



FINE FORM

From gallery walls to red carpets, new perspectives about the world around us materialise as art and fashion converge. At least for those willing to look for them.

Words by Amanda Randone

When the actress Zendaya stepped out onto the red carpet earlier this year in a silver cyborg suit for the London premiere of her movie *Dune: Part 2*, she was wearing more than just a 'capital-L' look. She was wearing a piece of history. Designed by Thierry Mugler for his fall-winter 1995 collection, the aptly named "robot couture" ensemble served as a projection into the future – one in which a woman's flesh turns to metal, her body encased in protective armour.

For Zendaya to don the metal-and-plexiglass catsuit nearly three decades later renders the sartorial choice, made under the guidance of her stylist and self-proclaimed "image architect" Law Roach, especially poignant. The archival garb has been reintroduced in an era where artificial intelligence is integrated into various aspects of our daily lives and humanoid companions are no longer the stuff of science fiction. It appears as a reaction to the world around us, and in this way, demonstrates how fashion and art can go hand in hand.



"Both fashion and art are interlinked and influencing each other. Artists today continue to integrate textiles and the handicraft of fashion garments into their works, experimenting in producing their own wearable pieces while collaborating with global fashion brands," says Suzy Sikorski, founder of the digital storytelling platform Mid East Art, which covers contemporary culture in the Middle East. Mugler's robot suit is an example of this trend, the designer producing it in collaboration with the artist Jean-Jacques Urcun, who reportedly developed new techniques in order to execute his partner's ambitious vision. The duo also collaborated on an iconic Mugler dress from his 1997 haute couture show *Les Chimères* (Mythical Creatures). The famed corsetier Mr Pearl was tapped to bring the piece to life, which turned out to be a dazzling combination of fish, bird, beast, and garment that required 20 pairs of hands to complete.

Urcun is one among several notable creatives whose artistic contributions have left a mark on the fashion industry. Sculptor Claude Lalanne's gilded body castings for a series of 1969 Yves Saint Laurent neoclassical couture gowns preceded the current rise of luxury breastplates on red carpets and runways. In the 1930s, Salvador Dalí partnered with Elsa Schiaparelli to produce clothing, fabric patterns and perfume labels using his signature surrealist touch. The pair's silk "lobster dress" featuring the crustacean provocatively depicted between the legs of its wearer created an uproar, especially when photographed on the American socialite – and newly minted duchess – Wallis Simpson.

The storied intersection of art and fashion remains a source of inspiration for contemporary artists who draw from garmenting to expand upon ideas explored in other media. Nick Cave made a name for himself through his *Soundsuits*: full-body coverings

