

ARTS

All dressed up in Oceanside

In museum's exhibit, artists use garment in unexpected ways

BY MARTINA SCHIMITSCHEK

Artist Melissa Meier's dresses are inspired by the pageantry of Brazil's Carnival and the ceremonial garb of indigenous people and are designed to portray strength, beauty and female empowerment. These mythological fashion statements are made all the more eye-catching by Meier's unusual choice of materials.

Her garbs are made from organic items, ranging from seashells and eggshells to stick and stones. They come with headdresses and often matching shoes.

Meier, who lives in the Los Angeles area, grew up in Brazil and traveled the world with her parents. The influences of culture and Carnival run through her "Skins" series of garments, which she also photographs into a visual story line and as a way to document the fragile pieces, which have a limited lifespan.

She spent time living in Switzerland. "That's when I got more interested in organic art. I was out in nature all the time," said Meier, who decided to put all the beautiful sticks, pine cones and moss she found there to use. She had made her first outfit in Los Angeles, before moving to Switzerland, inspired by the leaves of a magnolia tree in front of her house.

The material, Meier said, inspires the outfit. "Putting together the vision is what takes longer," she said. Using wire mesh to create an underlying form, Meier glues or sews her chosen material onto the shape. "That's the fun part," she said.

All the outfits are wearable, often modeled by her daughter. "I do like the idea of the sculpture being kinetic," she said.

Her imaginative designs and unusual materials caught the eye of Los Angeles-based curator Kate Stern and were part of the inspiration for the Oceanside Museum of Art's "Dress Rehearsal," which opened July 27. The exhibition's 12 artists showcase the dress in surprising ways, many using unexpected material.

"Many years ago, I started seeing artwork from dresses using crazy material," Stern said. "I was seeing metal dresses. I saw a dress made out of phone books. When I began to find these dresses, first is was visual. Then I came to see what's behind them, and it's so much deeper."

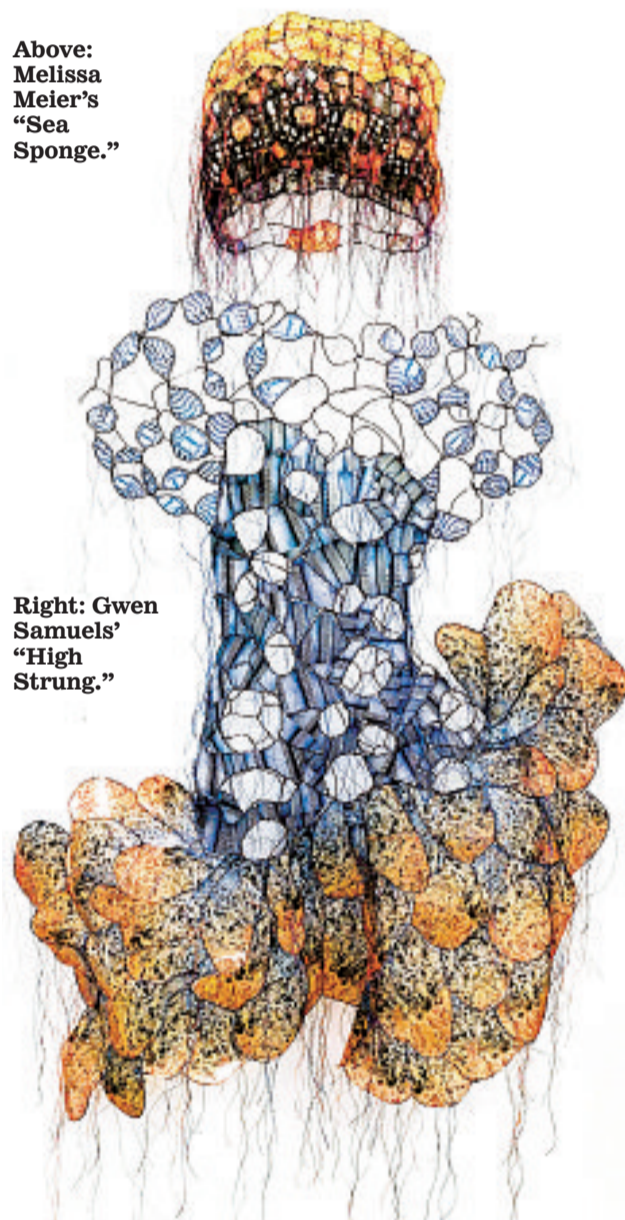
"The show has been gestating and marinating in my head for a long time," Stern said. The collection she had in her head shifted a bit for the Oceanside Museum of Art because of the museum's focus on regional artists; she had been looking at pieces across the globe.

Michael Kalish was another artist whose work inspired Stern to put together the dress-themed show. His exhibition piece



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OCEANSIDE MUSEUM OF ART

Above: Melissa Meier's "Sea Sponge."



Right: Gwen Samuels' "High Strung."

uses layers of stacked high-gloss metal to create the back of a geisha wearing a kimono.

The exhibition, Stern said, is art infused with fashion and drama. The title is a play on the theatrical with the dress center stage. An installation by Dosshaus, the collaboration of David Connelly and Zoey Taylor, is a whimsical look into a theater's dressing room. Created entirely of repurposed cardboard

hand-painted in black and white, the scene includes outfits hanging on the wall, an old-fashioned trunk, and items such as the "hand bag," a clutch with a hand attached to it.

Some works are in more traditional mediums, such as the ethereal photography of Carolyn Hampton of her daughter in white dresses or the paintings of Kenton Nelson, who captures the female body through figures in 1950s fashion.



Janet Taylor Pickett's "Circe's Insouciance" is on display at the new exhibit "Dress Rehearsal" at the Oceanside Museum of Art.

"Dress Rehearsal"

When: Through Jan. 19

Where: Oceanside Museum of Art, 704 Pier View Way, Oceanside

Tickets: \$5 to \$8

Phone: (760) 435-3720

Online: oma-online.org

"A lot of it is how you cover yourself and how you reveal yourself," Stern said.

Other artists use dresses as a canvas. Janet Taylor Pickett depicts her life as an African American and that of her ancestors as slaves with paintings of dresses, and Alexandra Dillon paints portraits of women in the spirit of Roman-Egyptian mummy portraits on vintage garments.

Two dresses hanging at the entrance to the exhib-

ition like theater curtains are deconstructed. "They are the unsung heroes," Stern said, "the ones with all the holes."

Meier has two dresses in the exhibition along with three photographs. One outfit is made out of sea sponges and another out of seashells, collected mainly near her parents' home in Florida. (The eggshell dress, which no longer exists, is one of the photographs.)

Dresses by Gwen Samuels, who started out as a textile designer, are made out of teabags and photo transparencies. The hand-stitched "Theadbare," which was also one of Stern's original inspirations, uses transparencies from Samuels' childhood that are sewn into teabags that are then patched into a dress.

Marina Debris' 10 photo-

graphs are of dresses made from trash collected on Southern California beaches. The trash fashion dresses — which she calls "Trashion" — are made to raise awareness about pollution. The photos are in conjunction with a dress on display made from fishing nets collected by oceanographer Charles Moore in the North Pacific Gyre, a system of ocean currents that has become a vortex for trash.

"I feel enamored with the artists' imagination," Stern said. "The show is highly imaginative. I'm not so much interested in why they made it. I'm interested that they made it. I love how far some people go — and even thought to go there. This show celebrates these people's heads — their minds."

Schimitschek is a freelance writer.

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