**Flora McLean: Can Plastic be a Muse for Future Feminist Innovation?**

My name is Flora McLean, BA Hons MA RCA.

I have a fashion label called House of Flora; I make hats and accessories and sell worldwide to stores and galleries. I studied Fashion Design at the Royal College of Art, and now teach there as the Accessories, Footwear and Millinery lecturer. Plexiglass plastic was the initial starting point for many fashion designs for the head. I see plastic as a material of modernism, a clean, smooth, futuristic material and a counterpoint to fabric or leather. The following image shows me working in my studio and demonstrates the styles I favour.

I have also brought with me some examples of my hats, jewellery and eyewear. I feel I should give you some background as to how I came to be here talking about plastic. I originally studied fashion, however this was really an accident, as I could not decide where to specialise, and fashion was just one of my interests. I come from a creative family of architects and fine artists, as well as textile designers, so I was influenced by many spectrums and aspects of design. I ended up in the textile and fashion workshops during my foundation year at art school, but in honesty I felt far more at home in the spatial design and sculpture workshops. I am now what is termed as a milliner specialising in making hats with fashion; but I prefer to be called a fashion designer who makes products.

Using plastic as a chosen material in the designs is also a rejection of traditional materials and techniques in millinery practice. Despite studying fashion design I was often to be found making things using plastic in the 3D workshops.

While I was studying I began collecting orange plastic kitchen utensils and hoarding them. I still search for things at car boot sales and more recently online, I love this colour, but the utensils have to be plastic. I started collecting these items as a young woman in a kitsch retro aesthetic, and now I actually use all of these pieces at home.

I am interested in the identity of women, and how they wish to be perceived, asking: “Who are you going to be today?” “Do you want to be a girl, a boy, a sex object, or an intelligent, strong, powerful woman?” I was influenced by own mother’s style.

This paper will explore the way that plastic can be considered a muse for feminist innovation and rebellion. I will reference my own archive of hats and accessories as well as including influences in fashion design, architecture, popular culture and art. I think plastic is inspiring as a material because of the infinite possibilities of form that can be created, re-positioned, mass produced as art object or wearable.

Fiorrucci was a shop into which I used to go as a child and teenager; an edgy ‘cool’ store, with fashion for young people, accessories which made plastic desirable and fashionable. They sold luggage as well as jeans and brightly coloured bikinis. The designer presented a range of items for sale displayed in an arty, music-filled space that felt more like a playground or an art installation than a shopping destination. To me it felt like a sweet shop, and exerted a huge influence over my ideas.

The image shown on the left gives you an idea of my early fashion designs; this is from 1995 and was made in plastic sieve filter mesh and PVC. The halo was made from large hosepipe and fairy lights. Rope lights were not available at this time. The crown on the right is a more recent plexiglass piece for a fashion editorial.

I am often asked to create special pieces for shows, shoots and advertising campaigns. The fibreglass trench coat on the left was moulded, sanded and lacquered to appear as though lifted by wind. ‘Soft-looking-hard’ and ‘hard-looking-soft’ seem to be a theme in many of the images I will present and discuss. The image on the right is from a Fiorucci book I have and has a similar aesthetic to my rather clunky, graphic, robust ideas of fashion or clothing expression.

Caroline Evans (2014), has explored the association of the female body with adaptability, as a kind of malleable plastic maquette that can be re-fashioned as a model for new attitudes and roles. I find this particularly inspiring, the idea of women using plastic to re-fashion their own ideas of feminist uprising and for future generations of women being influenced by the technological advances plastic has brought into our consciousness. I am also interested in plastic as an innovative material that can be used to identify new styles and modes of existing in the 21st century. For example there is a wonderful article by Debora Jaffé on the influence plastics has had on the emancipation of women over the past 150 years. Jaffé introduces the idea that the bicycle, and specifically the rubber tyre that allowed them to become popularised by Dunlop, was one of the first ways in which women were liberated to travel alone, with privacy. Now women were free to travel without chaperones, no one had to know to where or why a woman was travelling alone, and this freedom greatly advanced the fight for women’s freedom and self-actualisation.

