

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Gernreich Had Everything Oscar Needs: Creativity, Energy, Fun

Edward Goldman · Thursday, March 1st, 2012



With the Oscars just a few hours away, I drove to West Hollywood and then walked through the road barricades set up for **Elton John's annual Oscars party** at the Pacific Design Center. That accomplished, I entered MOCA's satellite galleries there and happily lost myself in the glamorous, seductive world of art and fashion, sprinkled with the magic dust of sex.



If you, like me, recognize the names of great fashion designer Rudi Gernreich (1922-1985), his model and muse Peggy Moffitt, and photographer William Claxton (1927-2008), you, my dears, are dating yourselves. In the '60 and '70s, these three were central figures in the Los Angeles art community and their exuberant collaboration is the subject of MOCA's delightful new exhibition, ***The Total Look***.



In the first room, you are greeted by the designer's famous, topless swimsuit from 1964, which became a worldwide media sensation and eventually led to Rudi Gernreich appearing on the cover of Time magazine in 1967. Seeing this swimsuit today, 50 years later, is still titillating and inspiring. And the same could be said about the other few dozen outfits spread through the exhibition. Each of them bursts with exuberant geometric patterns and color that dramatically contradict their minimal, severe design. Any actress who would have the chutzpah and imagination today to appear on the red carpet in one of these outfits would no doubt steal the show.



And speaking of the red carpet and the Oscars... The buzz is that though it was still alive, it was definitely not kicking. Watching the ceremony with my friends, only a couple of hours after seeing this exhibition, I couldn't help thinking how monotonous were the glamorous gowns worn by all these gorgeous women. It was as if they all were wearing variations on the same, mostly-strapless uniform, varying only in color and texture. Gosh, if only someone could figure out how to bring back Rudi Gernreich to advise, inspire, and stir things up. That would be a way to make Oscars ratings soar.



Back to his exhibition at MOCA's West Hollywood satellite: it's designed with much flair and welcome theatricality by Marmol Radziner, well-known Los Angeles architectural firm. I was especially surprised by how these architects transformed the utterly boring museum staircase into a "yellow brick road" leading up to the Emerald City of Gernreich's imagination, where William Claxton's camera is in love with the sinuous, exotic beauty of Peggy Moffitt, who happened to be Claxton's wife.



Since we are talking about fashion and art, it's the perfect time to mention the small, fashion-conscious **Renoir exhibition** currently in New York at the Frick Collection. While the opening of the MOCA exhibition coincided with the Oscars, the Frick exhibition coincided with New York fashion week, and I hope *fashionistas* took note. Even looking at the three full-length Renoir portraits of dancing couples, reproduced in the New York Times, makes me swoon over the effervescent elegance of the Belle Époque and the virtuoso brushwork of Renoir at his earliest and at his best. Those were the times...

Edward Goldman is the art critic for Los Angeles NPR-affiliate KCRW-FM/89.9-FM, where his ArtTalk airs every Tuesday at 6:44 pm Pacific Time. Formerly employed by the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, Goldman is a sought-after consultant and frequent public speaker. He teaches an ongoing seminar on art collecting, which he calls his "art gypsy caravan."

The Total Look: The Creative Collaboration between Rudi Gernreich, Peggy Moffitt, and William Claxton is at MOCA Los Angeles, February 26 through May 20, 2012

Renoir, Impressionism, and Full-Length Painting is at the Frick Collection in New York, February 7 through May 13, 2012

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