

Second skins: cloth, difference and the art of transformation

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I take the photographic portraits of Maud Sulter and Chan-Hyo Bae as my point of departure to explore (i) the place of cloth in the refashioning of cultural, racial and gendered identities, and (ii) the use of cloth as a vehicle with which to challenge structures of power that render certain peoples, their histories and their cultural expressions invisible.

Staged at the Ben Uri Gallery, London, 2013, the exhibition *Looking In* juxtaposed the work of Sulter and Bae. The show featured seven photographs from Sulter's *Zabat* series (1989), depicting African and African diasporic women artists as the Greek Muses. This was contrasted against nine self-portraits from Bae's *Existing in Costume* series (2006-2013), which emerged from his migration to Great Britain from Korea in 2004. There are clear parallels between these artists' use of cloth. Both embrace masquerade as a subversive strategy; masking becomes an art of transformation that questions normalised assumptions about difference.

Keywords: dcloth; masquerade; gender; race; diaspora; borders.

Introduction

"Second skins: cloth, difference and the art of transformation" takes as its point of departure the photographic portraits of Maud Sulter and Chan-Hyo Bae to explore (i) the place of cloth in the refashioning of cultural, racial and gendered identities, and (ii) the use of cloth as a vehicle with which to challenge hierarchical structures of power that render certain peoples, their histories and their cultural expressions invisible.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Maud Sulter, *Urania (Portrait of Lubaina Himid)*; Zabat, 1989, Photograph, dye destruction print, 122 x 153 cm.

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Staged at the Ben Uri Gallery, London (9 July-22 September 2013), the exhibition *Looking In* juxtaposed the work of Sulter and Bae. Seven photographs from Sulter's *Zabat* series (1989) (Figure 1), depicting African and African diasporic women artists as the Greek Muses, were featured alongside nine self-portraits from Bae's *Existing in Costume* series (2006-2013) (Figure 2), which derived from his migration to Great Britain from Korea in 2004. There are clear parallels between the two artists' use of



FIGURE N° 2



Chan-Hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume (Sleeping Beauty)*, 2009, C-Print, 320 x 180 cm.

Copyright the Artist.

1. The Iniva *Second Skins: Cloth and Difference* event (30 April 2009), brought together a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary group of artists, designers, cultural critics and thinkers all working with cloth. Postcolonial in its theoretical approach, an aim was to interrogate the use of cloth as a vehicle with which to refashion and articulate individual identities in contemporary societies, where some remain marginalised and without voice. Sarat Maharaj and Sarah Quinton provided keynote addresses. Other speakers included Yasmin Canvin, Jessica Hemmings, John Hutnyk, Barbara Taylor, and artists Sokari Douglas Camp CBE, Raimi Gbadamosi, Hans Hamid Rasmussen, Margareta Kern, Grace Ndiritu, and Rosanna Raymond.

cloth, yet these similarities are not culturally and societally determined. The draping of the sitter's body in swathes of tie-dyed indigo cotton, or the clothing of it in a voluminous leg-o-mutton sleeved green brocade dress, is at once a method of communication and a means of resisting society's constraints. In these moments the sitters' identities are temporarily re-fashioned out of the conscious interweaving of cultures, and performed through the manipulation of cloth.

In this article, I pick up the thread of the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), event *Second Skins: Cloth and Difference*, which I conceived and developed in 2009.¹ expand the notion of "cloth and difference" to include a coming together of race, culture and gender, opening up the politics of cloth to include other feminisms such as Black Feminism, as well as definitions of masculinity that look beyond the west. Cultural and gendered identities are considered as multi-dimensional, psychosocial constructs, whose characteristics are created and communicated through

representation and material culture, one element of which is cloth. Clothing is seen as a kind of border that mediates the meeting point between the 'public, exterior persona' and the 'private, interior identity', to reference Malcolm Barnard (1996:173).