The image to the right is from a film named *Things to Come* by Alex Korda, he worked with Maholy Nagy on the set for this film, about the future. I find the fluid, streamlined imagery very pleasing and see the woman in the image as intelligent and fully in control of her own destiny. The image on the left is a promotional image created by my team for a recent collection of eyewear and hats.

This plastic sculpture entitled *Leda the Swan* has many inspirational characteristics for me as a designer. Impenetrable, hard, smooth, transparent, it reflects the light, it can be heated and made soft to reform hard again. It seems to demonstrate the many possibilities for adapting its shape. The common dictionary definition of plastic is ‘a material capable of being moulded.’ However Roland Barthes, whom we will come to later also described it as ‘in essence, the stuff of alchemy’. This is very exciting for me as milliner, as I like to work in a very sculptural way. The image shows a plexiglass sculpture *Leda the Swan* by Maholy Nagy (1946).

Plastic is a vehicle for both the creation of the mundane and the extraordinary, to quote Barthes: ‘the mind does not cease from considering the original matter as an enigma. This is because the quick change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels.’ It is a material of artistry, of synthetic chemistry; plastics are suffused with meanings of modernity and urbanity, of manufacture and industry, and are an anti-naturalist aesthetic. Plastic is inspiring as a material because of the infinite possibilities of form that can be created, moulded, repositioned, mass-produced as art project or wearable.

The beret is a hat I make in multiples, and have done for over 15 years. I had an exhibition in a supermarket in Spain, in which the hats and accessories were displayed among brightly coloured cleaning fluids and other consumerables.

I took part in an exhibition with Archigram called Beyond Architecture in May 2013 at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. David Greene and Peter Cook referenced the idea that Jonathan Raban discusses in his book Soft Cities: ‘Cities... are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in turn shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal forms on them.’ My visors were used in the show. The hats and visors were placed on the heads of mannequins onto which were projections of science, technology and popular culture.

The following quote is from an article by Neeraj Bhatia, an architect, urban designer and assistant professor at the RCA: ‘But the most obvious associations with the ‘soft’ have been material characteristics – yielding readily to touch or pressure; deficient in hardness, smooth, pliable, malleable or plastic. And this is the definition of ‘soft’ that came to define some of the most exciting design motives of the 1960’s and 70’s. These new design approaches were sceptical of modernism; soft was deemed to enable individualism, responsiveness, nomadism and anarchy.’

The image shown now is by James Stopforth, displaying a visor shown in an urban environment, and reminds me of Donna Haraway’s famous essay *Cyborg Manifesto*, where she uses the metaphor of the cyborg to urge feminists to move beyond the limitations of traditional gender roles. The Perspex visor functions to almost eradicate the model’s gaze, as well as the male gaze, and this almost warrior-like stance are supplanted by the fact that the model is engaging with a machine rather than a human.

I reference Poly Styrene, punk singer from X Ray Spex, as she evoked a strong image of female rebellion, and has certainly influenced my way of thinking and designing. Miss Poly Styrene is seen here in a PVC dress and crash hat. When I perform as a DJ, I play only vinyl, always wearing a plastic hat, and am known as ‘Spex on the Dex”.

I argue that my black PVC beret piece (seen here on model Agyness Deyn on the cover of Vogue Italia, 2006, now exhibited at the Modip museum), is an icon and a celebration of the artist as a mode if being, that has a real significance for the 21st Century post-Punk feminist movement. In the image displayed, Agyness models the beret in an androgynous, angular portrayal of gender-redefining aesthetic. As opposed to the next image, the model is buttoned up, there are no overt sexual overtones, whereas this image by Miles Aldridge almost plasticises the model herself, oiled and Barbie-fied, she stares out from behind my plexi-visor with dead eyes, the perfect incarnation of male fantasy. Yet in Aldridge’s image it is as if a model has been plasticised by machine for a man’s approval. Marisa Olson summarised Haraway’s thoughts as a belief that ‘there is no distinction between natural life and artificial man-made machines’. Olson, Marisa: Viva Cyborg Theory (Nov, 2008).

