

Exhibition review:

Zampatti Powerhouse

Powerhouse - Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, 24 November 2022 - 11 June 2023

Timo Rissanen

University of Technology Sydney

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0192-4227

Dr Timo Rissanen is an associate professor in fashion and textiles in the School of Design, Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). His research focuses on design-led approaches to sustainability and social justice in fashion and textile systems. He is a queer artist producing poetry, cross-stitch and installation. He has published two books on fashion and sustainability: *Zero Waste Fashion Design* (2016), co-authored with Holly McQuillan, and *Shaping Sustainable Fashion* (2011), co-edited with Alison Gwilt. He is a founding member of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion.

Keywords: fashion exhibition, fashion design, Australian fashion, Carla Zampatti

Among Australian brands, few would be unfamiliar with the name Carla Zampatti, who passed away suddenly in April 2021 after 56 years leading her eponymous brand. An Italian immigrant, she was quintessentially Australian: more than half of Australians today were either born overseas or have immigrant parents. The exhibition at the Powerhouse - Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, curated by Roger Leong, was already well in development at the time of her death, and she was involved in its early planning. It was a rare gift: a thoroughly Australian fashion exhibition of a globally significant fashion designer and entrepreneur. Its curatorial and creative team included some of Australia's best: the exhibition was an appropriate celebration of the extraordinary life and career of Carla Zampatti. While focusing on a single designer, its depth of investigation places the exhibition alongside the significant survey, '200 Years of Australian Fashion' at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2016 (Gray 2016).

The design was grand and befitting its subject: Carla Zampatti was grand and yet also warm and funny. The ombré backdrop gave a sense of a celestial dusk within the

space. The exhibition comprised 100 mannequins in dense groups from three to twenty, in a single room with a high ceiling. Each grouping was either thematic or visual, ranging from early work from the 1970s, to a graphic black-and-white op-art group, to an animal print series to a group of a Zampatti staple, the jumpsuit, and more. Remarkably one section was curated from her personal wardrobe: she was the ultimate ambassador for the brand she created.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: 'Black, Red and Cream' and 'Jumpsuit' groups. *Zampatti Powerhouse*. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

Garments across the groupings gave a sense of how the Zampatti silhouette evolved over five decades, while also showing the designer's immediately recognisable shape of recent years. The padded shoulders are firm but without the 1980s aggression. The waist nips in gently and the neckline is usually deep. The graphically clean tailoring in matte crepe is a perfect stage for statement jewellery. Zampatti dressed women for work, Australia's equivalent to Donna Karan, at a level that was aspirational yet accessible to many.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: A panorama view of the exhibition. The busts by Dame Elisabeth Frink are at right. *Zampatti Powerhouse* exhibition. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

Within the space both the woman and the fashion designer were present. As the catalogue notes, Zampatti opened her home for events, and for anyone who had visited, the immense busts by Dame Elisabeth Frink were an immediate connection to time spent with the designer at her home (Wood 2022, 204). On one side of the main room were two tall cylindrical pods with seating, giving the audience a deeper insight into her life and career. In the first, videos of family, friends and collaborators engaged in conversations about her. In the other, her own voice – immediately recognisable to most involved in Australian fashion – filled the space. Her presence and her clarity of vision were palpable. The two pods were physically

attuned with the two busts within the main space; they helped with visual orientation in an otherwise organic spatial design.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3: 'Graphic' group on the left and one of the pods in the background. *Zampatti Powerhouse* exhibition. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

The design of headdresses and wigs was employed to provide further visual organisation within the exhibition design. For example, mannequins in the jumpsuit group had dramatic oversized wigs while the 'Princess' mannequins wore lace veils. The catalogue provides background on the creative process. The exhibition design was a collaboration between the curatorial team, creative director Tony Assness, fashion stylist Peter Simon Phillips and hair stylist Alan White. Whether the use of hair in spatial organisation was consistently successful is open to question. On first impression, some of the aggressive wigs dominated the subtler garments they were paired with. Some garments needed more space to be fully appreciated by the visitor. Nonetheless the curation was careful and comprehensive. Every garment added something by either exemplifying Zampatti's contribution to Australian fashion, or because the context of the garment's use (and often, wearer) was significant. Many garments met both criteria. Prime minister Julia Gillard's ruby jacket from her address to US Congress was present, as was the silk brocade gown that Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark wore in a 2015 official portrait.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4: View of 'Princess' and 'Carla's wardrobe' groups. *Zampatti Powerhouse* exhibition. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

Somewhat unusually and contributing to the exhibition's success, most of the garments were sourced by a public call and came from all over Australia. The fact that so many women, and in many cases their estates, had kept dresses from the 1970s speaks to the enduring design quality of the garments and the reverence in

which Zampatti is held. Quotes from the garment owners at the foot of each mannequin added a dimension rarely seen in a fashion exhibition: they were the almost-hidden gem of the show. In one, Yvonne Dite recounted: “I was wearing this dress when I first met my husband Bruce in 1968. At 73 years old, I still wear the dress at least once a year for our wedding anniversary. It wasn’t until 2019 I realised this was a Carla Zampatti dress, so I wrote and shared my story with her. I nearly fell through the floor when Carla called me.” The designer’s commitment to creating fashion that enhances women’s lives was vividly present. Garment lenders ranged from politicians and Australian glitterati to everyday women for whom a Zampatti dress or suit brought joy and celebration, whether in the form of an off the rack suit – several are on loan from Australian politicians – or the custom gown for Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5: ‘Graphic’ group. *Zampatti Powerhouse* exhibition. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

[Insert Figure 6 here]

Figure 6: ‘Animal’ group with close-up of beaded ‘Carla’ cape, 2016. *Zampatti Powerhouse* exhibition. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

Both the exhibition and the catalogue (Wood, 2022) highlighted Zampatti’s commitment to supporting the next generation of Australian designers. The exhibition included a cape embroidered with ‘Carla’ by Anna Plunkett and Luke Sales, of Romance Was Born, two of her mentees. The catalogue features initiatives from scholarships to formal and informal mentoring, including of now-established designers Toni Maticevski, and Kit Willow. Her 56-year career demonstrated that a flourishing fashion business in Australia could be built through an attunement to people’s needs, clarity of brand vision, business savvy, and tenacity. Against the tide of globalisation, Zampatti supported Australian fashion manufacturing throughout her career; the company still produces everything but knitwear onshore (Wood 2022,

p. 27). The lesson in her life's work is that a consistent vision is paramount and must not be compromised. The exhibition reminded visitors that fashion at its best enhances ordinary lives as much as it does extraordinary ones. Whether meeting the love of one's life or sitting for a royal portrait, what one wears, matters.

References

Gray, S., 2016. "Material shift: '200 Years of Australian Fashion' at the NGV." *Art Monthly Australia*, (290): 66-7.

Wood, S., ed. 2022. *Zampatti*. Ultimo: Powerhouse Publishing.