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RIZZOLI

International Bookstore and Gallery

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FASHION AS FANTASY

By Charles James

Rizzoli, the world's most prestigious publisher of art books, with its imaginative New York director, Gianfranco Monacelli, has been prevailed upon to organize an exhibition of many forms of fantasy as it relates to fashion. The exhibition will include works by leading designers, sculptors, painters, and illustrators, as well as works by those who are connected with fashion through their photographic, graphic, or repertorial talents.

The idea for the exhibition was initiated by Roberto Polo, the young, enthusiastic, twenty-four-year old director of the Rizzoli Gallery. Within a few months, he has succeeded in bringing together the works of artists with surprisingly diverse talents. Some of these works, at first sight, might seem frivolous, but are on the contrary completely serious creations of a dedicated few with a passion for experiment.

This exhibition is particularly necessary now, both as a social commentary and as a document revealing the relationship between the decline of many industries and the difficult-to-predict pendulum of fashion. The business world has always depended -- to a greater degree than most people realize -- on fashion experiment, since the factories and employees of industry do not have enough flexibility to experiment themselves.

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To have organized an exhibition of the magnitude and scope of Fashion as Fantasy has been an undertaking calling for unlimited energy, persistence and insistence, innate taste, a capacity to select that which is significant, and, above all, a discipline of tact needed to keep competitive talent from tearing out its guts. It has been an extraordinary feat to command the attention of social and business interests at a time when all industry (other than government-sponsored manufacture of expendables) is in a state of rapid decline.

The forthcoming exhibition (which in fact could have been enlarged to fill Madison Square Garden) will no doubt drive what we choose to call the "average mind" up the walls. It is quite safe to say that the greater number of people (especially those whose world revolves around the notion of a cash flow, derived from the corrupt misrepresentation of products through illiterate copy) has never considered the possibility that a mutually beneficial relationship might exist between fashion and fantasy -- I mean fashion in its general sense, as the foundation of many industries and the square root of prosperity.

Art, which demands the devotion of a whole life, an inexhaustible curiosity, and an endless search for ideals (at war with daily experience) should, and yet does not, command respect in proportion to the wealth it could and does contribute to society. But the artist himself is like the mud-soaked soccer-player: for him, it is the game, even more than the victory, that brings consummate rapture and defies comparison with worldly success.

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Artists (I refer to the dedicated few who finally write the record of the aesthetic) have always had their heads in the clouds. They are really the best businessmen of all. Given but dreams and the slender resources needed to make dreams come true, they leave, and have left through all time, a mountain of capital upon which the world has thrived.

This exhibition, so painstakingly created by Roberto Polo and his staff, risks becoming a landmark, one that has more significance in this particular time of fragmented thought and devastating pessimism than it would have had in the early decades of this turbulent century.

The laurels bestowed on champions -- the myrtle, the violet and all sweet essences -- have always been cemented together by the civet and musk of feces. Opposites, as art and industry are, combine to have a total impact on civilization.

An immense world of trained and disciplined artisans has been called upon to translate fantasy into fashion, and both into fact, and yet it's almost certain that many industries will hold out for ten years before they allow fashion to make them more productive of revenue or provide the artisans with a decent income.

Roberto Polo -- partly because he is too young to have experienced the attrition of repeated disappointment when ideals are broken by those who lack them -- is one of those rare people who dares to point out truths that conventional minds tend to tune out.

My personal "case" provides the exception: optimism in the face of improbability. If my life has at times been tragic, it is because from puberty onwards, I have always

been ahead of my time. This tends to make me view everything considered original today as having been conceived, perhaps more professionally, long ago by those who had already dedicated years to experiment and were guided by inspiration. Nevertheless, my involvement in more than twelve areas of related creative experiment confirms my belief that reality has always begun with "a sense of the fantastical," exuding a magic essence that expands the ever-widening circles of the human mind. If the creative "head" of artists becomes, at times, violent, it is surely more through frustration than indulgence in excess of ego.

Roberto Polo had the sense or sensitivity to realize that what is rare (what often seems perverse to the ordinary mind) has always exercised a radium influence on world commerce. Polo's almost desperately thought-out exhibition marries the dreams of artists with the avaricious greed of the business world, if only through snobbism (as Mr. Warhol surely cannot deny) and it must be admitted that such a marriage could revitalize industry far more than can the "dea ex machina" of the expensive-but-easily-bought public relations racket, despite its throttlehold on the national newspress.

This exhibition should result in business ceasing to promote as original that which is essentially ordinary and it should point up the sad results of business failures caused by the belief that what once sold well will continue to do so till the end of time. It may show that what was thought sense by businessmen (as with politicians) is "non-sense."

All the great concepts which have molded man's passage through time have flowed from enlightened minds in a torrent of fantasy.

-- Charles James

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