



Caitlin Thompson
DANDY LINES

Fine and Dandy: Sartorial Making and Transforming in Caitlin Thompson's *Dandy Lines*



Caitlin Thompson's *Dandy Lines* is an exhibition of ornate, sequin and thread-encrusted cloaks; garments which lack bodies, save for the vermilion-tinged fence posts that peek out of each collar, and the barbed wire that emerges out of the occasional sleeve, like the skeletal arm of a ghostly apparition. Vividly colourful images of the natural and supernatural – roosters, snakes, skulls, and aliens, to name a few – are meticulously embroidered across the cloaks. The exhibition's title, *Dandy Lines*, offers multiple meanings and associations, but references in particular the concept of dandyism, or the performance of a constructed, idealized identity, often through consumables such as clothing. Through *Dandy Lines*' otherworldly, bodiless cloaks, Thompson meditates on the transformative potential of wearing and making, and its intersection with materiality, labour, and identity.

Dandy Lines exists in a liminal space between real and surreal, animate and inanimate; bodiless garments frozen in simulated motion. The figures emblazoned across the cloaks

are rendered in a posterized, 12-colour palette, a result of the machine that Thompson uses to complete the embroidery. The reduced palette makes her figures reminiscent of keyframes in a sequenced animation, or a neon sign that transitions from one position to another.

The connection to animation is not incidental: Thompson has worked continuously between the two media, finding similarities between both processes.¹ Her chosen subject matter teases out these connections between embroidery and animation: one can envision the repetitive movements of the owl's feet in *Strix*, or the peeling flames in *Fountain*. The gradually shifting faces adorning the bottom edge of *Zenith* are particularly mesmerizing; the slow transformation between each "face" – planet to face to skull to alien – is redolent of a photo flipbook, while also serving as a nod to the many subcultures who have expressed or obfuscated their identity through surface adornment.

Several of the cloaks, notably *Cockfight*, a barrel-riding cape festooned with duelling roosters, have been installed such that the outside of the garment is equally as visible as the reverse, revealing the back side of the embroidered surface, replete with dangling threads and other signifiers of the embroidery process. While Thompson creates much of the embroidery with the assistance of a machine, she adds further detail by hand to complete the work, resulting in the gnarls and knots on the reverse side. The contrast between the two sides offers a visual diffusion of the tension inherent in time-consuming and physically laborious work and, through its direct evocation of the labouring body and the act of making, offers a critique of the historically inequitable relationship between maker and wearer.

Dandy Lines' garments and their attendant iconography – which Thompson refers to as "cosmic country embroidery" – wink at mythic constructions of "the West," a geographically and temporally vague frontier that can be imagined more clearly through expressions of an identity than through a precise location. The cloaks also reference the intricate embroidery of Nudie Cohn, a tailor who designed iconic performance outfits for the likes of Elvis, Hank Williams, and Roy Rogers, among many others. Cohn's lavishly embellished designs transgressed prevailing sartorial expectations for men and had an indelible effect on the aesthetic codes of Western wear within the vernacular of popular culture.² The performance of donning these garments allowed their wearers to assume and project a particular identity. Thompson abstracts this transformation beyond the act of wearing: "the *becoming* of western occurs through the *making* of western."³ In Thompson's construction, both the cowboy and the tailor become the dandy. They both embody what she calls "the material reality of an ideal self"⁴ through the making and the wearing of specialized garments. Thompson's gestures to Western identity and to rhinestone cowboys contain multitudes: *Dandy Lines* evokes the transformative nature not only of sartorial performance, but also of the crafting of such garments, as well as complex histories of labour and the decorative.

Elizabeth Diggon © 2017

1 Caitlin Thompson, "Dandy Lines: Beneath the Surface of Western Sartorial Identity." Paper presented at *Dressing Global Bodies* conference, 2016.

2 Mairi Mackenzie, Dreamsuits: *The Wonderful World of Nudie Cohn* (Tiel: Lanoo Publishers, 2011), 7, 99.

3 Caitlin Thompson, "Dandy Lines: Beneath the Surface of Western Sartorial Identity." Paper presented at *Dressing Global Bodies* conference, 2016.

4 Ibid.

Caitlin Thompson Dandy Lines

March 9 - April 8, 2017

ODD Gallery

CAITLIN THOMPSON grew up in rural east-central Alberta and completed her BFA in Sculpture at The Alberta College of Art + Design (2007). In 2009, Caitlin moved to Montreal to pursue an MFA in Fibres and Material Practices from Concordia University (2015). She has recently moved back to Alberta to complete the beneficial cycle of journeying and returning. Her studio practice focuses on the relationship between the act of making and the formation of identity, specifically in embroidery and animation.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Working through cycles of craftwork and digital media, my work focuses on the transformative powers of craftwork and animation. Through processes of fabrication, embellishment, and performance, my works become extensions of my body and allow me to re-experience the social meanings and mythologies of boundaries. The embellishment acts as an extension of the body through the projection of identity through material and labour. Crafting becomes a gesture, or a state of activity.

By performing these gestures through the surfaces of textiles and digital media, I am illustrating the ability that craftwork and animation have to transform inanimate objects into activated things.

ELIZABETH DIGGON is a doctoral candidate in the Cultural Studies Program at Queen's University, Kingston. She is also the lead researcher at the Esker Foundation, Calgary. She has worked as a curator, art writer, and archival technician with institutions such as the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; the Union Gallery, Kingston; the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, and the Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Images:

Dandy Lines (diamondback), embroidery & mixed media, 2015, photo: David J Romero

Dandy Lines (cockfight), embroidery & mixed media, 2015, photo: David J Romero

ODD
GALLERY

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