“Fashionality” is a newly coined play on words that refers to the visual culture and semiotics of dress and adornment. Combining the words “fashion,” “personality,” and “nationality,” it signals the interplay between clothing, identity, and cultural affinity. Taking the idiom of dress as a starting point, Fashionality: Dress and Identity in Contemporary Canadian Art explores the use of apparel in the work of twenty-three contemporary Canadian artists. It considers the diverse ways in which the clothed body and the idiom of dress are employed as sources of inspiration, humour, and critique, and as sites for the exploration of issues of identity, hybridity, and self-expression. Not strictly about fashion, the exhibition explores the ways in which the subjectivities and identities of those living in Canada are expressed, deconstructed, and reconfigured, while raising some intriguing questions about the embodied Canadian subject.

In the last few decades, the dialogue between art and dress has grown exponentially, a phenomenon which has been the focus of numerous publications and museum exhibitions. This largely has to do with the extent to which clothing can be “read” as a common language, or what French cultural theorist Roland Barthes calls the “vestimentary code.” This sartorial semiotics forms the basis of much fashion theory, where it is commonplace to talk about the lexicon of dress and adornment. Certainly, nothing can so readily convey gender, status, mood, cultural affinity or play with such signs as clothing can. Nor is there an object that can infer or nuance a human presence as can apparel. As such, the increasingly persistent appearance of clothing within the corpus of largely conceptual Western art is understandable, as the dialect of dress has become a fixture of contemporary art practice. Perhaps most significantly, as the “vestimentary code” is one that everyone can decipher, works that incorporate it are particularly accessible to a wide demographic.
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**FASHIONALITY:**

1. One’s personality expressed in their clothing, “fashion personality.”
2. One’s nationality expressed in their clothing, “fashion nationality.”

—The Urban Dictionary
Clothing has always been of primary importance in a country where donning appropriate apparel is imperative for surviving the harsh climate. The very settlement in Canada by Europeans was largely based on the market for fur for the fashion industry. Today, while Canada is by no means an international centre of fashion, clothing nevertheless holds a pre-eminent position in the history, art, and popular culture of the nation’s varied demographic. Despite the importance of dress in the Canadian imaginary, however, fashion historian Alexandra Palmer notes in her 2004 book Fashion: A Canadian Perspective, that Canada has no national costume other than crude caricatures of Aboriginal dress, or lumberjack and Mountie attire. Indeed, this vast country’s population is far too diverse to be represented by one particular ensemble or uniform. Reflecting wide geographic and cultural diversity, the many artists featured in Fashionality have in some ways addressed this problematic on an individual level, using apparel as a platform for examining many of the issues and discourses that are in common currency among artists living in Canada.

The exhibition is loosely divided into four themes. After the introductory space, the first gallery embraces the acts of creation and recreation. Here the focus is on artists whose work foregrounds relationships with nature, apparel-making, sports, and social media. Of note here are items of protective hockey equipment which have been embellished by living honeybees, an act orchestrated by Winnipeg artist A ganetha Dyck. Another project involves 365 days worth of hand-made clothing which was the result of a year-long daily dressmaking project blogged by Vancouver artist and designer Natalie Purschwitz. Asserting that First Nations not be relegated to the narratives of a primitive past, Oji-Cree artist KC Adams makes computer bags from fur and leather, and applies indigenous beading techniques to iPod and iPad holders.

The consecutive gallery considers the life cycle, and focuses on ghostly apparitions and unworn garments. Pointing to the domestic “uniform,” the south wall is resplendent with hundreds of brightly-hued transparent aprons assembled by Newfoundland artist Barb Hunt. Conversely, the north wall seems to be alive with hundreds of tiny woolen sweaters, knitted by Ontario-based artist Michele Karch-Ackerman and several volunteers, in commemoration of Canadian soldiers who fell in World War I. In between these two astonishing assemblages are a number of intriguing works that speak to the vagaries of domestic life, real and imagined histories, the feminine “mystique,” and the confines of masculine imperatives.

The third gallery centres upon that quintessential Western symbol of woman: the dress. A blast of colour and energy, paintings and photographs hung here exude a love of cloth, colour, texture, and movement. Nicole Dextras’s remarkable photographs of frozen gowns appear to dance next to Barbara Pratt’s immaculate painted homages to haute couture. Waiting in the wings is a column of Gathie Falk’s shoe boxes containing twelve pairs of colourful papier mâché pumps, while one of Barb Hunt’s black plasma-arc cut flat steel dresses leans on a nearby wall.

In the final gallery the visitor becomes part of a conversation about culture and gender. Showcased here are works by a number of artists who have turned to clothing to express their personal, political, and cultural identities. Stereotypical renderings of Indian chiefs and squaws, lumberjacks, fashion models, and beauty queens are deconstructed and reconfigured through kitsch, camp, and a decided roasting of Canada’s colonial imperatives. Lori Blondeau’s Cosmosquaw cover girl, Kent Monkman’s High-Heeled Moccasins, and Janet Morton’s absurdly oversized plaid lumberjack shirt (entitled Canadian Monument #2), strongly suggest that any typecasting of Canada’s diverse demographic is long overdue for a makeover.
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Fashionality focuses on works of art that employ dress as a primary medium, subject or sign. Artists consider a wide range of creative and conceptual possibilities, which are executed in media ranging from painting, assemblage, sculpture, and installation to video, photography, performance, and social media. Twenty-three active contemporary artists are featured, reflecting perspectives from diverse cultural and geographical purviews. Included in the show are KC Adams, Ingrid Bachmann, Lori Blondeau, Dana Claxton, Cathy Daley, Nicole Dextras, Aganetha Dyck, Jane Eccles, Gathie Falk, Farheen Haq, Barb Hunt, Michele Karch-Ackerman, Meryl McMaster, Kent Monkman, Janet Morton, Jacques Payette, Camal Pirbhai, Barbara Pratt, Ana Rewakowicz, Natalie Purschwitz, Jana Sterbak, Camille Turner, and Mary Sui Yee Wong. Together, the assorted practical and conceptual approaches of these artists speak the common language of dress and, in the process, help to define just what it is that Canadian fashionality might be.

Julia Pine

THE LAST HARVEST: PAINTINGS BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE
Organized by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India in connection with the National Gallery of Modern Art
MAY to JULY, 2012

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is lauded around the world as a poet, playwright, musician, and philosopher, yet few outside India know that he was also a highly regarded visual artist. The Last Harvest, produced to mark the 150th anniversary of the year of Tagore’s birth, comprises more than sixty works on paper created by this versatile and prolific visionary, drawn from three collections in India. The exhibition is curated by Professor Raman Siva Kumar of Visva-Bharati University and is co-organized by the National Gallery of Modern Art; Ministry of Culture, Government of India; and Asia Society Museum, New York.