

Frances Ferdinands: Freeing the Figure

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“A-Line China”, 2014 30”H x 30”W and 10”H x 10” W, MDF board, acrylic paint, “Delft Blue” porcelain chopsticks, porcelain bowl, nails, Mixed Media Wall Relief.

What is it that provokes or in fact actually shapes a shift in aesthetic focus from the flatness of painting to the real dimensionality of sculpture? Why would an artist choose to make that trip, risky as it might very well be? Why leave the fixed confines and known aesthetic parameters of the canvas plane to work in the multi-dimensionality of the sculptural, littered as it is with so many variables and unknowns?

Well, maybe politics might have something to do with it – the politics of gender and ethnicity, to be more specific. It was so for Frances Ferdinands

She’s a Sri Lankan-born artist whose paintings are held in the collections of galleries and corporations in Canada and the United States. Until recently, she was based in Toronto. But she’s transplanted herself to the Northumberland Hills, a rural region just to the east of the city (but still within its umbra) that is home to numerous artists and writers. With that move came another move – an artistic one. Frances Ferdinands discovered that she was turning into a sculptor.



(<https://iscbookreviews.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/doilies-installation.gif>)

Installation View of Dress. Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario, Canada Sept. 9 – October 18, 2014 Exhibition titled “Mining Beauty”

But first the back story.

Ferdinands’s painting has long centered itself around the representation of the human figure. Even today, it can still be rather tricky working with the body. Its aesthetic depiction is still mired in the risks of cultural and – let’s be totally honest – religious blowback. The human body is still something of a landmine; one misstep, and things can blow up in your face pretty damn fast.

It’s all, of course, because the body carries a heavy load of baggage, enveloped as it is in a thick haze of associations (sexual and otherwise), connotations, and references. It’s deeply coded, in short, and part of that coding – even perhaps a *very* large part of that coding – directly involves the stuff of which we clad it: textiles.

Now, as a painter, Ferdinands directly engaged that world of textiles by enquiring into the narrow, even more intensely coded sub-realm that is high fashion. *Haute couture*. Specifically she became interested in how fashion is advertised, how it markets itself to the world, and how we can be sucked into its magical mythmaking. Out of that came a series of painterly diptychs juxtaposing images based, on the one hand, on old advertisements in which fashion is foregrounded as a sales mechanism, and images drawn from some of the most immediately recognizable works of art on the other. And cleaving the images horizontally, extended the breadth of the painterly plane are textual elements that both cryptically brings the imagery of the diptych together and yet simultaneously splits it apart.

And, yes, this is clearly not sculpture. Not yet. We’re only just beginning to get there, for Ferdinands’s next small step in that direction was a body of work in which she articulates a more abstract vision



(<https://iscbookreviews.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/d-to-d-front.gif>)

“From Doilies to Dustmasks: The Poetry of Protest” (front), 2014. Approximately 60”H x 20”W, doilies, dustmasks, image transfers, acrylic paint, acrylic gel, thread, sequins, pearls, ribbons, sheer curtain fabric, lace, vintage wire dress stand.

born of the realm of fashion, of textiles, work in which things literally begin to lift off of the canvas, if ever so slightly. *Migration* is a triptych in which the painterly approach comes apart at the proverbial seams; the flatness of the canvas plane is violated by the intrusion of small textile-related objects – like buttons, hooks and eyes, and dozens of pins – as Ferdinands begins tentatively moving away from pure, unadulterated imagery and towards the vision of something truly sculptural.

But we are, however, still aesthetically functioning within the parameters of a wall-hung canvas plane, simultaneously entering into the very personal world of Ferdinands’s own familial migration from Sri Lanka to Canada, a process fraught with racism as authorities forced her family provide proof of lineage dating back to the 16th century and the beginnings of Dutch habitation and economic exploitation of her country.

Here, she takes us to the very bones of fashion, the roots of textiles, in a literal way by incorporating imagery of the likes of the human skeletal structure on the one hand, and in a more metaphorically way by incorporating objects, text, and the very paper patterns integral to the making of a piece of clothing. The bones. The roots.

And the beginnings of something “not-painting”.

Sure, you can still call it collage, but Ferdinands is beginning to push ever harder against the delimitations of the canvas plane. The aesthetic wants to pop off into the fully dimensional. poised,



[_ \(https://iscbookreviews.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/from-doilies_detail.gif\)](https://iscbookreviews.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/from-doilies_detail.gif)

“From Doilies to Dustmasks: The Poetry of Protest” (Detail), 2014. Approximately 60”H x 20”W, doilies, dustmasks, image transfers, acrylic paint, acrylic gel, thread, sequins, pearls, ribbons, sheer curtain fabric, lace, vintage wire dress stand.

here, at the edge of a leap into the sculptural unknown. The dimensional artifact is ready to spring forth.

One more step, though: an intermediary work entitled *A-Line China*. On two separate pieces of dense and heavy MDF board, Ferdinands gathers together a number of porcelain chopsticks, and assembles them together into a fan shape. It is, in fact, the shape of an A-line dress. Above it, on the second, smaller piece of board, a small china bowl visually addresses us head-on. “Head” on.

She calls it “relief.” I call it proto-sculpture, and it leads at last to this: *From Doilies to Dustmasks: The Poetry of Protest*.

Here is sculpture: the human figure, fully dimensional at last, the body rendered 1:1 scale as a dressmaker’s dummy, clad in a garment, a kind of dress. Exteriors matter, of course – fashion is built on that premise – and Ferdinands uses textiles to play with our visual expectations. Much of what we see is what we might *expect* to see in something that is ostensibly an item of clothing: a dress with an apparently elegant bodice of lace, with some sheer trim along its bottom edge. But it’s deceptive. Look closer: the bodice is in fact composed of doilies, and the sheer trim is wrought from the translucent drapery of mundane privacy curtains.

But it's what's literally in-between those two polar extremes that is of real, deeply historical, social and cultural importance. Ferdinands has formed the dress out of dozens of white paper dust masks – you know, the disposable kind with the elastic straps that hold it against your face. Masks of any kind have their own enormous auras of meanings, associations and connotations – many of them involving duplicity and intent to cause harm in an anonymous way – but all of it is of less importance than the role Ferdinands has assigned them here: she's researched into the history and development of women's rights in Canada, and then textually inscribed it individually onto each of the mask. For example:

"1917 B[ritish].C[olumbia]. becomes the first province to give mothers the same legal rights as fathers regarding children."

"1940 Quebec becomes the last province to make it legal for women, excluding those from a racial minority already banned from voting in other provinces, to vote and run for office."

This, *this*, is the meat of it. *From Doilies to Dustmasks* enacts a narrative of the history of women's rights as they were grudgingly given in Canada, moments and times inscribed entirely around its physically articulated representation, the body – the female body – encased, masked, in the unexpected textiles of the story. This, then, is what sculpture can do, and what it's permitted Ferdinands to do.



(https://iscbookreviews.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/a-line-china_detail.gif)

"A-Line China", 2014 30"H x 30"W and 10"H x 10" W, MDF board, acrylic paint, "Delft Blue" porcelain chopsticks, porcelain bowl, nails, Mixed Media Wall Relief.

From the representation of the thing that was the painterly image, Ferdinands has moved to the representation of the thing that is a sculptural artefact, all the while pointedly reminding us that the aesthetic is *deeply* political. Textiles and fashion may very well seem to tell of superficial cultural trivialities that seem to come and go, but actually are much more meaningful, much more deeply encoded than that.

The question now is: how is Frances Ferdinands going to sculpturally explore that world? It'll be interesting to watch.

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