PAPER

monster mash
INSIDE A CUCKOO NEW FASHION EXHIBITION
By Luigi Tadini

ATOPOS Contemporary Visual Culture, exhibition 'ARRRGH! Monsters in Fashion' at the Benaki Museum, Athens, © photo: Panos Kokkinias.

Magnificently grotesque creatures are taking over the Gaîté Lyrique in Paris this spring, when the museum opens its doors to "Arrrgh! Monstres de Mode." Conceived by Vassilis Zidianakis and Angelos Tsourapas of Athens-based cultural incubator Atopos CVC, the exhibit compiles the work of 55 fashion designers who challenge beauty norms through their transformative, body-morphing creations. From pieces by Alexander McQueen and Issey Miyake to newcomers Hideki Seo and Craig Green, the show includes videos, soundscapes and, of course, subversive fashions. The pieces are an extension of Atopos CVC's book *Not A Toy: Fashioning Radical Characters*, which highlights the influence of character culture (think video games, street art and online avatars) on contemporary fashion. Below, we chat with Tsourapas about the exhibition.

What's your definition of a monster? How does this play into the current fashionscape?

For the ancient Greeks, except for the obvious meanings still in use today, the word 'Monster' described everything strange that had to be given an explanation. Monsters were not just repulsive, supernatural and frightening beasts, but also the astonishing, heavenly phenomena of the world and universe that surrounded them. Anything that could not be explained was a 'monster.' This definition is questioning everything that surrounds us and even our inner thoughts and, I think this is what avant-garde and experimental fashion designers are attempting to do today.

The idea for the exhibit came after the publication of your book *Not A Toy* which is an exploration of 'character culture' in fashion. What is character culture?

Character culture, or the contemporary characters phenomenon, first appeared in the USA at the beginning of the 20th Century and boomed intensively in Japan in the following decades. Their original purpose was for advertising and product promotion. From the '90s onwards, contemporary characters have flooded cultural and artistic production on a global scale; they now appear in many forms of artistic production -- from street art and video games, to vinyl toys, animation and cinema, object and product design, graphic design, artists' sketchbooks and fashion, questioning the established norms of aesthetics. Even the simplest emoticons, smiley or sad faces that we use every day on email or sms are characters.

Charlie Le Mindu + ATOPOS cvc, Atopic Bodies [ONE]: 'Mr & Mrs Myth', 2010, © photo: Vassilis Karidis.

Alexis Themistocleous, 'Out of this World' collection, 2010, photo: Demetris Vattis.

Paul Graves and Joe Fish, Fashion Monster Blahnik, 2006, © photo: Paul Graves.
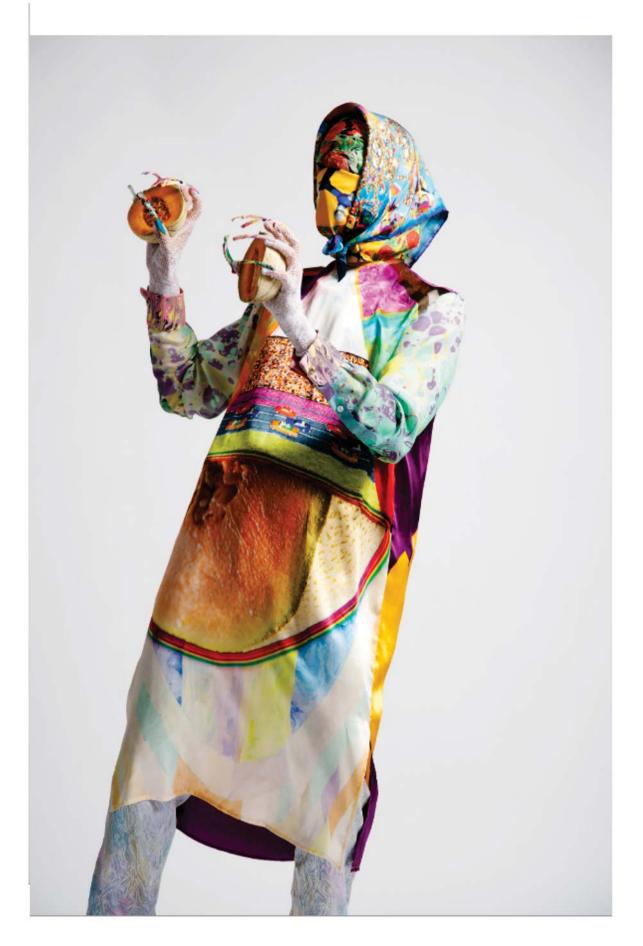