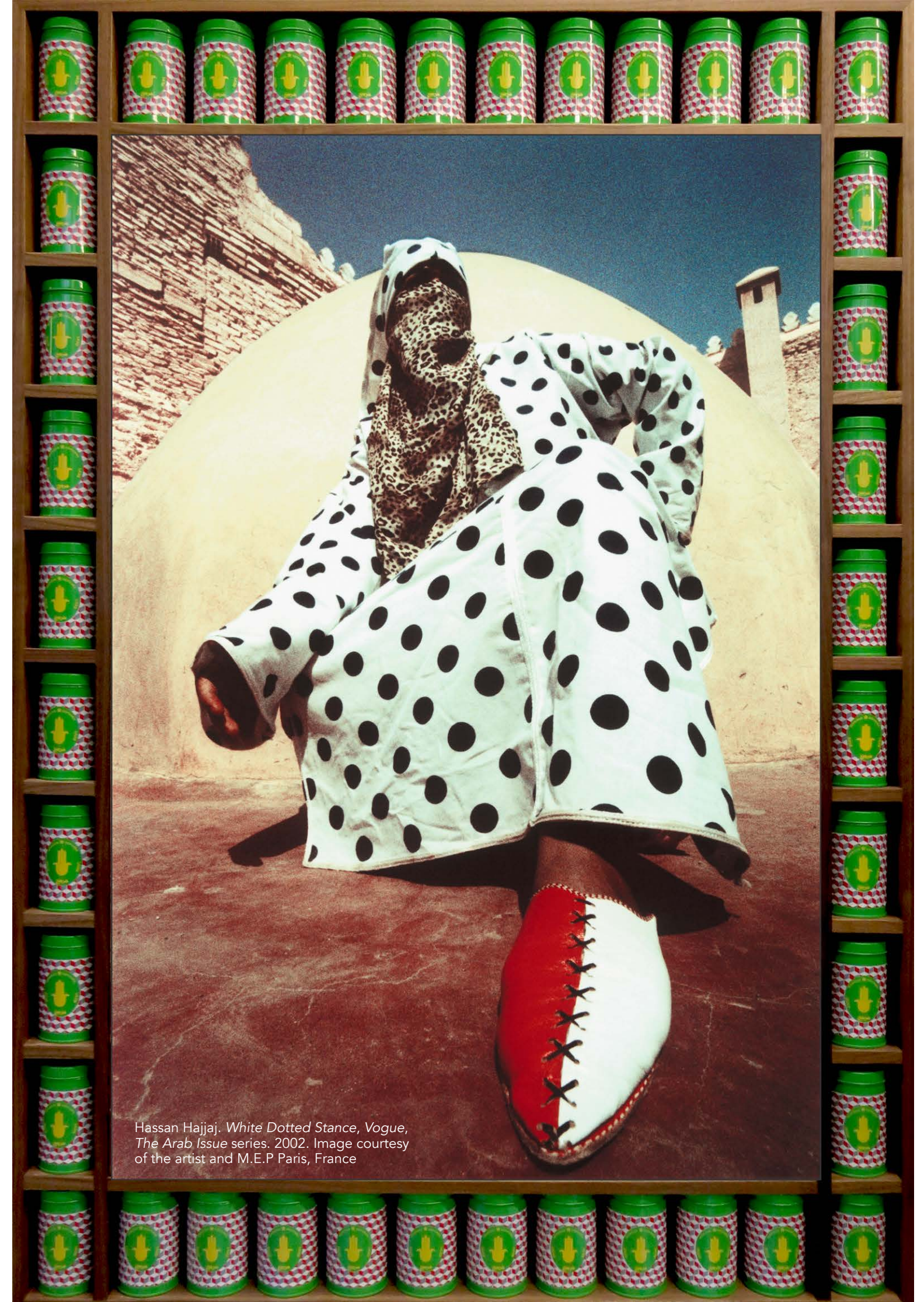


made from twigs, buttons, figurines and objects gathered from markets and thrift shops to form a wearable shield, much like Mugler's robot ensemble. Cave's first identity-masking suit was presented as sculpture in response to the racial profiling and beating of Rodney King by police officers, although his pieces have since been worn for live performances, videos and photographs. Yinka Shonibare has also adopted clothing in his practice by showing mannequins – usually headless – donning Victorian-style attire made from vibrant wax print fabrics commonly associated with African culture. Seeing as these textiles actually originate from Indonesia, Shonibare manages to communicate ideas around consumerism, colonialism and globalisation in a single assemblage of his creations.

As contemplated by designers and artists alike, the question of the body – and of how and if it is covered – has often depended

on a wider social and political context. In the seventeenth century, for example, European artists – think Rubens – presented women with more robust figures and deep cleavage as aspirational and attractive. Compare this to the late 1960s, when a new androgynous aesthetic was emerging, and it is no coincidence that, at the same time, the feminist movement was going up against the bra as a symbol of patriarchal constraint.

Designers today continue to challenge norms of what has traditionally been classified as women's apparel. Take the post-pandemic, *Bridgerton*-fuelled return of the corset, followed by Schiaparelli's use of objects like gold-dipped bronchial passageways and embroidered animal heads to cover the chests of Bella Hadid and Kylie Jenner, respectively. Harking back to the luxury house's roots, creative director Daniel Roseberry revisited its lobster iconography for spring/summer 2024.