Setting this article into the context of my post-doctoral research, my concern is with the connection between fractured African diaspora narratives, postcolonial life writing and creative making. I am interested in the disconnections/connections between personal histories and dominant received histories, how neglected or obscured diaspora histories can be mapped through textiles or how history can be 'worked by hand' (hooks 2007:326).

In examining the works of Sulter and Bae I ask: how are shifting notions of the 'self' and the 'other' articulated through cloth? My argument is thus underpinned by an exploration of the role of cloth in the re-creation of self, a theme that is central to diasporic experiences, and to the negotiation of cultural, social and racial borders. Indeed, a defining feature of diasporic experiences is the negotiation of physical and metaphorical borders. Drawing on Homi K Bhabha's (1994) and Frantz Fanon's (1986) writings, the border is seen here as both a site of transformation and a space of innovation.

What captures my imagination is the theatricality of Sulter's and Bae's portraits; the way in which each image has been carefully staged making use of props such as a drum, or an African sculpture, or a mechanical toy robot. I am intrigued by the way in which each sitter has been meticulously dressed; the way every gesture, every pose, carries meaning. Cloth – whether cut and tailored into historical costume, or loosely shaped around the body – is utilised as a vital tool in the construction and performance of identity. Cloth is pivotal to Sulter's sitters' and Bae's own masquerades. It is used to close the distance between the 'public exterior persona' and the 'private, interior identity' of each sitter (Barnard 1996:173) and to articulate refashioned cultural, racial and gendered diasporic identities that challenge stereotypical view of others grounded in colonialist thinking.

I frame my discussion to follow with two quotes. The first, by Martin Heidegger, is as cited in the opening pages of Bhabha's seminal text, *The location of culture*: 'a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing' (Heidegger cited in Bhabha 1994:1).

The second is taken from the British Museum's "Africa" gallery wall text (c 2002):

Masquerade is an art of transformation. Masquerades often occur at the changes of the seasons and rites of passage ... they often maintain and express [the] secret knowledge [of insider groups].

I return to these passages later in my discussion.

Looking In

In the exhibition *Looking In*, Sulter and Bae interrogate their positions within British society and western art history. Their works are about the traces of colonialist thinking that remain; about inclusion and exclusion; visibility and invisibility; about stereotypical definitions of gender, culture and race. Both embrace the boundary-crossing potential of costume and masquerade as subversive strategies. Masking, under Sulter's and Bae's respective lenses, becomes an act of transformation through which hetero-normative assumptions about difference are troubled. The staging and performance of each masquerade poses a challenge to notions of self and other. But what role does cloth play in this process?

Much of Sulter's work – both her writings and her visual art practice – is concerned with the critique of received British history, the foregrounding of African diasporic culture and heritage, and the questioning of the relative absence of black women in the received history of photography. The word "zabat" – the title of the series of images shown at the Ben Uri Gallery – describes a traditional ritual danced by women on 'occasions of power' (Sulter 1989). The *Zabat* series is Sulter's response to the 150th anniversary of the invention of photography in 1989. The images evolved from a collaborative process between artist and sitter. The sitters are all female creative practitioners from a range of disciplines, for example, visual artist Lubaina Himid is depicted as Urania, Muse of Astronomy, writers Alice Walker and Dorothea Smartt are shown as Phalia, Muse of Comedy and Bringer of Flowers and Clio, Muse of History.

Similarly, in his *Existing in Costume* series, Bae questions his place as a Korean male living within British society. He states that as an Asian man, he sees himself as being invisible to British women, adding that he finds it 'difficult to engage easily and fully' with [British] culture, since he feels 'isolated' and 'alienated' within it (Bae cited in Barron 2013:17). With the exception of Hollywood's stereotypical martial arts caricatures, images of Asian men are seldom seen in western popular culture. Furthermore, Asia itself is often seen as femininised. Bae places himself centre stage

in reconstructions of traditional European fairytales such as Cinderella and Rapunzel, using cloth to challenge his sense of isolation, alienation and invisibility.