The reference to Barbarella is one that straddles this concept of male fantasy with futuristic über-female. There is a dichotomy between a very male conception of the ‘plastic fantastic female’ (Kim Kardashian super-inflated curves), versus edgy, minimalist, boyish, intelligent beauty, which I prefer as a designer. Plastic is a material of artifice and synthetic chemistry. It can be seen as a counterpoint to the idea of the ‘natural woman’, plastic being a rebellion against oppressive female traits. Women are required to aspire to an impossible “natural” archetype and embracing plastic is a way of rebelling against it. Plastics are celebrated for their plasticity, for their propensity for infinite change and shape shifting. They can be melted down and also reformed and articulated in many ways, and this appeals to the mercurial nature of many post-modern feminists.

Bjork is a radical, both sartorially and musically. Pictured here in a Maiko Takeda headpiece on her album cover of 2014, the candy-coloured translucent plastic spines generated from the head-piece give Bjork almost a celestial radiance, as if she were a goddess from the distant future; which accords beautifully with her pure, truthful and distinctive sound. Here plastic is not utilitarian, but atmospheric, creating form in suspended space, emitting light, and suggesting traces of movement around the wearer. This echoes the spirit of the sculpture mentioned earlier: *Leda the Swan.*

Roland Barthes compared the names of plastic compounds to the names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polythylene), in his analysis of the meanings of Plastics in the book *Mythologies* (1957). The image on the left is a Schiapparelli Rhodophane (an early form of cellophane) cape, from 1935. The translucent rhodophane cape gives an ethereal majesty to the model, as if to elevate her from mere human to otherworldly being. The image on the right depicts a hat by Stephen Jones made of translucent plastic entitled ‘Wash ‘n’n Go’ from his 1993 collection, *Souvenirs*. This hat captures the very nature of plasticity in that it appears almost liquid, moulding itself to the wearer’s head, but is actually a fixed form.

These outfits by Pierre Cardin suggest plastic as a unifier. The models look like they are in uniform and their stance is almost alien or a cyborg vision of the future female doll army. This echoes the ideas I expressed about plastic as a tool for the emancipation of women, making them almost into militant, powerful beings, capable of determining and fighting for their own destinies, not those imposed upon them by men. The outfits are also almost fetishist in that they are wipe-clean; nothing leaves a mark on this plasticised armour.

Pierre Cardin’s designs from the 1960’s deviate from the earlier slides which show how plastic can give almost a supernatural silhouette to the wearer; these outfits transform the wearers into a kind of troupe or army, donning protective hats, gloves, and boots: hygienic, utilitarian and homogenous.

Plastics assist in creating structures which resemble urban environments in my work; in the image above by James Stopforth, the model strides through the urban metropolis clad in protective plastic armour with the Tatlin Tower hat, which serves almost to blend her into the concrete structures which surround her. Plastic could be the perfect vehicle for achieving a powerful and sensual incarnation of the female psyche that rejects traditional values of womanhood in favour of strength, autonomy and self-actualisation.

As a designer I see plastic as a malleable force for moulding the infinite possibilities of my imagination to propose a cool synthetic future aesthetic for women.

‘Fakeness’ is illustrated in this unconventional plastic hairstyle hat, a representation for iconic designer Sonia Rykiel. Fakeness as a concept is central to this design: inspired by fake hair extensions, these grahic, tango Marcel-waves can be repositioned according to the wearer’s inclination, using Velcro.

Plastic is perceived as being removed from the natural world, yet at its most basic elements, can be formed from commodities such as cotton and wood pulp. This shows a dichotomy between our imagining of plastic as a foreign body, and its original provenance. When I visited the Mazzuchelli plastic factory in the spring I found a huge cave of plastic blocks produced and designed in round layers of colours formed together and then sliced in a delicious process like cooking toffee.

Angela Carter argues passionately against the equation of women with nature, suggesting in her 1978 book *The Sadeian Woman* that the writings of De Sade enable a more interesting concept of nee femininity to become articulated in images of parody, artifice, modernity and contradiction.

I argue that it is the details, the accessory, which is the point in fashion. It is fashion that enables femininity to emancipate itself from the timelessness of nature, and to enter into the game of modernity: wearing a hat is provocative, but wearing a smooth, futuristic plastic hat takes it to another level entirely.

In conclusion I would like to end on a series of quotes from Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957):

*“So more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: its is less a thing than a trace of a movement.”*

*“The hierarchy of substance is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world can be plasticized…”*

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Caroline Evans 2014