at the front,<sup>1</sup> so that they all adhere to the rule of law of the Paper Doll Dress. They are made to fit a totally flat surface; a body without real contours, a body not in need of darts to get over the bumps of breast and bottom, the body most like that of the pre-pubescent girl who is the actor within the dress up fantasy, the intended identifier with, and the manipulator of, the Paper Doll that she calls her own.

suzanne spinner

### note

1. The notable exception to the seen-from-the-front-only rule is *No. 1 Wedding Dress*, its long train billows and trails out behind, breaking the rule by foregrounding the back as much as the front. It was suspended in front of a window so that it could be seen from both sides and it seemed to float in the air like an apparition of the Virgin it references.



Winsome Jobling, Dress Ups. Installation view, 24HR ART, Darwin.

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