Urania (Portrait of Lubaina Himid); Zabat

I now shift focus to the photograph of Lubaina Himid as Urania, daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne. In classical representations, Urania is typically depicted draped in undulating folds of cloth embroidered with stars and carrying a globe in her left hand, and a small rod or staff in her right. In Sulter's images, her classical drapes are replaced by a loose-fitting tie-dye indigo tunic dress, or *djellaba*. In place of her rod and globe are what appear to be two large wooden discs carved with symbols relating to African cosmology, but are actually cardboard plates masquerading as ancient African artefacts.

Indigo, of course, is one of the oldest known dyes, having been in use since 2500BC. Indigo dyeing is still a current art form in West Africa and South East Asia and also features in the artwork of contemporary African artists, such as Aboubakar Fofana whose work is nourished by his Malian heritage. The honouring, preservation and renewal of natural indigo dyeing techniques is a key driver for his seeking out of master dyers and weavers (Balshaw 2012:46-47).

In certain West African societies Indigo cloth symbolises wealth and prosperity. The distinctive deep blue colour results from a lengthy process that begins with extraction of the dye from the plant by boiling or, more typically, by beating, rolling and drying the leaves. This residue must then be fermented in an alkaline solution to render it soluble enough to penetrate the required fibers. This process takes place in large vats that are buried underground. When the vats are unearthed, the dyed fibers are yellowish in colour but return to the familiar indigo blue once exposed to the air. Indigo dyeing is a complex process, hence the association with wealth. This somewhat contradicts the apparent understated simplicity of Himid's wide-sleeved gown. However, as John Picton (2004:28) notes,

West Africa is a complex social and historical entity, and any summary account must point up the illusion of a seemingly unified presentation of the subject ... there are continuities of form, practice and idea ... but whether that amounts to a common set of values is another matter altogether.

In contrast to the association with wealth that I highlight, Picton observes that in the western Yoruba city of Abeokuta, although indigo dyed yarn was commonplace, local indigo adire cloths would only be resist or tie-dyed if they were old and worn. Nevertheless, my focus on the association with the wearing of indigo with wealth and therefore status, makes the deployment of this particular garment by Sulter and Himid fitting, on such an ‘occasion of power’ to return to the origins of the Zabat ritual (Sulter 1989).

Sulter and Himid’s decision to dress their contemporary brown-skinned Urania in loose fitting *djellabas* parallels the wearing of traditional robes by some formerly colonised African peoples in the “moment” of achieving independence. Documentary photographs of pre- and post-independence Ghana, for example, show Kwame Nkrume’s shift from wearing Savile Row-style tailored suits to traditional printed cotton tunics, visually marking a break from the past. Clothing has always been part of the means through which society’s experience of the social order is constructed. The distribution and mechanism of power within that social order are experienced as legitimate. Thus Sulter’s and Himid’s choice of traditional dress visually marks not only a reversal of power, but also the refashioning of complex cultural, racial and gendered identities temporarily free of the colonial gaze.

In Sulter’s *Urania*, the indigo cloth combines with the flow and volume of the tunic dress to create an authoritative aristocratic air. Increased bulk in dress is a marker of a higher social status in West Africa and drape and elegance in movement is an important aspect of West African dress aesthetics. From a social psychology of clothing perspective, JC Flugel (1930:36) suggests that because they enhance the bulk of the body, thereby allowing it to occupy more space – dress and adornment become extensions of the bodily self, and as such, can serve to increase the stature and therefore the perceived status of the wearer. The colour blue, particularly from a western perspective, is associated with serenity, calm and spirituality, yet can also denote sadness; the ‘blues’ or, as Nina Simone sang, that ‘mood indigo’. Himid, though uncharacteristically still and silent, almost screams from the page. Here, her composure is unsettling. Read twenty-four years later against what is known of Himid’s tireless work with museums, archives and galleries on the unearthing of hidden diaspora histories in Britain, and the raising of the visibility of black women artists, Sulter’s image takes on a new poignancy.