Pierre-Antoine Vettorello, 'Bonnie Magnum vs Samantha Beretta' MA collection Antwerp Fashion Department, 2009, © photo: Ronald Stoops.

Chi He, 'Oh! My Dog', BA collection Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design Fashion & Textiles Department, 2011, photo: Buzz Chen.
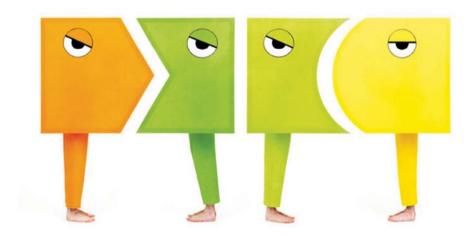

Jean-Paul Lespagnard, The Believers, 2010, © photo: Javier Barcala / La Fortuna Studio.

Manon Kündig, 'Bowerbird', MA collection Antwerp Fashion Department, 2012, © photo: Michaël Smits.

Piers Atkinson, Knitted Balaclava with Pom-Poms, 'All the World's a Stage' collection, S/S 2009, © photo: Leigh Keily.

ARRRGH ! Monstres de mode. © Style et character design : Craig Green -- Photo : Daniel Lillie

How does character culture fit into fashion?

In the contemporary fashion field, the human body is constantly mutated and transformed into an unknown, bizarre and many times monstrous figure. Designers and artists experiment, give atypical shapes to textiles, create odd forms and extreme volumes, cover and mask the face, and dress the human body by creating hybrid creatures with supernatural shapes, vibrant colors and surprising abstract elements. These experimental creations become parallel worlds, proposing and bringing to surface different realities.

Even though most of the creations exhibited mask or morph the body in a variety of ways, how do these explorations end up revealing more about gender, body identity and current culture?

Our contemporary tendency is to see the function of masks as simply one of concealing -- of hiding, masking -- one's true identity. Cross-culturally and historically, however, the primary, thoroughly extraordinary function of the mask is that of revealing rather than concealing; of transforming -- the ultimate magic-- one person into another person, a deity, spirit or demon, a particular type of person, a human quality or characteristic or an animal. Similarly, these creations are aiming to reveal what the creator has kept a secret in his own unique universe.

We selected outfits that would make heads turn if you were to see them walking down the street. In terms of the link between character design and contemporary fashion and the use of characters on the catwalk, I believe that what most designers are aiming is to present creations that don't focus on 'who I am' (the impression I make with what I wear), but 'what I experience' (the effects that this body and appearance have on my brain).

Tracy Widdess, 'Preta', 2012, © photo: Tracy Widdess.

When piecing together the book and the exhibit what were some of the criteria you held for choosing the talent showcased? Who were some designers that first came to mind?

We reviewed over 5,000 images and we selected those that we considered strange, extraordinary, odd, eccentric, unnatural, disgusting, foul, unwanted, atopic. The first designers that came to mind were Walter van Beirendonck, Alexander McQueen, Comme des Garcons, Martin Margiela, as you would expect, but then our focus was also younger and upcoming designers.

What was it like curating an exhibit, specifically transforming something that is 2D (the book) into a 3D experience.

In the book, we aimed to narrate a story, page after page. We selected the images that would best describe that story with a clear beginning, middle and end. For the exhibition it was quite different. First of all, quite a few of these costumes were not available. They were either damaged because they were too fragile or there were even cases that the designers or artists had to throw them away because they moved and these costumes were simply taking too much space. There were also some cases where we asked for a specific costume and the designer replied that even though that costume looks great on the picture, they would suggest another one for the exhibition because it looks better