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Alumni Magazine of the Fashion Institute of Technology

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FIT

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Covers: Front, mannequin by Mondo; back, mannequin by Adel Rootstein. Photos by Paul Whicheloe

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL WHICHELOE

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MANNEQUINS

Everything you need to know about fiberglass people

by Alex Joseph



SHOULD YOU PLAN to explore the world of mannequins, know this: The people who manufacture them, dress them, and position them in displays, usually refer to females as “the girls.”

“This is exciting,” Anne Kong says. “Some press for the girls.” For the benefit of a photographer, Kong, assistant professor, Visual Presentation and Exhibition Design (VPED), unlocks an out-of-the-way closet in FIT’s Pomerantz Art and Design Center, revealing a room full of stunning, realistic mannequins. There’s a “Toukie Smith,” created by leading mannequin design firm Adel Rootstein, and one of the first modeled on a black person. A male creation by the firm Mondo, Kong points out, was also based on a unique human being. “His head was not put on anybody else’s body. He’s *somebody*.” There are plus-sized mannequins, Asian mannequins, and “lifestyle” mannequins that slouch, lounge, and lean. Kong, who has worked in the display field more than 30 years, is the college’s resident mannequin expert. Their individuality impresses her. “When you buy Rootstein you get the real person, no breast enhancements, hip downsizing, or butt reduction. Every one of these girls has a social security number and a thumbprint, as it were.”

Not all mannequins are realistic, of course. The Schläppi (usually pronounced “schleppy”), a popular Swiss model, has only the suggestion of a face. Gap and Banana Republic are known for using headless figures. These abstract versions offer versatility. “You can put anything on a Schläppi and she looks great,” says Clinton Ridgeway, visual coordinator for Le Château, one of Canada’s largest retailers.

Throughout mannequin history, “there’s been a constant back and forth” between realistic and abstract models, says Glenn Sokoli ’90, a VPED instructor. One could argue that abstracts came first. Dress forms, used for fit purposes and lacking heads, hands, and individuality, have existed for thousands of years. A wooden figure found beside a box of clothes in King Tut’s tomb may be the first one, according to *Smithsonian* magazine. The word mannequin originates from the Dutch *manneken* (“little man”), and their precursors may have been the dolls European monarchs once sent out as examples of national fashion. Charles IV of France sent one to Richard II of England, as part of a peace negotiation, in 1396.

It wasn’t until the 19th century that the modern mannequin—a tool for selling clothes—emerged. Where and when they were first introduced has been debated, though certain factors made their use possible. By midcentury, electric lights and newly invented plate glass helped create a stage for them in store windows. The spread of ready-to-wear meant shoppers could be enticed to buy an outfit featured in such a display. One early esteemed window dresser was L. Frank Baum, who wrote several books on the subject, as well as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Made of wax and wood, the first mannequins had glass eyes, authentic-looking teeth, and real human hair. Weighing up to 300 pounds and spooky looking, they were prone to melt under hot lights and on summer days. In 1925, *Vogue* reported on a new development at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris: “The art



Photos 1, 4, 6, Ralph Pucci workroom and studio. Others, VPED’s collection at FIT.



MANNEQUINS IN MUSEUMS

The last time you went to a costume exhibition, did you notice the mannequins? You probably weren't supposed to. Visitors should notice the clothes instead, according to Fred Dennis, exhibitions manager, and Tommy Synnamm, technologist, at The Museum at FIT. Abstraction is preferred, since realistic faces can distract from the garments. (Schläppi are favorites.) The exceptions are shows with a theatrical aspect, like the museum's 1999 exhibition about flamboyant designer Bob Mackie; for that, the museum used, among others, a Rootstein that looked like Cher. For period shows, special mannequins from Japan's Kyoto Costume Institute (torsos and heads, right) save display experts extra padding work. They feature sloped shoulders, posteriors that support bustles, and "corseted-looking" midsections that are also ideal for Empire-waist dresses.



of the mannequin, which did not previously exist, has been perfected." They were referring to new art deco abstract figures, which proved short lived. Until World War II, most mannequins manufactured in Europe were realistic, with a distinctly Germanic look. Americans, including display designer Lester Gaba, creator of "Cynthia" in 1932, modernized their materials and appearance.

Cynthia was not like other girls. Made of plaster, she had freckles, pigeon toes, and, like many actual women, different-sized feet. Gaba squired this 100-pound figure to New York theater and society events, and posed with her around town for *Life* magazine. The line of Gaba Girls featured, perhaps for the first time in mannequin history, "regular" Americans—"Not a lifted pinkie in the lot," Gaba later wrote.

During the war, their appearance shifted again. "Mannequin expressions became severe," Clinton Ridgeway says. "In the '50s, they were happier." They lost weight, too, as their materials changed; today, most are fiberglass and weigh roughly 30 pounds.