Where the Greek Urania is typically shown looking up to the stars, Himid looks directly at the viewer – quietly challenging him/her to look and take note. The overall effect is completed by the use of an ornate gilt frame that places Sulter’s photograph into the tradition of European portrait painting.

As stated in the Victoria and Albert Museum's contextual notes (2014): 'The contrast between these anachronistic and aristocratic styles and the actual histories of her sitters is used to poetic effect and also raises questions about the nature of "national" heritage.'

By repositioning her black female sitters as Greek Muses, Sulter elegantly reverses the colonial gaze that fixes these women as other, and relegates them to subservience at best and at worst invisibility. Furthermore, where the Muses in western art operate in the 'realm of passive inspiration' (Butchart 2013:21), Sulter's Muses are active; they are co-collaborators in the amplification of female presence, and the critique, or removal of the stubborn stain of colonial discourse, the troubling trace of the west and the rest thinking that colours western art history.

Existing in Costume

Turning now to Bae's images: *Existing in Costume 1*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Bae's title, *Existing in Costume*, clearly resonates with the central concern of this article, that is, how we who are relegated to the periphery, use cloth as a subversive strategy to refashion our identities and to disrupt the hierarchical power structures that shape prescriptive representations of difference. The phrase itself suggests that cloth or clothing is the means through which existence or visibility can be readily achieved. His appropriation of British early Tudor and late Victorian female dress, together with the tension between the whitening out of his face and the leaving bare of his brown-skinned hands, draws visual attention to and exaggerates his articulation of otherness. The prominence of his hands is especially fascinating – this is not a simple cross-dressing exercise; nor is it merely a reversal of the 'Western tradition of travesty or breeches roles' (Butchart 2013:21).

Through the appropriation of iconic images of Britishness such as Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, and well-known fairytales of western origin, for instance – *Sleeping beauty* and *Beauty and the beast* – Bae sets up a double narrative that weaves its way in and out of his central themes: femininity, masculinity, race, desire, deception, destruction, love. His restaging of these children's stories calls to mind Angela Carter's darkly Gothic yet highly sensual re-workings in the anthology *The bloody chamber and other stories* (1979). Carter, for example, retells the classic tale of *Beauty and the beast* in *The courtship of Mr Lyon* and *The tiger's bride*. Although *The courtship of Mr Lyon* is set in London, in modern times, the narrative follows the original version, ending with the Beast's true identity being revealed once Beauty and the Beast declare their love for one another via a kiss: 'when her lips touched the meat-hook claws, they drew back into their pads and she saw how he had always kept his fists

clenched but now, painfully, tentatively, at last began to stretch his fingers' (Carter 1979:51).The Beast is human after all. They live happily ever after.

However, in *The tiger's bride*, the couple's declaration of love causes them both to be transformed. The Beast Milord's mask slips to reveal that he is, in fact, a tiger. Beauty, no longer bound by the idea of women as the weaker, fairer sex, also becomes a tiger: 'each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin ... and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs' (Carter 1979:67). The match is one of equals. They live happily ever after.

