Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich

Fearless Fashion is the title of the exhibition that explores the life and career of fashion designer Rudi Gernreich (1922–1985). It was curated by Bethany Montagano, assistant curator Dani Killan with fashion designer and creative adviser Humberto Leon. The installation consists of seven sections that are organized chronologically and thematically. Within each, the garments are presented in stations, equipped with a small screen and headphones playing interviews with dancers, former
models, and Gernreich himself. On the walls, quotes by Gernreich frame and introduce each of these sections. One of the strengths of the exhibition is the integration of a vast amount of archival material loaned from the Charles E. Young Library at UCLA. It comprises handwritten letters, telegrams, clippings, drawings, and other ephemera, offering an interesting glimpse into Gernreich’s life, and conveying his political involvement in civil rights movements. This exhibition attempts to exalt this symbiosis of art and political activism by focusing on the social and cultural impact of Gernreich’s work and political agenda.

Gernreich was born in Vienna, Austria, and moved to Los Angeles with his mother at age sixteen, running away from the anti-Semitic persecution propelled by the Nazi regime. He started his career as a dancer in the Lester Horton Dance Theatre, and soon transitioned into costume and fashion design, working for Edith Head, Adrian, and Hattie Carnegie until he launched his collection in 1948 with manufacturer Walter Bass. He founded the gay rights Mattachine Society in 1950, with Harry Hay. Four years later, he began a life-long relationship with Harvard graduate and UCLA Professor Oreste Pucciani (1916–1999).
The first section of the exhibition, “Becoming Rudi Gernreich,” is a short biography that sets the tone by stating that Gernreich conceived fashion as “a platform for innovative designs that sought to empower those long marginalized or devalued in mainstream American life.” Rather than being a career goal, the grandiosity of this claim showcases Gernreich’s intention to direct attention to matters less superfluous than fashion. Walking around the gallery, visitors see Gernreich’s childhood drawings, family albums, official immigration documents, and other memorabilia registering his family’s journey to Los Angeles. This section also displays two highlights of his career as a swimwear and futuristic designer.

Text panels frame an entrance that opens onto a room featuring three circular platforms in the center, each displaying one garment. The “Claxton Dress,” a black and white maxi-dress (1971) used for the exhibit’s promotion is front and center (Figures 1–2). The white “swan”

Figure 2
Peggy Moffitt modeling dress designed by Rudi Gernreich, Fall 1971 collection.
Photograph © William Claxton, LLC, courtesy of Demont Photo Management & Fahey/Klein Gallery Los Angeles, with permission of the Rudi Gernreich trademark.
leotard and red “Duotard” frame the scene and introduce the second section, “Dance & Theatre.” Gernreich’s interest in freedom and movement through the costumes is put forward in his designs for Bella Lewitzky’s Dance Company performance of *Inscape*. As its name indicates, the “Duotard” is designed for two bodies, joined by the hips and one inside leg. These mannequins are placed in dramatic poses, emulating the dancers’ moves to illustrate Gernreich’s interest in creating garments that become one with the body.

Continuing towards the third section of the exhibition, visitors discover that the black panel behind the three circular platforms hides a catwalk for “The Minis, Mods & Pantsuits” display that presents Gernreich’s support for second-wave feminism and equal rights. The panel serves as a screen on which a runway show is projected in a loop (Figure 3). Two ensembles stand out as an homage to the women who challenged the gender status quo, during the 1830s and the 1930s. The “Marlene Dietrich” ensemble is a champagne satin pantsuit that, according to the information provided, was banned from the runway during the Coty American Fashion Critics’ Awards Fashion Show in 1964, under the premise that American society was not ready for
women wearing pants. The “George Sand” ensemble consists of a jacket, vest, blouse, pants and skirt in brown textured velvet (Figure 4). This is a homage to French Novelist Lucile Aurore Duping (1804–1876), who assumed a male pseudonym to pursue her career as a writer. These garments are displayed together with brochures about the Men for the Equal Rights Amendment movement of 1972, showing the designers’ support for the feminist movement.

The museum’s press release emphasizes that Gernreich’s iconic monokini catapulted him into celebrity through the controversy it created. The monokini, a topless swimsuit created in 1964, was said to signal the end of morality in the US and is shown in “Swimsuits & Undergarments” (Figures 5–6). This section is followed by “Concept to Rack,” which presents Gernreich’s work for various retailers. One of the walls is installed like a contact sheet with Peggy Moffitt, Gernreich’s favorite model and muse, and features a large white square for visitors to take their own “contact” pictures (Figure 7). Items from Gernreich’s ready-to-wear collections for the retail chain Montgomery Ward and LA’s Jax Boutique during the 1960s and 1970s are hung on two racks,
while others are displayed on mannequins, showing that not all of his designs were conceptual but also adapted for commercial casual wear.

