

From the collection



Creating her largest art work to date, a huge 104-part painting to cap off her survey show, *a loop around a loop*, at Christchurch Art Gallery in 2006, Julia Morison titled the behemoth “Gargantua’s petticoat” after the garments mentioned in Francois Rabelais’ 1534 novel. Rabelais describes how the men and women of the religious order Theleme were appareled: “next to their smock they put on the pretty kirtle or vasquin of pure silk camlet; above that went the taffety or tabby farthingale, of white, red, tawny, grey, or of any other colour.”

RoCoco is one of the ten playful entities that emerge from under the skirt of that gargantuan. Made of ten aluminium laminate quadrangles, it fixes flat to the wall like a segment of an architectural frieze or dado. Cross-shaped, this Euclidean straight-edged geometrical support is dressed first in a coat of Berlei beige then with a spiraling, looping and interlacing configuration of black and white lines. While the lingerie colours and tightly cinched centre of the pattern might conjure associations with corsetry, the interlocking C-scrolls conjure the signature motif

of French eighteenth-century Rococo décor. The predominantly horizontal black-and-white stripes appear stave-like, ending either in tightly curled spirals or unwinding into treble clef-type curlicues. In the top half of the work, koru-like black bulbs are furled in purposeful formation in contrast to the flaccidly drooping teats on the left. One road leads to Gordon Walters and Op Art, and the other route takes us to the free organicism of the Aesthetic Movement: formalism versus decoration.

As well as invoking the Rococo style, the unusual capitalisation of the title suggests a playful reference to Coco Chanel (1883-1971), the French fashion designer whose casually chic clothes liberated women from the corset. In a range of sporty outfits inspired by nautical pursuits, Chanel teamed horizontally-striped shirts with espadrilles that meant women laced their shoes rather than their undergarments. Just as the decoration of royal residences in the reign of Louis XV saw the rampant release of rippling S curves meeting to form the outline of a bow above mirrors and doorways, so too did Chanel dress up her boxy suits and blouses with pussycat ties and ribbons. Although it was once defined as “excessively or tastelessly florid or ornate”, historians have also noted how Rococo accompanied an age of liberating modernity when lightheartedness replaced the suffocating formality and sobriety of the seventeenth century. Chanel’s fashion is the twentieth century equivalent. For both Coco and Rococo, the concern was not with sculpting mass or the body beneath, but with a delicate play of pattern on surface, and with countering constraints imaginatively.

Linda Tyler

Julia Morison, (born 1952), RoCoco, 2006, 2400 x 2400mm, 10 panels, mixed media on aluminium laminate