The venerable Schläppi debuted in 1952 and is still produced today. She is largely unaltered by the vagaries of fashion, while other girls come and go. Looks and poses tend to date badly: "In the '70s and '80s, mannequins tended to look a little 'high,'" says Tommy Synnamm, who works on displays for The Museum at FIT. "Now they're more relaxed, sexier, simpler." Alas, they also tend to fall. "They chip, they break their ears," Anne Kong says, and having them refinished costs as much as \$400. Still, with proper care, they can survive quite a while. Ridgeway says, "I've got Rootstein girls from 1974, and they're still workin'."

The firm created by Adel Rootstein (1930-92) holds the trophy for making mannequins based on real people. One of the British designer's early successes, in 1966, was "Twiggy." "Rootstein always finds 'the person of the time,'" Kong says. "It's not the most popular girl; it's the one whose particular body language reflects the period." The Twiggy figure stood without support, in part because she was made to wear flats, not high heels. The company's executive vice president, Michael Steward, says, "A good mannequin is well balanced enough to stand up on its own." (Some mannequins have a "foot rod" or "butt rod" that fixes them to a base.)

Ralph Pucci began making mannequins in his 18th Street factory in 1976. Back then, he says, "all mannequins were ladylike and elegant, with chic, fashionable poses." The jogging gear then in vogue, and athletic fashion images by photographers Herb Ritts and Bruce Weber, inspired his first line of abstracts. Since then, "lifestyle" mannequins, with active and idiosyncratic poses, have grown increasingly popular. "Just standing there' is passé," Ridgeway says.

Rootstein's "Dianne Brill," from 1989, is posed as if making a big entrance. Steward says Brill was the ideal mannequin model. "She was the house model for Thierry Mugler, and also worked for Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood. Her husband owned Danceteria, and Warhol called her 'Queen of the Night.'" Brill's shape—36-inch bust, tiny waist, and full derriere—was fashionable, too. She was promoted as the Shape of the Decade. "They're her real measurements. Her look was a reaction to the waif look that was so popular then," Kong says.

In the recession of the early '90s, budget cuts turned the trend against realistic mannequins, which look best in elaborate (read: labor-intensive) displays, while minimalistic abstracts are at home in simpler settings. Mass retailers like Gap chose abstracts. Now the pendulum is swinging back: "Fashion is in a romantic phase again," and it's easier to engage a shopper's imagination with realism, she says. Steward agrees. "Fashion's been minimal for so long—so Jil-Sander-Prada-esque," he says. "There was so much homogenization that people are welcoming back a more flamboyant feeling. They want hair, makeup, the whole thing."

MANNEQUIN FASHION SHOW

Once a year, mannequin manufacturers hold a fashion show—only it's the viewers who walk, while the "models" remain perfectly still. The three-day event, organized by the National Association of Display Industries (NADI), is held in New York in early December. Major display companies, including Adel Rootstein, DK Display, and Mondo, premiere their latest wares for mannequin buyers across the country. Ralph Pucci's display for the 2007 show is pictured above.

Pucci has a different take on contemporary fashion. Over the years, he has collaborated with artists, including illustrators Maira Kalman and Ruben Toledo, pop surrealist Kenny Scharf, and designer Anna Sui. The defiantly proud look of Toledo's "Birdie," a size 16, was considered groundbreaking when she debuted in 2000. Kalman's figures looked like pink-haired cartoon characters; Scharf created a purple-skinned cyclops. But unlike Kong and Steward, Pucci says the current look is "cleaner, simpler, more minimal." Increasingly overburdened display staffs means abstraction is the future. "The realistic mannequin is a dinosaur," he says.

One new trend has nothing to do with the girls. "Male mannequins are very much in vogue," says David Terveen, president of DK Display, which represents European mannequin makers to stores across North America. In the past, certain retailers wouldn't use males because they were considered fey. "These days," he says, "men shop for themselves. Male mannequins showed men how to layer, use color and stripes. They taught men how to shop." Terveen thinks the trend of J-Lo- and Beyoncé-inspired "big booty" for female mannequins will pass, but Clinton Ridgeway says, "The boys are definitely getting beefier." *Au contraire*, says Dina Meindl, Display and Exhibit Design '95, northeast regional sales manager at Mondo Mannequins. The skinny silhouette rules, she says: "We tried making plus-size males. They haven't gone anywhere."

In 1999, an exhibition mounted by FIT graduate students explored the relationship between mannequins and fine art. American artists Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol had early careers in display, and the windows of Simon Doonan, Barneys creative director, have incorporated work by artists Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger. Pucci says it's not so simple: "I want to treat mannequins as sculpture, but I'm well aware that they have to wear clothing." Terveen is emphatic: "What we're creating has only one purpose—to sell clothing. If it doesn't work, it doesn't sell." Perhaps the Rootsteins come closest to art. As Ridgeway says, "Those girls have life."

