

Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise

Catriona Fisk

Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise. Glynis Jones, Exhibition Curator. Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. 17 October 2019 – 22 March 2020.

Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) is a riot of colour. As befits the two leading lights of Australiana fashion, to step into this exhibition is somewhat akin to stepping into a kaleidoscope. This is not the say that the colourful, immersive exhibition is indiscriminate or without serious design sophistication. In fact, the exhibition is an exercise in carefully balanced visual storytelling, a tale of bubbling delight in colour and pattern. The exhibition's central focus is the productive partnership of Kee and Jackson, one the designers themselves describe as creative love at first sight.¹ As a portrait of a fashion love affair it is, appropriately, completely joyous.

The uninitiated are prepared for the splendour within by the exhibition marketing and opening text, which is written over a background of Kee's *Black Opal* textile print that the late Karl Lagerfeld used as a suit lining in his 1983 debut Chanel show.² From there the visitor is led towards a black, darkened space that acts as backstory and preparation for the rest of the exhibition. The cabinet of curiosity-like display hosts images, objects, garments, animations and film clips detailing the personal and creative development of Jackson and Kee from their birth in Beaumaris and Bondi respectively up to 1973. Photographs of Jenny mixing with the cognoscenti of swinging London and at the Chelsea Antique Market with Vern Lambert, Linda with Peter Tully in Bali, and records of travel through Papua New Guinea, Paris, Indonesia and beyond all set the scene for the pair's fateful meeting back in Sydney.

Duly prepared by the low-light retrospective space, the following rooms recreating Kee's frock salon Flamingo Park are beautiful and almost shockingly bright. Mirrors painted with wattle and waratah, blue walls, reds walls, shocking (almost florescent) pink curtains, red paper lanterns, tropical-print mid-century chairs and a good measure of potted plants and standing pink flamingos recreate the atmosphere and interior of the store. Kee recalls in the catalogue that on returning to Bondi from London she was struck by the inhabitants' continued adherence to dull and drab dress, vowing instead to fill the store with all the 'vibrant, glorious colours of the Australian Landscape.'³ This vibrancy is the heart of this section of the exhibition. Mannequins and invisible dress forms sport iconic garments on raised central platforms, including the 1975 *Matisse* dress and pale blue linen ensemble (*Opera House* 1974) with applique pieces celebrating the forms of the Opera House, which opened a few months after the store itself. These are accompanied by flat-laying and wall-mounted garments, mostly Kee's characteristic graphic knits, and ephemera from the salon including accessories, ceramic Australiana object d'art, receipts, news articles and fashion show invitations. Although not chronological, a further room in this section takes us through the bright, patchwork-like designs of the later years of the 1970s, displayed against a background of Kee's knitwear artwork. A video instillation room shows film and quotes from the many Flamingo Follies fashion shows/parades of the 70s and early 80s, up to the dissolution of this intense phase of their collaboration in 1981. These document the

¹ Glynis Jones, Jenny Kee, Linda Jackson, Georgina Safe & Penelope Tree, *Step into Paradise: Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson* (Ultimo: Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences Medua and Thames & Hudson, 2019), 30; Lauren Sams, 'A Colourful Past: Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson,' Australian Financial Review, August 28, 2019.

² Jane Rocca, 'Creative version of a first love: the colourful impact of Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson,' Sydney Morning Herald, October 6, 2019; Jones et al, *Step into Paradise*, 186.bi

³Jones et al, *Step into Paradise*, 29.

creative energy and ‘fashion, friends and fabulousness’ that cultural historian Sally Gray describes as emblematic of the period.⁴

From there the remainder of the exhibition explores themes, inspirations and motifs in their creative practice from the 1970s to the present. These include Cultural Connections, Opals, Spirituality, the Bush, Knit and Print, Reef and Rainforest. The overarching impression is of design schemes drawn from Australian landscape, flora and fauna, or inspired by Jackson’s fascination with Indigenous artists and printing. Not content with letting the unparalleled collection of 150+ artefacts do all the talking, curator Glynis Jones and the exhibition and design team have produced a show not quite like those you’ve seen before. This team included external contributions by Creative Director Tony Assness, DJ Johnny Seymour and composer Nick Wales for the sound, lighting by Damian Cooper as well as Kee and Jackson themselves. A world apart from a sterile white-box gallery environment, it is a lesson in taking inspiration not just from the output but the spirit and ethos of a fashion designer and translating that to an integrated visual experience.