Bae's photographic retellings brush against those meanings evident in Carter's texts. In casting himself as all the characters, he simultaneously critiques the conflation of femininity with a particular kind of western beauty, with innocence and with passivity, whilst raising the undesirability, or perceived asexuality of Asian men, and exposing the feminisation of Asian masculinity; indeed, he highlights the feminisation of Asia itself– a concept that is rooted in the self-affirmations of the west as pinpointed in Edward Said's study *Orientalism* (2003). Through the construct of Orientalism, the Orient (primarily the Middle East in Said's text and Asia in a contemporary context) was constructed as the west's opposite or other. If the west, or the Occident, was rational, civilised, dominant and therefore gendered masculine, then the Orient was exotic, uncivilised, passive and therefore gendered feminine (Said 2003). In addition, the whitening out of his face points to notions of beauty rooted in the equation of whiteness to purity, virginity, and the Anglo-Saxon 'ideal'. The prominence of Bae's brown hands – their strength and colour, their sheer brownness – set against the intricate patterning of each of his costumes, parallels the slipping of Milord's mask in Carter's *The tiger's bride*. The fallacy of this somewhat outmoded feminine ideal is revealed, as are the many myths surrounding the male Asian other. Viewers are given a glimpse of the complex multiple subject positions or "doublings of consciousness"² Bae occupies. The boundary between male and female, east and west is shaken. The masquerade ends. But does anyone, can anyone live happily ever after?

2. I use the phrase "doublings of consciousness" to highlight the tensions between the multiple-subjectivities characteristic of being in diaspora, belonging not to one culture or another but to both. The phrase itself is drawn from WEB Du Bois's (1994:2) notion of 'double consciousness' which describes the tension between being both African and American, striving to measure oneself against someone else's measuring tape and always coming up short.

Cloth, difference and the art of transformation

Amber Butchart (2013:25) draws a parallel between Sulter's and Bae's photographic works and the nineteenth-century Victorian 'fancy portrait'. Commissioned by 'artistic and literary circles', according to Butchart (2013:25), 'fancy portraits' captured the then interests in 'revivalism and pre-industrial fantasies'. In using these terms, she refers to the ways in which historical costumes are worn to reconnect the wearer to



FIGURE **N° 3**



Malick Sidibé, *Untitled*, 1975/2003, Vintage silver gelatin print, 5 3/8 x 3 1/4 inches image size, 15 1/8 x 12 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches framed, 14 1/8 x 12 1/2 inches framed.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

past values that in turn shape the present and potentially framed the future. However, in my view, one cannot look at Sulter's and Bae's portraits without considering the use of 'fancy' costume as a way of amplifying the 'private interior identity' from the point of view of diasporic peoples (Barnard 1996:173). One cannot look at Sulter's



FIGURE **N° 4**



Malick Sidibé, *Le Deux Amies*, 1971/2001, Vintage silver gelatin print, 4 1/2 x 3 inches image size, 11 1/8 x 9 1/8 x 1 inches framed.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

and Bae's portraits without therefore also considering the everyday masquerades depicted in the studio portraits of Birmingham's Ernest Dyche, or those of Mali's Seydou Keta and Malick Sidibe (Figures 3 & 4), or even the hyper-real, contemporary "swagger portraits" of New York based artist, Kehinde Wiley.

Through a series of highly finished paintings presented on the exhibition *The World Stage: Jamaica*, held at the Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, 2013, Wiley raised the profiles of everyday Jamaica people by re-presenting them in classic eighteenth and nineteenth century poses. In his exhibition, Wiley brought together the extensive research undertaken by the artist in Jamaica – in the dance halls, on the beaches in Negril, in the streets of Trench Town in Kingston – and research conducted in key British galleries and museums, such as the John Soane Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, London. Opposition, resistance and play collide here! Wiley plays with images of power; with the history of European painting and with the marker of Englishness in British material culture, that is, William Morris. In this way, like an Anancy figure, Wiley artfully comments on the history of Jamaica and its close but uneven relationship with Britain, the island’s former colonial master. The sitter’s sideways glance subjected on the viewer is a powerful act of counter gaze that parallels Himid’s direct stare. Wiley’s show stopping “swagger portraits” may appear playful, but they are deeply serious. As Wiley (2013) himself claims, this is ‘beating-the-chest’ art.³ There is so much more to say about this work and what it reveals about black and brown masculinities but this is not an appropriate forum for such extended discussion.

