

The third GSK Contemporary exhibition at the RA's Burlington Gardens galleries tackles the ecological, social and political influence of fashion on art. Co-curator, artist and designer Lucy Orta tells *Ben Luke* what's in store for the show

Fashion statements

Andreas Gursky's *Kuwait Stock Exchange* (2007, opposite) is an epic and enigmatic work by this German master of photography. Shot from a high vantage point typical of Gursky's work, the picture takes an overview of the trading floor where hundreds of men are milling about reading screens and talking either amongst themselves or on the phone.

What stands out is their uniform of flowing white gowns. These men are dressed not in the suits that we associate with the City and Wall Street, but in traditional, ankle-length *thawb* smock and *ghutra* headdress which, set against the red chairs and floor, give the photograph an extraordinary formal beauty. This single image at once creates a reflection of globalisation and the shift in centres of global finance, a stunning formal symmetry and colour harmony, and a striking evocation of the importance of clothing to cultural and social identity.

Gursky's photograph is one of the highlights of the third and final GSK Contemporary exhibition, 'Aware: Art, Fashion, Identity', which continues the series' commitment to showing contemporary artists' responses to environmental, social and political issues. The exhibition takes the baton from last year's GSK exhibition, 'Earth: Art of a Changing World', in which artists responded to the urgent need for action in the face of climate change. Lucy Orta, an artist and designer, is co-curating 'Aware' along with Italian contemporary art curator

Gabi Scardi and the RA's Kathleen Soriano. Orta featured in 'Earth', alongside her husband and collaborator Jorge, showing *Antarctic Village, No Borders* (2007), a tent covered in a variety of national flags. She recognised that GSK Contemporary also offered the opportunity to explore a fresh ecological sensibility in fashion.

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'We're looking at a new era in fashion,' Orta says, 'a new thinking about the ethics of designing clothes, the way we produce them, the materials and processes we use, the environments that clothes are created in.' Additionally, countless artists in recent decades have realised that clothing reveals much about the society we live in and our place within it. 'Fashion is useful because it is so tangible to the public,' Orta explains. 'You can get across messages to the masses very quickly.'

For Orta, 'Aware' is the result of around 20

years of thinking about the interface between art and fashion. She studied fashion design at Nottingham Polytechnic in the mid-1980s, specialising in knitwear design, but became disillusioned with fashion's extreme extravagance soon afterwards and began to make art. She has since trodden the line between the two disciplines, influencing the fashion world with works such as *Refuge Wear – Habitent* (1992-93), a shiny silver creation which is both tent and garment, while showing in galleries across the world. She is now Professor of Art, Fashion and the Environment at the London College of Fashion (LCF).

Belgian designer Martin Margiela is among those influenced by Orta, and he is one of a number of top fashion figures, including the late Alexander McQueen (page 60), to feature in 'Aware'. A series of Margiela's collages reflects his adoption of avant-garde art techniques in his design. In splicing apparently incongruous images of different dresses together, Margiela creates a variation of the assemblage techniques pioneered by modernist artists including Picasso and the surrealists. Margiela is clearly conscious of fashion's reputation as 'a consumerist business, always munching things up, and leaving a lot of waste behind', as Orta puts it. 'Aware' features a recreation of his exhibition from 1997, where he worked with a microbiologist to explore the permanence and



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Kuwait Stock Exchange I, 2007, by Andreas Gursky