Hassan Hajjaj. *White Dotted Stance*, Vogue, *The Arab Issue* series. 2002. Image courtesy of the artist and M.E.P Paris, France

Yinka Shonibare. *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Gentlemen)*. 2006. Installation view of *Racism. The Invention of Human Races* at the German Hygiene Museum (19 May 2018–6 January 2019), Dresden, Germany. Photography by Sebastian Kahnert/dpa; Sebastian Kahnert/picture alliance via Getty Images



A cream-coloured skirt from the collection, complete with a lobster fixed to its crotch, swiftly made its way into Zendaya's *Dune: Part 2* promotional looks.

Moroccan designer Artsi Ifrach, winner of the Fashion Trust Arabia evening wear award in 2022, is also known for avant-garde designs that reinterpret classic pieces through the use of antique and repurposed textiles and items. In a recent Instagram post for Ifrach's Marrakech-based label Maison ARTC, a model poses in a top fashioned out of what looks like an oversized vintage purse with two protruding tassels. Again, coverage for the chest is reimagined through the coming together of art and fashion. "As a creator, I try to bring fashion as an art form in order to survive time, and to make it valuable and powerful as an imaginary universe," Ifrach explains. "As a designer, I try to preserve culture and shape it to fit our time and save it for the future. The difference between fashion and art is clear to me. Art is not a branding [exercise] or product, it's an individual expression of creativity. It is not created with commercial intent."

Sikorski points out that there are a number of creatives from the MENA region who, like Ifrach, imbue their work with local artistry as a way of preserving craft and even identity. "Obaid Suroor, the Emirati pioneer artist, used jalabiya fabrics in his work just as [Moroccan artist and photographer] Hassan Hajjaj fits his sitters with ensembles made by local tailors and artisans," she says.

Mous Lamrabet is another Moroccan-born photographer whose art celebrates his cultural heritage by merging contemporary and traditional elements. Raised in Belgium, his diasporic perspective is present in his photography and woven into each global collaboration that comes his way as his profile grows, from WhatsApp to Saint Laurent. Other luxury houses have similarly commissioned artistic projects with Arab talent to engage more meaningfully with regional audiences. This direction notably includes Dior's move to give Egypt's Ghada

Amer and Qatar's Bouthayna Al Muftah carte blanche to design specific editions of its signature Lady Dior bags.

For the late Lebanese painter Huguette Caland, clothing was an art form with which she experimented in a range of significant ways. In 1969 she founded the Lebanese NGO Inaash, which continues to help Palestinian refugee women to earn an income by using the centuries-old *tatreez* embroidery technique to produce motifs for apparel, accessories and decor items. The organisation now sells a piece called the Samia Halaby Jacket, designed by the Palestinian artist herself, along with a vibrant tapestry that blends ancient craftsmanship with a contemporary aesthetic.

When it comes to Caland's other endeavours in the fashion world, she is perhaps best known for making over 100 kaftans with the designer Pierre Cardin after her move to Paris. "She believed that the loose-fitting design of the kaftan liberated women from traditional ideals of beauty. Compared with Western-influenced styles, Caland appreciated that the kaftan was free-floating and did not reinforce the male gaze," writes curator Noora Abdulmajeed about the clothing items included in Caland's August 2020 solo exhibition, *Faces and Places*, at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar. In both her garments and her abstract painting, the artist examines the politicisation of female sexuality, often using her own form as a subject and a tool.

There is no right or wrong approach to the question of how to dress and address the body. Instead, there are different responses to be found, be that in a Tom Ford chrome bodice, in a series of Caland oeuvres titled *Bribes de corps* (Body Parts) or in a Mous Lamrabet image depicting hijabi women layering basketball jerseys over their traditional dress. When an artist has a message to convey, fashion can assist in storytelling around gender, place, attitudes and ideologies. It is a relationship that works both ways. Creators are communicators inviting others to try on their ideas for size, and in that sense, answers await in art of all kinds. ■