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High Kicks into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever
Elizabeth Milton
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Curated by Vanessa Kwan

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STRETCH
SATEEN
Helen
Reed

On the very first block of West Hastings, adjacent to a hole in the ground containing some overpriced parking spots and the ghost of a lesbian bar, is Dressew Sewing Supply. Dressew is an enigma, a reticent storefront housing the most fanciful material. Branded with a bright yellow zigzag sign, Dressew is as famous for its vast selection as it is for its brassy customer service. Here, the customer is not always right but rather, in the way.

Founded in 1961, it maintains its pre-service economy ethos. There's no website, the phones are only answered between 9 and 10 am and the store closes promptly at 5:15. So, you must plan ahead to get your body to the shop on time, to wander the aisles, to finger each bolt of fabric.

As you enter, there is half an aisle of theatrical gloves; black satin, lace, long snakeskin, and velour sequin. These faux-elegant accessories give way to latex hairy werewolf hands with huge gnarled fingers and thick yellow fingernails. And beyond these, white gangster spats. One row over wigs: Dolly, the midwestern bubble coif, and Elise, a severe short crop, sit alongside archetypical Anitas, Gaylas, Erins and of course, the Bob. The Red Glamour Wig is multiplicitous enough to remain nameless, free to receive the spirits of Lucille Ball, Glinda the Good Witch, Carol Burnett or Peg Bundy.

Next, fabrics. Rayon lycras are lined up from stark white through peaches and pastels to bright and punchy pinks and on to red. This is the main organizing principle of the store—first material, then color shades and tones incrementally shifting up the aisles.

A mirage mesh sparkles gold on black. Followed by printed lycras, like nebulae, like flowers, like screensavers. Jersey knits and press-on vampire nails. Stretch cotton linens and plastic bloody chainsaws. Artifice and utility.

“Exaggeration is my only reality,” once said fashion journalist Diana Vreeland. And here, performances of femininity, which can be so cruel and inflexible in other environments (department store washrooms, television runway shows), are freely exaggerated and associated with wolf man hands, old-time criminal footwear, and mermaid tails.

The burden of performing a naturalized femininity in a woman-hating culture might best be described as nerve-wracking. One of the most enduring thematics of western cinema is *the woman come undone*. From early medical chronophotography of female hysteria to the contemporary oeuvre of Julianne Moore (for example), the fascination with witnessing a poised woman break down into sobbing fits and screaming rages is articulated on the silver screen.

The iconic actresses who play out these traumas successfully, authentically, whose on-screen personas bled into their personal lives have, by a queer sleight of hand, become the most valorized in gay culture. Judy Garland, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, actresses who, on and off screen, have performed a glamorous survivalism despite personal suffering. Hollywood permitted us to view these breakdowns and redemptions in vivid detail through cinematic close-ups.

American director George Cukor remarked on Joan Crawford's passion for the close-up after he directed her in his 1939 film *The Women*. “As the camera came in closer, she had an expression on her face of wanting it intensely. She glowed from within. Her skin came to life...It was utterly sensual, erotic. Her close up was ecstasy.” Cukor describes a deeply physical response to both the proximity of the camera and the heat of the lights, a sensational experience in the making of a spectacle.

Glamour may be fake, but it is rarely frivolous.

Back in the basement of Dressew, there are offcuts and frayed edges, and a chance meeting of friends hastily planning costumes for just one night's wear. In the clearance room: wonder satins at \$5/meter, marabou plumage, turkey quills and a hot pink ostrich feather that is not guaranteed to be colour-fast. “Of course, you understand I'm looking for the most far-fetched perfection,” says Vreeland. After the performances, after the film shoots, in the early hours of the morning the Virgin Mary may appear in a grilled cheese sandwich, or a Frankenthaler oil-stain painting on a damp facecloth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This piece of writing is loosely based on a conversation under some magnolia trees with the artist Elizabeth Milton. *Stretch Sateen* developed from Milton's generosity in sharing her practice, some of her influences and reference points with me. I need to thank Jon Davies for sending me his thesis work, *Trash is Truth*, which explores transgressive glamour in American queer cinema. I want to recognize the influence of Hilton Als' short essay "The Only One" about the former editor for Vogue Magazine, André Leon Talley, from which I pulled the latter of the Diana Vreeland quote (special thanks to Hannah Jickling for recommending the Als essay). The first Vreeland quote is from [The Hundred Dresses: The Most Iconic Styles of Our Time](#) by Erin McKean, and the Cukor reference appears in "I Am Joan Crawford," a 2008 Atlantic article by Thomas Mallon. Lastly, thanks to Vanessa Kwan for the invitation.

BIOGRAPHIES

Elizabeth Milton is a Vancouver-based performance and media artist who utilizes character-play to investigate constructions of identity and affective expression. Her work has been exhibited throughout Canada and developed through residencies at Access Gallery, Vancouver and the Banff Centre. Her recent performances and exhibitions have taken place at VIVO Media Arts Centre, the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Nanaimo Art Gallery. Milton holds an MFA in Studio Art from the University of British Columbia and a BFA in Visual Art from Simon Fraser University. She instructs courses in Studio Art at the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University and Langara College in Vancouver, BC.

Helen Reed is a Vancouver-based artist and occasional writer. She self-publishes a 'zine of fan fiction for contemporary art called *Art Criticism & Other Short Stories*; Issue #3 is due out in Fall 2016. Reed has exhibited work at Prefix Institute for Contemporary Art (Toronto), The Dunlop Art Gallery (Regina), The Foreman Art Gallery (Sherbrooke), apexart (New York), Smack Mellon (New York), Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum and La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse (Montréal).





High Kicks Into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever
Production Detail
Elizabeth Milton
2016



High Kicks Into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever
Studio Experiment
Elizabeth Milton
2016



High Kicks Into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever

Production Detail

Elizabeth Milton

2016

High Kicks Into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever
Video Still
Elizabeth Milton
2016





High Kicks Into the Light Forever and Ever and Ever
Video Still
Elizabeth Milton
2016

opposite page
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Production Detail
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Video Stills

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Production Detail

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Production Detail
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grunt gallery was founded in 1984 with a vision to be an internationally renowned artist-run centre furthering contemporary art practice. Through the exploration of our diverse Canadian cultural identity, we offer innovative public programming in exhibitions, performances, artist talks, publications and special projects. Our mandate is to inspire public dialogue by creating an environment conducive to the emergence of innovative, collaborative, and provocative Canadian contemporary art.

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