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Exhibition Review: *Hussein Chalayan: From Fashion and Back*

**Reviewed by
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There are two types of fashion exhibitions: the stodgily old-fashioned and the artfully experimental. The latter is reflected in the Design Museum's *From Fashion and Back*, a fifteen-year mid-career retrospective of conceptual and multi-disciplinary designer, Hussein Chalayan. In an exhibition that goes literally beyond the walls of the gallery space to a display in the Design Museum tank outside by the river, Chalayan-designed T-shirts in the boutique, Chalayan-selected Turkish coffee in the café, this show crosses the boundaries between clothing display and

engagement in the medium of fashion. This exhibition, much like that of Chalayan's oeuvre, spans multiple mediums and modes of display. I am, for the most part, a contemporary art critic, and so it is with these eyes that I view fashion; I compare the conventions between the display of art and fashion. I am interested in the blurring of boundaries, where installation meets artifact and the vitrine no longer separates the viewer from the object. Chalayan's influences and design processes become transparent in these displays, uniting his philosophy with the final object.

A small but substantial-feeling black-and-white exhibition guide accompanies the exhibition. Designed by Abake Studio, it includes a map with detailed explanations and images. These entries correspond to large sans serif capital letters adhered to the wall, denoting each thematic section as a collection. A mannequin wearing a dress lifted by helium-filled balloons from the *Kinship Journey* collection (Fall/Winter 2003; Figure 1), stands at the base of the stairwell leading up to the exhibition. On a following landing are framed examples of Chalayan's *Airmail Dress* (December 1999) in various states of unfolding.



Figure 1

Hussein Chalayan: *From Fashion and Back. Kinship Journeys* (October 2003). Photograph: Luke Hayes.

Finally, the exhibition opens at the top of the stairs. Past and present meet: a nod to Chalayan's beginnings comes in the form of a preserved-looking piece from his 1994 graduating show, *The Tangent Flows*. Yet it is a noisy fan that commands attention, creating real movement for his recent speed-inspired and molded latex dresses on display from the Spring/Summer 2009 collection, *Inertia* (Figure 2). Three mannequins lined up lean back as the fan blows through their hair, eyes closed. Immediately, I am reminded of the more interesting fashion exhibitions of late: the wonderful dollhouse sensibility of *The House of Viktor & Rolf* at the Barbican and the explosion of visual stimuli of *Bernhard*



Figure 2

Hussein Chalayan: *From Fashion and Back*. *Inertia* (Spring/Summer 2009). Photograph: Luke Hayes.

Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel at Antwerp's ModeMuseum. Like these shows, *From Fashion and Back* allows the viewer to engage with and occupy the same space as the fashion, breaking away more traditional and hierarchical modes of displaying artifacts. One such notable installation can be found in the *Panoramic* collection (Fall/Winter 1998; Figure 3), whereby three mannequins stand on step stools, and paint a curved section of wall. This enactment could not be more literal in aligning Chalayan's work with art and philosophy.

Taking direction from the exhibition guide, I moved easily between installations. There is a lot to look at and not very much space to maneuver, especially with the visiting school groups. Luckily, space-saving measures are in place as some collections are shown as videos or, as in the case with *Ambimorphous* (Fall/Winter 2002), a back-lit photograph. Where room divisions are not possible, airy and open vertical



Figure 3

Hussein Chalayan: *From Fashion and Back. Panoramic* (Fall/Winter 1998). Photograph: Luke Hayes.

blinds separate spaces yet allow for breathing room and fluidity. Enclosed spaces such as Chalayan's *After Words* collection (Fall/Winter 2000; Figure 4) channel a museum quality that is suitable not because the notion of an exhibition is culturally situated in a museum, but because it is conceptually sound for the fashion objects displayed. Just as a video room would best communicate movement, sound, and color, the living room layout of these convertible furniture pieces as fashion are best suited to a modern design show aesthetic. In a pseudo-living room fashion, a flat screen monitor plays back the runway show of models transforming the chair covers into clothes, chairs into suitcases, and the coffee table into a skirt.

Chalayan's philosophy is easily communicated in simple, yet effective exhibition display decisions. His technological and futuristic aesthetic is apparent in details such as the LED (light-emitting diode) signs denoting each project or collection. Such design choices have dual-fold purposes, solving the problem of often poorly lighted texts in exhibition spaces while creating an immersive environment that is distinctly Chalayan-like. Interspersed among the collections are his professional



Figure 4

Hussein Chalayan: *From Fashion and Back. After Words* (Fall/Winter 2000). Photograph: Luke Hayes.

projects, which create a comprehensive overview of his complete design practice. The narrative framework in which he works, including architecture, design, philosophy, anthropology, science, and technology, is a lateral one. From *Place to Passage* (October 2003), a short film collaboration with digital designers Neutral, to *The Absent Presence* (June 2005), Chalayan's work representing Turkey at the 51st Venice Biennale and featuring Tilda Swinton, it is clear that his collaborations are well respected, as his influence extends beyond the field of fashion.

Active displays of Chalayan's fashion of the future: a video-like dress featuring underlying LEDs and Swarovski crystals from *Airborne* (Fall/Winter 2007) and a moving laser beam dress from the *Readings* collection (Spring/Summer 2008), allow a glimpse into conceptual works to which audiences would otherwise not have access. It is these pieces that showcase not only spectacle, but also Chalayan's technologically forward thinking. Perhaps the same could have been done for the animatronic dresses in the collection *One Hundred and Eleven* (Spring/Summer 2007), which, unfortunately, are only shown via the runway presentation on video.

The exhibition's various modes and methods of presentation are directly connected to Chalayan's diverse exploration into numerous mediums. It is through these modes of seeing that turn passive viewership into active participation and experience. They communicate Chalayan's vision in adapting to our changing world.