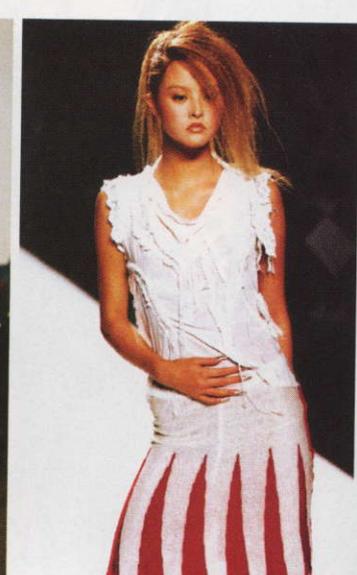
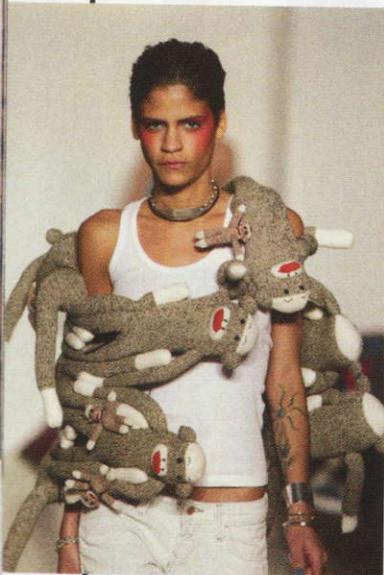


Fashion Fetish

Inspired by BDSM, queer politics and raw sexuality, designer Liz Collins can make a set of knitting needles do things your grandmother never dreamed of. **By Stephanie Schroeder**



From 2000 to 2004, Liz Collins' name was on her clothing label. She had at least seven runway shows and was the darling of the fashion world, particularly the Japanese fashion media she has been enthralled by since she was a teenager. "I made a big splash with my first show, which was a total surprise since I was new to the high-fashion scene," says Collins, who today teaches at her alma mater, the Rhode Island School of Design, where she earned her BFA and MFA in textile design. An assistant professor in the textile department, she extends her excitement about knitwear and knitting techniques into research that she says blurs the boundaries of the academic and the artistic.

Collins began her fashion career with a boutique in Providence, R.I., that she operated from 1994 to 1996 with a friend, and which she now refers to as "an ongoing designer sample sale."

"We did one-off pieces and also sold other designer's clothing. It was an experimental period," she reminisces. "I learned how to make clothing by trial and error." She returned to RISD to obtain her MFA and then created the Liz Collins brand.

"I find women's bodies perpetually inspiring. Not that men's bodies can't be beautiful — I enjoy the human structure, but my love for the female form and queer women's bodies is what inspires me, rather than a certain fabric or fashion silhouette. It's very visceral for me." Collins says that while out lesbian designers are few and far between, "many are at the helm of design companies, head designers for big name designers or other players in the fashion industry, behind the scenes in the way lesbians in television are as producers and writers."

Collins laughs when asked about the butch-femme dynamic and her personal relationship with her partner of two years, AIDS activist and educator Julie Davids. "Well, it kind of looks like that, and I don't want to define Julie's identity; however I'd say she is more in the transgender realm — though she has her butchy moments. And I'm definitely a girly-girl." Bondage and fetish are also a part of Collins' identity as both a queer woman and as a designer. "BDSM and fetish are part of my aesthetic language and very connected to who I am as an artist and as a person."

"BDSM and fetish symbols show up as motifs in my clothing both as fashion and ideas about how the body can be restrained and experience different sensations. I translate that into a visual language. There are a lot of possibilities in the realm of fashion and clothing, and my way of talking about it is to show compression, pressure and resistance. For example I use ropes in my designs," explains Collins, "I mean I knit long cords out of fabric and then attach them to a garment. It's like self-bondage. In some of my pieces, the wearer can tie herself up or someone else can. It's about restraint. The viewer can see that the wearer is bound, and both the wearer and the viewer experience something exciting."