What Sulter’s and Bae’s studio photographs and Wiley’s hyper-real paintings have in common, is that they have the potential to simultaneously raise awareness of cross-cultural entanglements and interwoven histories on a global scale, by appropriating and re-inscribing recognisable visual tropes, or traditions, in art and culture. They question the positions of those in diaspora within western society and art history.

Reflecting on Sulter’s and Bae’s use of cloth, I am reminded of Irving Goffman’s (1959:234-235) statement that ‘when one appears in a public space, one consciously and subconsciously projects a concept of one’s inner self, at the same time as projecting a reading, or definition, of the situation’. The projection of one’s inner self, or indeed one’s ‘private, interior identity’ (Barnard 1996:173), is key to these artists’ work and to my argument. As appearance is re-fashioned, ‘public space’ is re-negotiated, and vice versa. In this case, the ‘public space’ is constituted first by the bricks and mortar gallery, and secondly, by the metaphorical space of received historical canons. Both sitter and viewer are momentarily transformed.

And so through encasing the body in tie-dyed indigo cotton, clothing it in a leg-o-mutton sleeved green brocade dress, and adorning it in a “cut ‘n’ mix”, psychedelic clash of colour and pattern, the border between the interior self and the outside presentation, between the private and the public, is ruptured. This amplification, or

3. A film depicting Wiley’s process was presented alongside the portraits. The camera follows him as he conducts his research in Jamaica and in London. He speaks candidly about his influences, the hierarchical nature of the art world and the representation of black and brown people. Wiley (2013) uses the phrase ‘beating-the-chest’ to describe his own work in the film.

“presencing” of the inner self acts, I believe, as a counter gaze, challenging received understandings of the other. Through these portraits, Sulter and Bae interrogate and undo binary essentialist west and the rest thinking. They visually capture the notion that culture itself is by nature, as Bhabha (1994:1-19) writes, complex and multi-faceted. They convey what it is to occupy the space in-between, and, to draw on Bhabha (1994:1-19) again, to be neither one thing nor another. In doing so, they simultaneously resist the oft-repeated stereotypical representations of black women, as either ever-smiling Mammies, devoid of sexuality, or overtly sexualised red-hot Mommas, and of Asian men as femininised, where ‘femininity’ is taken to mean passivity. I would also argue that Wiley’s colourful hyper-real dandy with his sideways look resists by ‘signifyin’ on the stereotype of the flashily dressed black male, to use Henry Louis Gates’ (1988) term. Wiley’s sitter is “cuttin’ ‘im eye on yuh”, to fall back on my somewhat limited Jamaican patois.⁴

What is highlighted in each portrait is a state of emergence that is integral to the negotiation of physical and metaphorical borders characteristic of diasporic experiences. In each portrait, the experiences of those that do not reflect the predominant, mainstream representations of gender are underscored. However, the state of emergence is temporary; freedom and transformation are fleeting. The re-creation of self, the refashioning of one’s identity, is something that is ongoing. It never reaches completion. It is always in process. As Frantz Fanon (1986:229, 231) writes on the refashioning of his own African diasporic body, ‘In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself ... And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle to freedom’.

Reading “freedom” as “presence”, parallels can be drawn between Fanon, Bhabha and the Heidegger (cited in Bhabha 1994:1) quote that I began with: ‘a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing’.

In summation, these images reveal the way in which cloth, like a second skin, or even a chrysalis, facilitates transformation, mapping a state of emergence, allowing “presencing” to begin. Cloth clearly plays a central role in the refashioning of cultural, racial and gendered identities. It provides a vehicle with which to challenge the structures of power that render certain peoples, their histories and their cultural expressions invisible. The sitters’ dressed bodies mimic that of a masquerade performer, making the familiar unfamiliar, marking the rite of passage from one sense of being to another, facilitating transformation and thus heralding wider change.

4. The literal translation of “cuttin’ ‘im eye on yuh” into Standard English is “cutting his eye on you”, meaning looking down on someone with a degree of condescension or contempt.

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