Of the mannequin's appeal, Lester Gaba wrote, "Remember that the woman your customer wants to look like is the woman she envies." Not all mannequins look enviable, but their human qualities can be unnerving in certain contexts. In a 1993 episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine is shocked to see a store display with a figure that resembles her being spanked. A few years ago, Daffy's created an ad campaign with mannequins. The next week, a gruesome murder was committed, and the killer's picture ran in all the media. The retailer's dummy looked exactly like the murderer. The ad was pulled.

At FIT, after two hours of shooting, Anne Kong returns the mannequins to their closet. It is hard not to think of them in the dark, waiting for someone to tell their story. Perhaps, just for once, they would like the opportunity to speak for themselves.

TALKING WITH SIMON DOONAN

Barneys creative director Simon Doonan is known for his outrageous window displays and rapier wit. He emailed us answers to a few questions about his experience working with fiberglass people.

Did you ever have a nightmare about mannequins?

I always dream that I am dragging them around looking for a base-plate which fits—and herniating myself.

Which are easier to work with—girls or boys?

Girls!!! They are so much lighter—fewer hernias!!!

Do you have a favorite one?

I loved the Violetta Sanchez by Rootstein—very snotty and languid.

Do you prefer realistic ones or abstract?

We have not used realistic mannequins for years—they tend to look older and more old-school glam. Abstract mannequins are a better blank canvas for the clothing. This is the Barneys approach. Rootsteins look great in Escada and Saint John.

What's the worst mannequin display you've seen?

There is no such thing as a bad display. Lousy amateurish displays are always fun—and therefore they are good. I love the displays at Goodwill, with missing fingers and cockeyed wigs.



*by Alex Joseph
photographs by Paul Whicheloe*

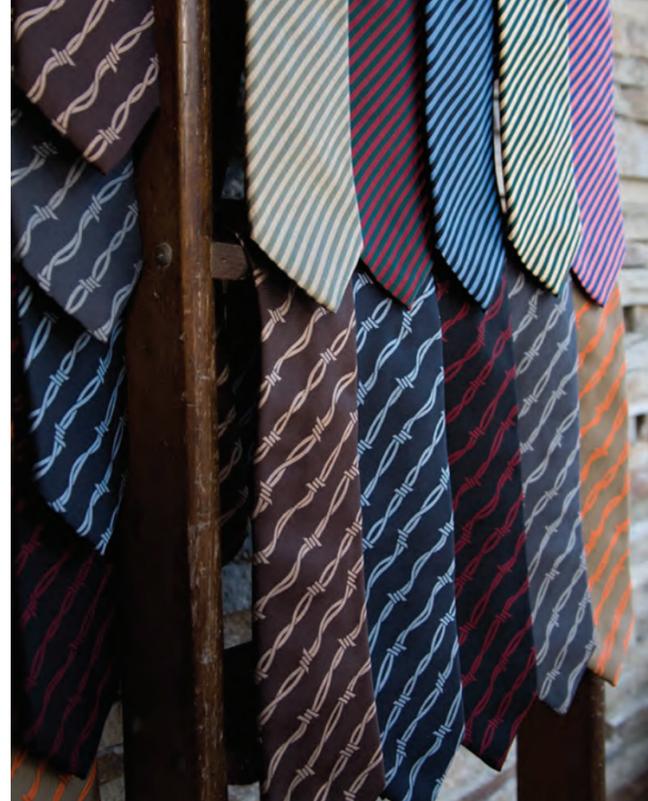
What's in Store

WITH HIS FIRST SHOP AND NEW POSITION AT
LIZ CLAIBORNE, JOHN BARTLETT, MENSWEAR '88,
ADVANCES HIS UNIQUE VISION FOR MEN



JOHN BARTLETT HAS CHANGED.

THE TWO-TIME CFDA MENSWEAR AWARD WINNER UNLOCKS THE DOOR OF HIS NEW SHOP AT 143 SEVENTH AVENUE AND BEGINS TO PREPARE FOR THE DAY. TO COMPLETE HIS OUTFIT OF A WHITE BUTTON-DOWN SHIRT, LEATHER BOOTS, AND BLACK TROUSERS, BARTLETT DONS A BROWN CANVAS APRON. HE CONFERS WITH A COUPLE OF ASSOCIATES ABOUT THE STOCK. HE'S A SHOPKEEPER READY FOR WORK.



Bartlett's store logo and label are inspired by his dog, Tiny Tim.