Additionally, Collins' interests lie in sensations the body receives via clothing. "Since the female form is such a huge inspiration to me, I feel like I design clothing to relate to people. Like making a soft and cozy knit dress or sweater someone wears on a date. I'm not on the date, but I kind of am, you know what I mean." Collins refers to one specific dress that is very popular in her line, "I build elastic into some garments, and I have this dress I do where the whole torso is elasticized. It's corset-like, and you can feel safe and held in but not restrained to the point of losing your breath, and it's very exciting to wear."

Over the past few years, Collins has taken her ideas from sublimation in her designs to exploring and incorporating them on a physical and visceral level in her personal life. "It all furthers my understanding of what I'm interested in within the arena of my personal life, which is purely queer. My personal landscape is queer women and transpeople," Collins says. "I think that for a lot of artists, their sexuality is a huge part of what their art is about." Collins admits that she thinks making clothes is sexy. "It's my way of connecting to people in a sensual way. It's my urge to connect that feels right and is honored and is genuine in that tangible connection."

One other interest that sets Collins apart is her fetish for the reuse of material — "scraps," she calls them. "I would rather use leftovers from other designers or my own work than make new fabrics," Collins says. She remains firm that all her art be useful if unconventional. "I often think about



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making clothing soft and intimate, filled with love and affection and passion, passing from me to other people.”

Collins’ knitwear is for the woman who wants to be the center of attention. “The Liz Collins customer is someone who is willing to be seen, talked to and approached,” she says, “because my designs are so unique and attention-getting, she is also someone who is willing to spend a little more for the effect.” Her designs are not what she considers lesbian fashion, “whatever that is, and even I don’t know.” Collins says a designer such as Parisa Parnian of Rigged OUTFitters, who specifically caters to butches and the trans community, definitely “does” dyke fashion. “Patricia Field is, of course, an out lesbian, too, but she’s more of a stylist and tastemaker.”

These days, Collins designs knitwear collections for other top fashion designers in addition to her own creations. “But,” she cautions, “I don’t know what the next few years hold — whether the Liz Collins brand as the fashion world knew it will return. It was so much work being the boss of the firm, running projections and supervising people in addition to designing.” Collins plans to spend two months at a textile factory in Peru this summer to “refine and resolve some design issues that I never had time to when I was running my own company.”

Collins lives in Providence with Davids, whom she met online. “I am a huge advocate of Internet dating,” she says with a laugh, adding that part of her courting of Davids was to send her an original Liz Collins sweater. “I am madly in love for the first time, and I am the happiest and busiest I’ve ever been.”

As to the raging argument about too-thin models, Collins weighs in on the issue. “It’s a real problem, particularly for young people to see these too-

thin models. But, I think it’s advertising more than runway fashion. I mean it’s only a select few who attend runway shows while seeing these skinny women over and over in magazines is very damaging.” Asked if designers use super-thin models as “clothes hangers” so that their designs are more prominent than the models, Collins agrees but points to innovative designers, such as Jean Paul Gaultier, who get around the issue. She references Gaultier’s show where mannequins wearing his designs were advanced around the runway with the kind of machine drycleaners use. “It’s designers like that, who take incredible risks and flout the status quo, who ultimately make an impact.”

Collins’ creative impact comes into play with the art she crafts using knitting machines. She is internationally known for creating 3-D installations in addition to clothing and textiles, and her series of performance-based knitting installations, KNITTING NATION, employs uniformed knitters working on machines to create a multisensory experience that examines what she calls “my commentary and ruminations on how humans interact with machines, global trade, fashion, and iconography.” Collins says that the only part fetishism plays in KNITTING NATION is perhaps in the uniforms the knitters wear. “You might say I have a uniform fetish,” she laughs, “in that a group of people doing the same thing wearing the same costume that defines the labor they are performing is pleasing to me.” ■

KNITTING NATION’s Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting program runs at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York City through June 17. A performance by Collins, “Phase 4: Pride,” is scheduled for the afternoon of June 16, during which she and her knitting crew plan to create a giant rainbow flag. Learn more about her at lizcollins.com.