The garments are displayed against equally vibrant backdrops, frequently floor-to-ceiling curtains with bold prints highlighting the relevant themes—fish and tropical plants for Reef and Rainforest, waratah flowers for The Bush. The garments are never left to tell the story alone, instead they are integrated into engaging vignettes which can include artificial rocks and painted banksia branches. The various modes of display emphasise this point as no one style dominates. Several mannequins are wearing body-suits in related colours and patterns, others are spattered with paint, others plain white and headless, others with stylised hair and accessories. Knitwear and jumpers are presented flat but suspended from the ceiling. Nor are the displays entirely static, for example in the *Kee Collage* and *Goddess* outfit, a compilation of silk designs from 1980-2017, the various floating elements sway under the effect of a concealed air current. The standout is Jackson’s *Zen Gold Waratah Bush Kimono* 2000-2010. Inspired by Buddhist monks’ robes and literally made with prayers and meditation, the outfit is suspended some distance above a mesmeric brassy oval base. Posed in gentle tension, it appears to float. The suspension mechanism is completely concealed, emphasising the ethereal mood. Fashion exhibitions have long attempted to re-animate clothes through human facsimiles, risking the impression of their appearing unsettling or haunted.⁵ Not so here. The significance of this ensemble is communicated without words, and it is magical.

In many ways, this complete visual experience is the biggest risk in the exhibition. It hovers on the boundary of being overwhelming and just a bit ‘too much.’ Yet that quality is what makes it a fitting reflection of the work and legacy of Kee and Jackson. The information communicated by the exhibition is far more visual and experiential than verbal or written. Touchscreen devices positioned throughout the gallery provide stations to access the digital guide, which visitors are also invited to download onto their phones. There is very limited guiding text in the exhibition itself, and none next to the garments in these themed vignettes. This is a slight drawback for those of us, well represented amongst the ranks of historians, who like to read labels in detail. While many can and do download the guide, it is possible to travel through the exhibition with a very limited sense of the historical context of their work. One of the dangers of this lack of text is illustrated by the section on Cultural Connections, including Jackson’s famous work with Indigenous designers including the textiles made by the Utopia Women’s Batik group from the Northern Territory. The *Utopia Costume* is a landmark object in Australian fashion history,

⁴ Sally Gray, *Fashion, Friends and Fabulousness: The Making of an Australian Style* (Australian Scholarly Publishing: Melbourne, 2017).

⁵ Robyn Healy, ‘The Parody of the Motley Cadaver: Displaying the Funeral of Fashion’, in Jessica Hemmings ed., *The Textile Reader* (London: Berg, 2012): 91-92.

entwined in narratives about the search for an Australian design language, recognition of Indigenous peoples and the Indigenous art and crafts movements, and questions of cultural appropriation. In the catalogue the pairs', and particularly Jackson's, formative experiences with and respect for Indigenous communities is explicitly stated from the opening text, and curator Jones acknowledges that this work is now 'read within the broader contemporary conversation around appropriation.'⁶ This is crucial to situating Jackson's Bush Couture in the story of fashion in twentieth century Australia, but not discussed in the digital guide.⁷

The final three sections of the exhibition ask, without ever stating as much, about the legacy of Kee and Jackson and their place in the canon of Australian fashion. The creative exchange between them and another dynamic Australian fashion duo, Anna Plunkett and Luke Sales of Romance was Born, speaks to their lasting impact. Equally it shows how their outward-facing, collaborative mode of working helped enshrine this legacy. Jenny Kee's costumes for the Olympic Games in 2000, itself a significant cultural moment for the vision of an Australian national identity, comprise the final clothing display of the exhibition. In these final moments the vibrant background gives way to white, the fade from brilliance to monochrome preparing the viewer to re-enter the less fantastical world outside. Two monumental, two-metre high portraits by Carla Fletcher are the final notes in the 'After' section, set against black just as the 'Before'. In size and prominence, the artworks not only capture the personalities of Kee and Jackson but encourage a commemorative, monumentalising conclusion to the largest, most complete and most fabulous retrospective of their work to date.⁸ Writing after the close of the exhibition in March 2020 in the throes of a global pandemic, the world fashion designers now inhabit seems very removed from that of Jackson and Kee. Yet many of their central concerns for the natural world, 'authentic' Australian style, sustainability and spirituality, Indigenous design, and finding fun through fashion are as pressing as ever.

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Figure One: *Rainforest and Reef*. 'Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise,' Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, October 2019.

Figure Two: Jenny Kee, *'Wattle' Dress*, 1977. 'Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise,' Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, October 2019.

Figure Three: Linda Jackson, *Zen Waratab Bush Kimono*, 2000-2010. 'Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step into Paradise,' Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, October 2019.

⁶ Jones et al, *Step into Paradise*, 11

⁷ At the time of writing the digital guide is still available online at <https://maas-guide.netlify.com/> and serves, along with the catalogue, as a good summary for the exhibition itself.

⁸ Previous examples include in 1985 when the Australian National Gallery, as was, mounted an exhibition of the work of both designers, while Jackson's Bush Couture and her fashion collaboration with McDiarmid have been the subject of exhibitions in more recent years (at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2012, and Wollongong Art Gallery in 2016-2017 respectively).