

Liminal Lyricism: Boredom and H.B. Peace



*'The statement is pointless
The finger is speechless'*

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The title of H.B. Peace's new collection reads the final stanza of a poem in R.D. Laing's book *Knots*. Laing, a psychiatrist of the mid-20th Century, diagnosed disorders as reflections of the culture in which the patients live and work. His approach rethought the human condition through the dismantling of mental disorder stigma. In this way, poetically, "statements" lose their diagnostic tenets; they become "useless". H.B. Peace translates this subjectivisation of condition, consciously or not, into their latest collection, which concatenates the muted and unremarkable into subtle worn dramas. Comprised of washed out tones and elementary cuts made out of found bed sheets and second-hand woollen blankets, the clothes and runway show that H.B. Peace created realigned fashion back to the sensuous touch. During the runway presentation, these clothes were then performed on bodies, each of which walked through a compressed *mise-en-scène* implicating a gallery full of spectators.

Easy garments like pants with elasticised waists, full peasant skirts, relaxed coats, shapeless two-piece kimono-sleeved dresses and shirts with the referential metrics of tabs, buttonholes and neat mandarin collars all issued the impression of the basic. This collection, however, was far from any trite attempt to 're-invent the basic', the most benign diagnosis in the fashion patios. Instead, it was invested in the subjectivisation of it. The majority of the pieces were made from found cotton bed sheets that were then hand treated by the designers, colouring them mild grey toned blues and purples. Texturally enriching the fabrics, it also degraded them. The treatment appeared instinctively etiolated and unbalanced as if put through one's domestic washing machine countless times. These contaminated basics were faintly worn as if previously experienced and the bed sheet interface gestured obliquely towards the intimacy between cloth and skin. Worn wool using a similar dye treatment was used for the long coat and chunky pants, creating reduced shell-like iterations of these generics. The boredom of the basic was being toyed with.



Heat-transferred images of their logo, commissioned texts, and other hand-drawn scribbles printed across the pieces created sensitive techniques that took on an appeal of aging process. As the adhesion of heat-transfers wears and stretches through the durational give of fabric, unique to the shape and habitual movement of the wearer's body, slight puckering and twists occur, transforming the static image into an organic object, prone to deterioration. This was also seen on their aged woollen scarfs with the giant A3-sized heat-transferred poems by artist Christopher LG Hill. With a hefty copper ring held by a strip of glued leather these basic scarfs performed multiplicity, moulded as either a clutch with the ring held by the hand, or a pulled-through scarf around the neck. Running across the surface of two rectangular sack dresses, the barest of garment forms, was a trail of abstracted lines beaded with tiny plastic droplets of the same colour as the fabric. The palette of the pattern was

difficult if not impossible to properly define. Something so diminutive developed a poetic puzzle against the clarity of the sack dress. What became apparent was that a good image capture of this dynamism is almost impossible. Information is lost or made liminal from any one photo, destabilizing the process of techno-recycle and connectivity of image distribution, both in digital and printed form.

The presentation by H.B. Peace intentionally squeezed the large audience of the night together in Melbourne gallery Slopes, making our social bodies aware of each other as we stood literally shoulder-to-shoulder. We saw each other intimately as we watched the models, foregrounding a relational experience in the designers' lo-fi runway, which was mapped by masking tape. This tight formation of audience choreographed the route where the models traversed, forming a slim snaking maze in the gallery, often bumping and scraping onlookers. The tactic had the ability to create alienating bodies, using people as fleshy architecture. The ambivalent style and provisional environment nevertheless precluded a sincerity that felt less authoritative. How this choreography became powerful though was through violating sharp visibility of the clothes. It was as if skirting your way through a party or busy city street, only parts of the clothing could be pictorialized by any one position. In a filmic move, H.B. Peace made the boring captures of the edge of a cotton shirt, the skim of an unhemmed skirt, expressive. There was no vantage point in the gallery though that secured a holistic image unsullied by other interrupting people.



Video still of presentation held at Slopes, Melbourne

One thing was concrete: materials were wrapping themselves around actual bodies. Literally, with the nebulous fringed piece of leather tying itself around the chest, free forming an adjunct bustier as the only outspoken piece in the show. Or the 10cm-

wide, 1mm-thin, soft polymer metal encased in the bed sheet cotton, malleable enough to be bent and suspend itself around the waist as a visual cue for a belt. Materials gained subtle relationships. Various hems were raw and the plodded fraying was unspectacular; one would only notice the disentanglement of warp and weft upon close touch, abjuring itself as a prescribed graphic action¹. If Jacques Rancière has become popular in fashion theory² it is because he addresses the 'distribution of the sensible' as a dilemma that relates so well to the consumption of the basic garment. This collection however, as a series of basic garments, dramatized covert acts of subjectivization that privileges acts of looking and wearing, upsetting what Rancière would deem 'the police order' or standardization of dress.

¹ Retro-grunge label *Marques'Almedia* is a good stakeholder of current fashion reproducing *fraying* as uniformity.

² His interest in art is well known but books like *Aesthetic Politics in Fashion* (2014) underscore his thoughts through the rubric of fashion.



Basics, which are normally the apparatus for standardisation, massification and financial terror, instrumentalised by the corrupt flows of mega-companies like Target and violent exploitation of cheap labour from sweatshop workers, are the symbols of our economically rationalized and uniformed society. Rendering visible the politics of this 'basic' aesthetic, H.B. Peace problematizes this language by creating elegiac interruptions with moments like dying materials to age them, texturizing faint pilled surfaces, abetting fabric to unravel and using heat adhesion as a counterproductive ploy for volatility. In appealing to one's psychological experience of the basic through intimate cognized and worn states, these pieces take a liminal lyricism. The collection makes "boring" eccentric and in a much more composite and processional manner than the easy sloganeering of designs by, say, Victor & Rolf. It is within these liminal enunciations that pause are given to the wearable expectations of the basic and standardisation questioned.

In the wake of the industry heralding video as the new democratizing frontier for designers, we have witnessed only a further entrapment of perpetual image production. If we recount Kim Gordon's clothing label X-Girl and the video Paul Morrison made for it, there is a sort of anti-narrative. The video disrupts itself through a French New Wave style of fragmented editing, where its discursive potential is realized in the platitudinous length and manifold storylines. Liminal spaces emerge between storylines, between images and at the junctures of the cuts. The ongoing, almost Brechtian, critique of presence hinders the easy speed of the image exchange-value. Bodies aren't consumed for smooth techno-capitalist recycle but similar to H.B. Peace's latest work, flirt with the idea of being boring as an agenda to bring us together as subjects. "The statement is pointless / The finger is speechless" is too un-professionalized to render a clean minimalistic locus and too subtle to be outrageous spectacle. The underwhelming edifice of this collection is that its information takes time to process and necessitates personal codifying, which is exactly its strength.

H.B. Peace is a label by two people (Hugh Egan Westland and Blake Barns) currently based in Melbourne and shown by Centre for Style.