

ArtReview

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Mirror, Mirror

Art and fashion reflect



Exclusives: cover art by Vanessa Beecroft, interventions by Julie Verhoeven and Graham Dolphin, and Alexander McQueen on his art inspirations



The sky's the limit

Abigail Lane is as much at home making clothes and furniture as she is with art, says **Sophie L ris**.
Photography by **Coco Amardeil**

At the opening of her last solo show at London's Victoria Miro gallery in 2001, Abigail Lane wore a dress designed by her friend Brigitte Stepputis, head of couture at Vivienne Westwood. Stepputis wore an identical outfit made from what has now become Lane's signature fabric: a turquoise sky featuring a pattern of scudding clouds and outsized bluebottles. Lane's "Fly in the Sky" material was beautiful and surreal and, at its first outing, left you wanting more.

Though the show was a success, Lane found herself "still skint" afterwards. "The traditional thing for an artist to do after a show is to shut up for two years and then exhibit again, but that wasn't going to pay the bills. I was full of ideas. I thought, 'This is just another artworld trap,' so I looked back to how we dealt with it last time."

She is referring to "Freeze", the group show mounted with unprecedented marketing savvy by a posse of Goldsmiths art students including Lane, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Rachel Whiteread in 1988. Instead of pinning their hopes on their potential discovery by the gallerists, the "Freeze" generation simply challenged the status quo. "We refused to see the walls; we just smashed a hole and jumped through," says Lane. "It worked. We were bombarded with work, and it was us who called the shots."

Over the next 15 years, Lane established a highly individual way of working. "I couldn't stand the nine-to-five normality of studio existence, which is only an extension of the college system. I have to live and work together. Whether I'm washing up or making art, it's all part of the same thing." Her first live/work space in East London's Curtain Road was one of the key artworld destinations of the 1990s, as important as the shop run by her friends Emin and Lucas. "We showed films on the roof, and on Fridays there was a hair salon."

Lane was asked by White Cube to host Turner Prize after-parties for Sam Taylor-Wood and Gary Hume. "I'd only known art people before, so I was really broadening my frame of reference," she recalls. She continued to work on event-based projects with her partner at the time, Paul Fryer, calling their collective efforts Complete Arthole. They also began producing fabric designs for Fendi. "A friend of ours sometimes brought Fendi's head designer Eric Wright over to our place where he used to watch us work," says Lane, "and he commissioned us." Those designs funded Arthole's ▶







◀ other activities, and it was the knowledge that the commercialization of some of her artistic output could support the rest that led to the birth of the Showroom Dummies. Named after a 1977 Kraftwerk song, the Dummies are Lane, Stepputis, Bob Pain, founder of printing company Omnicolour, and Edwin Wright, a furniture designer. They take functional items – tables and chairs, blankets and wallpaper – and transform them with images inspired, in this collection, by natural history and natural disasters.

“I bumped into one of my old collectors at a party and when I mentioned I was making blankets, he did a 180-degree turn and walked off.” Lane rolls her eyes. “I’m not claiming that these pieces are art, but the crossover is already there. I love the purity of the white cube, but once art is bought, it usually ends up in people’s homes – it becomes something removed from its original intention.”

The Dummies describe themselves as “special, but not elitist”, and it is in this spirit that Lane eschews what she considers the pointless exclusivity of limited editions, preferring instead to work on a commission basis. “I’m just following my instincts and it’s happening all by itself. Funnily enough, it’ll probably end up more highbrow than I intended, but I find this much easier than making art, because there’s less intellectual responsibility. With art, there’s always the fear of being misunderstood.”

The support Lane has drummed up is phenomenal. The venue for the month-long opening show has been donated by its owner, while the Dummies’ first commission – designing the staff uniforms for the launch party of arts channel BBC4 – came about through a friend (amazingly, the £2,000 fee has kept them afloat for months). Sarah Lucas has ordered several cashmere blankets; another friend commissioned eight “Fly in the Sky” cushions; CDs are being created for free by hotshot DJs such as Matty Skylab and Angus Fairhurst’s group Bandabandoned; Guy Healy, hairdresser at the Curtain Road salon, will set up shop at the show.

These and other loyal supporters are known as the Dummies in the Wings and are very much part of Lane’s personal vision. “I try to harness people’s talents and idiosyncrasies, combining the young and old, rich and poor, famous and unknown, so that they all come crashing together ... That’s where creativity really begins.” Although at this stage Lane does all the designing herself, she intends to invite other artists to make designs for the Dummies. “From January, I want to divide my time between the Dummies and my art. I’m hoping that each will inform the other. Actually, a lot of the Dummies pieces are looking very much like my art, which just goes to show what a load of bollocks these labels really are.”

Showroom Dummies, 11 Oct-9 Nov, Old St Pancras Conservative Club, 26 Argyle Square, London WC1

Preceding page: Abigail Lane with “Fly in the Sky” dress and fabric. Top: Perspex horse screen. Above: Ethel and her cashmere blanket. Opposite: Lane with skeleton wallpaper and fabric. All designs 2003.

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