

Robb Jamieson + Dominique Sirois, Low Rise Sun

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**LAROCHE/JONCAS GALLERY
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When an exhibition or art practice incorporates clothing, is it unfair to expect the artist to critically engage with issues of gender, sexuality and performativity? This is the question that I kept asking myself as I explored the two-person show *Low Rise Sun*, which was concerned with the power and importance of clothing. The exhibition did not explicitly ask viewers to consider how clothing can signify different genders, social classes or sexualities; nonetheless, I examined the works from that perspective.

The show's title did not fit comfortably with the exhibited works, but combined with the presence of Dominique Sirois's glazed stoneware vases in the shape of denim jeans, it did make me think of the quintessential

clothing item of the early aughts, namely the low rise jeans favoured by Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. This in turn conjured Alexander McQueen's controversial bumsters, which famously revealed the top of models' buttocks. McQueen's bumsters made people uncomfortable, and although the British fashion designer was accused of objectifying his models in violent sexual fantasies (for instance, his 1995 show *Highland Rape* in which many of the models wore ripped clothing), McQueen repeatedly stated that he wanted women to feel strong and warrior-like when wearing his clothing.¹

Low Rise Sun brought together two Montreal artists—Dominique Sirois and Robb Jamieson—whose works for the show were not created specifically to be exhibited together, but which the Laroche/Joncas Gallery positioned as being in dialogue nonetheless because of the two artists' concern with clothing, materiality and the human body. Jamieson's collages incorporate fragments of his own clothing (including lace, leather and cotton), often juxtaposed with abstract shapes created with ink and acrylic paint. *Jean Shorts* (2019), for example, is a collage that combines fragments of bleached denim, lace, ribbon and part of a back-stage pass to Mariah Carey's 1995 *Daydream* tour.

The mid-1990s was a time of heroin chic, queer camp and musical divas, including Carey. Judith Butler had published her important book *Gender Trouble* in 1990, and her theory of gender performativity was influencing



Dominique Sirois, *La femme de Nîmes 2* / *The woman of Nîmes 2*, 2021. Glazed stoneware, 35 x 14.5 x 7.5 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Laroche/Joncas.

scholarship, popular culture and fashion. It is possible to employ Butler's theory, which proposes that gender identity is constructed through clothing, language and repeated gestural actions, to interrogate Jamieson's collages, but Jamieson himself provides very little to actually work with in this regard. There is no clear point of view provided about his perspectives on masculinity, sexuality or the possibility of reading (or indeed misreading) queerness from fragments of clothing and a backstage pass. It is left up to the viewer to read the cloth and backstage pass as, perhaps, small pieces of the artist's public performance of masculinity.

In one of Jamieson's collages—*Laryngoscope* (2020)—fragments of coloured leather, denim, linen, a sports sock and lace float against a light blue ground with white, cloud-like forms. There is potentially something interesting going on here with the different, even paradoxical, gendered materials—the sports sock in close proximity to lace, the leather perhaps signifying a sexual subculture. The fragments do not actually coalesce into a perspective on leather culture, the gendering of sports, or the various connotations of lace as a material historically worn by women and the wealthy.

Sirois is also interested in clothing, but her works are sculptural creations that mimic clothes, rather than fragments of garments she has worn. Whereas Jamieson's works hung on the white gallery walls, the majority of Sirois's sculptures were displayed on a long table and on purple yoga mats placed on the floor. Two of her glazed stoneware works—*Danae I* (2021) and *Sunspot* (2021), both of which are a bronzey brown—did not fit seamlessly with the other pieces, and it was unclear whether the sculptures on yoga mats were intended as a critique or celebration of mainstream yoga culture, or simply as a quirky way of displaying some of the pieces. Tables or pedestals would have been a stronger choice.

Sirois's *The Woman of Nimes* works, which were displayed on a table in the centre of the gallery space, are clearly concerned with the symbolic power of clothing and the sexualized female body. *The Woman of Nimes* series includes several glazed stoneware vases that are moulded in the shape of a waist, buttocks and thighs wearing tight blue denim jeans. Jeans signify, in a range of ways, different social classes, age groups and gender identities. The fact that Sirois engages with denim jeans using this particular material (glazed stoneware) and this particular object (the vase) opens up space for thinking about how this clothing item is filled with a myriad of different bodies. It also invites a reading that considers the vulnerability of the female body. The glazed stoneware is hard to the touch, brittle even, but will break if treated roughly. Sirois is interested in the sexualized white, female body in these works, but because there are no faces, and indeed no body parts that clearly indicate gender or race, it is possible to consider the vulnerability of all bodies, and all subjects, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation.

Ultimately, a more declarative point of view on the power of clothing in relation to gender and sexuality from both artists would have been welcome. In a text entitled "Stitching Up: Embroidering the Sex Life of a Fetishist Image-Maker," Nigel Hurlstone observes that, as a queer man, clothing has been crucial to his life and identity construction, whether he wants to appear queer or pass as straight. Of the erotics of clothing, Hurlstone writes: "It is where we can learn about the frailty of self, but also gain strength. It is where we can construct desires and take pleasure when we can. It is where we are most honest, but also the most vulnerable."² I would very much have liked to see more pleasure, and more vulnerability, in these works.

1. Caroline Evans, "Desire and Dread: Alexander McQueen and the Contemporary Femme Fatale," in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 201–214.
2. Nigel Hurlstone, "Stitching Up: Embroidering the Sex Life of a Fetishist Image-Maker," in *The Erotic Cloth: Seduction and Fetishism in Textiles*, eds. Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 57.

Julia Skelly teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her publications include *Wasted Looks: Addiction and British Visual Culture, 1751–1919* (2014), *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017), and the edited collection *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600–2010* (2014). Skelly's next book, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Academic in 2022.