Returning to the runway and following the imaginary pathway leads to the section “Youth Culture & Politics,” (Figure 8) displaying his designs that were produced in reaction to protests during the 1970s, and that addressed the racial tensions and armed conflicts. The military outfit, consisting of shorts and an army shirt/minidress with large pockets and belt in camel, was accessorized with military tags and a machine gun, to protest the Vietnam war. The “Unisex Solidarity” section presents a collection of garments created in the 1970s to convey ideas of gender fluidity, highlighting utilitarian design; this implied minimalistic garments that prioritized comfort and motion. For this campaign, he asked his models to shave all body hair as he wanted to strip away culturally imposed gender markers. His idea, it is explained, was to create garments that could be used interchangeably by all genders, such as leotards or caftans. Gernreich envisioned an era in which designers would become technicians, engineers able to spray clothing onto the body (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 120). The section showcases two black knitted
leotards and three caftans. Two of these caftans were designed for the Brooklyn-based company Harmon Knitwear, a fashion brand Gernreich collaborated with throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The third caftan on display was designed for Moffitt’s son (Figure 9), who appears in one of the videos recalling his experience as a kid running around in a dress, unaware of cultural prejudices regarding clothes and gender.

The final section, “Experimental Fashion & Legacy,” focuses on Gernreich’s innovative use of zippers and dog leashes as accessories – yet unrelated to a contemporary Punk aesthetics (Figure 10). Exiting the exhibition, visitors get a last peek into Gernreich’s ideas. A black and white image covers the wall showing a crowd of models wearing his geometric designs (Figure 11). Under the image, a quote from 1964 reads: “It was about changing culture throughout society, about freedom and emancipation.”

The disposition, selection, and presentation of the exhibition are well accomplished, easy to follow, and entertaining. It presents visitors with the possibility of a fast pan or a longer, more engaging experience. Gernreich’s use of vibrant colors and designs allow for immediate visual gratification for a quick walkthrough. For those willing to learn more,
engaging with audiovisual content and reading the archival material selected for each section can keep visitors entertained for hours. The curators presented a full overview of Gernreich’s work, breaking away from just being the creator of the monokini. The exhibition succeeds in presenting Rudi Gernreich as a social activist rather than merely a fashion designer. This is accomplished through the combined presentation of garments and ephemera. However, in attempting to portray him as a revolutionary activist to a celebratory extent, curators have detached his work from a broader historical context. The tumultuous landscape of the 1960s and 1970s provided a fertile ground for younger generations to manifest against the impositions of the establishment. This fostered an amalgamation of industry, arts, and politics not only in the fashion front but also in many other cultural industries.

The racks in the “Concept to rack” section could use some improvement. While the interactive wall is ingenious, and the idea of conveying off-the-rack through the hangers gives the illusion of entering an open closet, the displayed garments cannot be fully appreciated, as a line on the floor marks where visitors can stand to refrain them from touching...
the pieces. The photo-op wall featuring Moffitt’s contact sheet could be set apart, in a way that allows people to play with it without blocking the path for those who are contemplating the mannequins. Despite showing ready-to-wear collections and collaborations with local stores, the section lacks information about these garments’ impact on consumer culture. Even though the main driving force throughout the exhibition is his social activism, the decision to include a section that directly addresses his commercial side calls for further contextualization. Therefore, it is unclear as to what extent Gernreich’s work was fetishized by a circle of connoisseurs or widely picked by consumers.

The combination of garments, information, audiovisual outputs, and archival material is compelling. However, the low placement of the video screens makes it uncomfortable for watching five-minute long clips. Similarly, waiting for the looped playback to restart did not benefit engagement. This is standard practice for shared projections or shorter clips. As these videos were intended for individual viewing, having control over their reproduction would have enhanced the experience. The final “Experimental Fashion & Legacy” section was the weakest

Figure 8
Frontal runway view. Photo credit: Danny Moloshok. Courtesy of the Skirball Cultural Center.
section insofar as Gernreich—as well as many other of his contemporary designers—have done more groundbreaking work with unconventional materials than the ones displayed.

Overall, the exhibition is well worth visiting, due to the attractive balance between oral history, garments, ephemera, and the visual display. Interestingly, there are other ongoing exhibitions at the Skirball Cultural Center that complement the one on Gernreich: *Spotlight: Andy Warhol* and *Black is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite*. The chance to visit the other ongoing exhibitions provides a broader historical panning of the United States during the most active years of his career and a glimpse into an era filled with social activism.

“Fearless Fashion: Rudi Gernreich” touches upon several issues about gender and race that have come to the public forefront in recent years.

Figure 9
(Left) Rudi Gernreich for Harmon Knitwear. Caftan, 1970. Wool knit. (Center) Rudi Gernreich. Caftan, c.1973. Printed cotton plain weave. (Right) Rudi Gernreich for Harmon Knitwear. Caftan, 1970. Wool knit. Collection of Peggy Moffitt. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer.
The exhibit links past and present, showing that some issues remain unresolved and highlighting Gernreich’s social commentary through fashion that remains current and relevant today. In the era of fake news and mediated social interactions, we cannot let the allure of fashion distract us from significant matters. The exhibit succeeds in making this point. The 1966 words of Rudi Gernreich summarize his interest in fashion not merely as a commercial product but more importantly, as a force to open discussions about social change: “I’m totally unconcerned with skirt lengths. They are not the issue. The issue is flying to the moon, killing men in Vietnam, teenagers pouring kerosene over Bowery drifters and setting them on fire. Life isn’t pretty. Clothes can’t be pretty little things.”

Figure 10
“Experimenting with Fashion and Legacy” section. Photo by Danny Moloshok, courtesy of the Skirball Cultural Center.
Figure 11
Rudi Gernreich fashions at the Wiltern, 1985. Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Reference

Palomo-Lovinski, Noël. 2010. *The World’s Most Influential Fashion Designers*. New York: Barron’s.