A customer enters. He drifts among the merchandise, considering carefully, touching an olive-green cashmere scarf (\$250), slim brown jeans (\$180), gray cotton blazer with green corduroy panels (\$695). Silver-haired with a trim figure, he fits into the store's surroundings—weathered floorboards, fieldstone walls, and palette of somber tones. He's here for the opportunity to meet Bartlett, and asks informed questions about where the garments are made (India) and where the materials are from (Europe, chiefly Italy). Bartlett answers all, makes the sale, and thanks the shopper as he leaves. Bartlett pats his dog, a Rottweiler-Lab mix, who watches his master with utter devotion. "Good boy, Tim," he says. The scene could be sponsored by Hallmark, except for the dog: Tim has three legs.

The last time I saw Bartlett in person, he was speaking to a class of FIT students in March 2001. His form-fitting leather lace-up pants and black T-shirt suited his reputation as a provocateur. His fashion shows featured porn stars, and his garments referenced the lewd illustrations of Tom of Finland, the homoerotic '70s magazine *After Dark*, and skintight uniforms of every kind. The industry applauded him, and critics adored him. *Time* wrote that he was "the first American designer trained specifically in menswear who has attracted a following since Ralph Lauren." Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute curator Richard Martin dubbed his work "idiosyncratically shrewd." At FIT, his presentation included a video of a recent fashion show that alluded to bondage: "I've always had a fetish for rope," he told the students.

That fall, Bartlett presented another memorable show at the New York State Armory on 26th Street. Models appeared in mock prison cells, wearing blindfolds. Bartlett himself modeled in a blindfold. Translating his look for a commercial audience had already proved challenging, and that new collection didn't help. The show's dark mood was eerily prescient; it took place three days before September 11th. "Afterwards," he told me recently, "that kind of expression just didn't feel appropriate."

In 2002, Bartlett left the business. He lived with Buddhist monks in Thailand and studied yoga. "You do the same six moves every day," he told me. For nine months, he focused his mind and tried to figure out what to do next. When he returned, he considered a degree in media studies at the New School, but fashion drew him back. He began to do shows again. One of the most memorable was his fall 2006 "bears" show—clothes based on the subculture of big, hairy gay men. The line defied the current menswear trend toward leaner silhouettes, and its narrow demographic puzzled critics. Clearly, there was still a disconnect between the designer and a broader audience.

While pursuing a sociology degree at Harvard in the early '80s, Bartlett had a formative shopping experience. "Louie's of Boston was this place that sold upscale European clothes. They even had a cappuccino bar," he says. One salesman allowed Bartlett to try on the clothes, even though he couldn't afford to buy any. "That was smart," Bartlett said. "It was a

way to develop a customer at a young age."

With the new shop, which opened last September, Bartlett himself provides the personal touch. Over the years, he has designed for other companies, but he says there's an advantage to selling your own work. "I can monitor what the customer wants. When you're wholesaling, the retailers have to do that for you. This is more direct."

Bartlett's new line is subtler, less aggressive.

The strategy has already paid off. Actor Kiefer Sutherland came in one day, and Bartlett has been selling him clothes ever since.

His new line represents a slightly revised aesthetic: It's subtler, less aggressive. "The guy I dress is looking for clothes that will bring out his essence. He's not looking for a costume," he says. Though you can still find snug-fitting leather pants here—and a tie with a barbed-wire motif—the designer now favors soft moleskin fabric and a less

restrictive silhouette. They're clothes for a preppy guy with a dark side. Most of the merchandise wouldn't seem too out of place at Brooks Brothers, a store with a trademark look Bartlett says he has always admired.

That iconic sportswear store probably wouldn't feature a three-legged dog on their T-shirts and shopping bags, but Tim is special. The dog was rescued by the North

wear out that night—that fashion could be personal for me." By learning to dress himself, he learned how to dress other men, too. Now he's adapted this skill for a look more men can aspire to. *After Dark* is still a reference, but these days, the magazine's covers wallpaper the storage closet. His essence hasn't changed, just his approach.

It's a style that's about to go mass-market. In January, Liz Claiborne announced that Bartlett would design its men's sportswear line, to debut in spring 2009. Though he's still researching the design, Bartlett says "the lines will differ in many ways, price being one of them, but the approach for both is similar."

Today, Liz; tomorrow, the UPS man. Bartlett told me he'd love to redesign the UPS uniform. "I love it because it's got both form and authority. When I began my company in 1992, I was shipping from my apartment, and I got used to waiting all day for that guy in the chocolate brown outfit. To me, he's a very sexy icon."

Shore Animal League after being hit by a car on Christmas Eve 2002. The shelter amputated his right front leg and named him Tiny Tim. Bartlett adopted him soon after. The colors of the store's décor were inspired by Tim's silky coat. "In my next incarnation, I'll be an animal advocate," Bartlett says.

For now, he's still Bartlett, the same but not the same. At FIT, he says, the fact that "we were on the machines from day one" led to an epiphany. "I realized I could make something that I could



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