

**Nicola Costantino**

***Boutique (Human Furriery), 2002***

Born in Rosario, Argentina, 1964. Lives and works in Buenos Aires.

**A Woman Wearing These Clothes Remains Practically Naked**

Tami Katz-Freiman

Fine leather goods meet the eye as it scans the *Boutique's* front window. Fancy evening gowns, corsets, elegant coats and sporty jackets are displayed on mannequins alongside handbags, purses, men's shoes and ladies' high heeled shoes tastefully and carefully arranged on shelves and hangers. Is this subversive art, or is it merely the latest vogue in the fashion world? It is towards that elusive split second, when the viewing context is blurred and it becomes unclear whether the experience is consumerist, design-minded or museal, that Nicola Costantino channels her creative energies.

All the fashion items in this boutique are made of 'real leather'. So real that it tempts one to touch, feel and even sniff the products. A closer look reveals a chilling resemblance to human skin. Costantino has developed and refined a unique technique of silicon casting and polyurethane injection, whereby she obtains this striking similarity. This synthetic material used to create the garments is combined with real hair, and patterned with fine casts of human nipples (always male nipples) and bodily orifices such as navels and anuses.

Operating on the borderline between art, fashion and gender, Costantino's works have been exhibited in extra-artistic contexts as well, such as in the prestigious magazine *Esquire*, or in the window of a classy Liverpool department store. The seductive power intrinsic to fashion marketing is part of her artistic strategy, just as the politics of consumerist pleasure is an integral part of her artistic agenda. This underlying ambivalence, which generates a sense of disconcert when encountering her works, is also characteristic of other contemporary female artists (such as Vanessa Beecroft and Georgina Starr): on one hand, a critique against the world of fashion that fosters a distorted perception of body and sexuality; on the other hand – a fascination with it.

Argentina is well-known for its leather industry. Thus, a leather/skin-like purse decorated with an arshole pattern acquires a cynical meaning vis-à-vis the hackneyed saying: "money has no smell." Costantino alludes to inhibition-free consumerism as a type of cannibalism, a gastronomic act of unrestrained gulping and gluttony; indeed, her works have often been read in this Marxist spirit. Her earlier pieces, in which she explicitly addressed the violence involved in the meat industry (likewise famed in Argentina), food processing, and the exploitation of animals for economic purposes, reinforce this interpretation.

The preoccupation with skin, flesh and animals is linked to the engagement with identity and the body, and is part of a critical discourse characterizing the work of many contemporary post-feminist female artists (such as Jana Sterbak, Kiki Smith and Janine Antoni). The affinity between 'nature' and 'culture' is one of the fundamental issues emerging in the context of gender (woman = nature / man=culture). The body, and especially the skin, has become a symbolic

platform on which the struggle for the politics of representation takes place.

Being an external site, the boundary marking the borders of the organism, the skin becomes the metaphoric bulletin board of identity.

Costantino's work emphasizes the defiance of social taboos, undermining the regime of prohibitions and conventions regarding that which is considered apt and orderly and that which is dubbed inapt, abnormal, contemptible and abject.\*

The horror taking over the viewer when observing *haute couture* made of human skin calls to mind the horror evoked by the film *Silence of the Lambs*. Our sensitive, exposed and vulnerable skin, our front line of defense against the world, has become a shelf commodity. It is the violation of that taboo that is so chilling. The interruption of order subverts everything included under the definitions of 'culture' and 'good taste'.

In this spirit, one may talk about the nipple corset and hairy belly-button coat as part of the discourse of the uncanny and repressed, the very heart of Surreal thought. A woman wearing these clothes remains practically naked. It is a visual tautology based on a distinctive Surreal syntax. In view of the fact that Surrealism became so naturally naturalized in Argentina, as in many other Latin American countries, it is particularly interesting to compare these pieces with Surreal objects such as Meret Oppenheim's fur cup.\*\*

The blurring of identities, ironic mutations and macabre humor have all remained diversion strategies in discussing the fear of death. It seems nothing comes close to the fashion culture and joy of consumption as the ultimate diversions celebrating the transient and ephemeral. Costantino's fashion items are, thus,

yet another reminder of human hubris – a chic ‘vanitas’ collection, a type of ‘nature morte’ placed on a hanger and displayed on a shelf, which like the extinguished candle, the withering flower and the skull, attests to the transitoriness of life.

\* Julia Kristeva, “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,” trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

\*\* See Paulo Herkenhoff’s essay which places Nicola Costantino on the historical continuum of female artists who carry on a Surreal tradition: Meret Oppenheim, Frida Kahlo, and Louise Bourgeois, in: exhibition catalogue *Nicola Costantino*, 2001, Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino, Rosario, pp. 28-29.

Translation: Daria Kassovsky