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PRESS RELEASE

Dorian Sari

jardin et jalousie

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The art of Dorian Sari concerns the structures which contain the self; what distinguishes the self from what is around it; what might, in turn, protect, repress, or manifest it.

At the center of their sculptural vocabulary is a jacket, several of them shoulder-padded and sometimes double-breasted. Quite ordinary, or even typical, they represent the idea of the human subject. Of course, there is, as in every use of a symbolic stand-in, a winking acknowledgment of how all symbols are shot full of holes, of how the world never did exactly correspond to the idea. So, too, this idea, this jacket-as-universal-subject, is a tattered fiction. Inside is a skeleton of clothes hangers, multiple and deviant, as people tend to be.

Jackets are essential to what it means to be human. In Gogol's famous story 'The Overcoat' (1842), the protagonist, Akaky, does not appear as a subject worthy of respect or even compassion until he gets a new overcoat to replace his old rag. Of course, this transformation is ambivalent because Akaky now suddenly also has something to lose. We are not exactly surprised when Akaky is robbed of his new, prized possession by some rascal, who leaves him in the snow to catch a cold and, eventually, die. Later, his ghost haunts the citizens of St. Petersburg by stealing their coats, and the reader is left to wonder whether it could not have been a similarly motivated ghost who stole Akaky's coat. This is how coats, jackets, blazers, double-breasted or not, circulate the privileged marker of 'human subject': gives and takes, gives and takes.

Gogol's story – and Sari's jacket-sculptures – imply a serious question about what is left of humans without their clothes. Can we ask, as we do, about the sound of a tree falling in the forest when there's no one around to hear, whether the naked human, alone in front of their mirror when no one is looking – at that moment – truly exists? The subject is born by an intricate dialectic between private and public, as the coat hides your naked body from view in the same instance as it allows you to appear in public. Visibility at once constitutes selfhood, disguises it, and, as Akaky's tragic destiny illustrates, threatens its survival.

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A related concern is at play in the wall of ceramic tablets mimicking the layout of a calendar. Again, there is a system, structure, and repetition. Humans are different from one another in the same way that days are: on the one hand, completely, and on the other, not at all. Another thing these two perceived entities have in common is that the structure which enables them to emerge as distinct is entirely arbitrary. Not all world cultures subscribe to the concept of an hour or an individual. But somehow, we've come to live by these concepts and die by them, too.

A calendar is a diary with a coat on. What we see in this work is a palimpsest of public and private, individual and collective experience. On the tablets are diary-like entries that describe something that took place – a date, say, the first one in a long time – or an emotion: fear and anger at something happening in the world. But where diaries are often kept safe under lock and key, or even burned, dramatically, to keep their secret, in Sari's work, they are both part of a public display and edged into hard material: fireproof. As such, they stand for a reevaluation of what is considered valuable testimony, what makes it across the threshold of the private interior, and into the buttonhole of the dinner jacket, like a flower, for everyone to see.

A flower in the buttonhole of a dinner jacket, right above the heart. A propeller on top of a hat, like a child's, spinning and spinning. These details in Sari's work push the archetype inferred by the universal-particular jackets in the direction of the clown, the fool, or the trickster. As Mikhail Bakhtin argued, this figure has the power to topple hierarchies, reverse expectations, and destabilize currencies – the eyes that stare out from beneath the coat flaps are capricious and theatrical. In the world of Tarot cards, The Fool is the void from which everything arises; openness, innocence, purity of instinct, but also chaos and danger. The foolishness of the jackets complicates their stability as signifiers and their special role as gatekeepers between inside and outside. Something that is often forgotten is that every assertion of category or boundary is also a question: why here? Why like this? How many coat hangers can fit under a single coat?

Careful observers will note that in the popular Rider-Waite Tarot deck, The Fool appears on a cliff under a beaming sun, waves crashing around them, holding a white flower. This, I suppose, is what certifies their innocence. It is also another instance in which the world of symbols falls short of the world we know. Because there is not, in Sari's work, exactly innocence or purity, but a brusque awareness of the violence and inequity that structure our coats and our calendars, fill them up, and wear them out.

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The exhibition's title, *jardin & jalousie*, describes a complicated space that is both private and exterior and a difficult emotion, both insidious and loving. Sari's black ceramic flowers – the fleurs du mal that dot the floor like black pools – speak of a world in which desire and fear tend to meddle with the purer impulses to care and protect. The jalousie, also understood as a curtain blind, is another carnivalesque object which reveals at the same time as it conceals, disturbing the power between the one who is seen and the one who sees. In the dialectic between private and public, existence and exhibition, as we meet it in Sari's work, one always glimmers inside the other like a pair of eyes from out of the dark.

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