

collaborations between artists and industry. So, for instance, Lawrence Epps has joined forces with Ibstock to create the artist's tiny extruded figures encased in a brick block. The idea is that visitors can help themselves to a brick and the installation will whittle down to nothing by the end of the Biennial. Other partnerships include Simeon Featherstone and Johnson Tiles, Corinne Felgate and Steelite International, and Peter Jones working with the international materials technology company Ceram.

It's impossible to list the entire contents here. Suffice to write that it's a huge and purposely eclectic collection that goes some way to explaining the possibilities of clay as a material industrially, artistically, and as a tool for learning. If you don't find one installation particularly stimulating or a little intellectually light-weight, then fine, you can simply move on to something else. In terms of sheer scale it's reminiscent of the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Below: *Skifting (Changeling)*, Malene Hartman Rasmussen, ceramics, digital printed wallpaper, MDF, objet trouvé, installation 283 cm high, 2013 (showing in AWARD, British Ceramics Biennial)

The exhibits there are related to an overarching theme; however, here curatorial guidance seems rather more relaxed, with some, but by no means all, of the installations inspired by the Spode factory itself. Essentially though, this is a show about breadth.

Once again the AWARD exhibition, which features 22 artists, many of them familiar to regular readers of this magazine, takes place at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, while Corinne Felgate (in collaboration with Florence Peake, Camilla Emson and Marcus Boyle) has an exhibition at the Airspace Gallery, featuring a series of floor-to-ceiling columns created from hand-cast pieces made from old moulds found at the Spode factory.

However, the major innovation this year is *Typographies of the Obsolete: Vociferous Void*, which takes place around the offices and outbuildings of the Spode Works, the culmination of a research project led by Bergen Academy of Art and Design in collaboration with universities in Denmark, Germany and the UK. In common with a number of other exhibits, the finishing touches were still being applied on the Biennial's press day, but an intriguing selection of installations were taking shape. Rather than dealing with the material directly, the project's curators Anne Helen Mydland and Neil Brownsword asked artists from different disciplines to explore 'ceramics and clay as a subject'.

The results are varied and often fascinating, using the ruined building as a suitably evocative canvas. Among the highlights was Brownsword's own installation, *Vis Unita Fortior (United Strength is Stronger)/Heritage Economy*, that investigates the factory's hierarchy by bringing the old café furniture used everyday by the production staff into the mock-Tudor environs of the Blue Room, where company executives would entertain visitors, as well as Chloe Brown's film, shot in the newly refurbished boardroom, that pays homage to the city's Northern Soul heritage.

So there's a little something for everyone, and certainly enough to keep visitors entertained for a day. I suspect the question for the organisers is where they go from here. Do they attempt to ape the London Design Festival and become an umbrella brand for a host of individual events around Stoke, or do they take the Venice model and do something more tightly focused curatorially, on a couple of major sites. Whichever, you sense the consolidation period is over, and 2015 will be about expansion. *Grant Gibson is editor of Crafts magazine*

Alaïa as a metaphor for modernity

Alaïa

Palais Galliera, Paris 75116

28 September 2013 – 26 January 2014

Catalogue: €34 hb

Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

Shows about fashion are such a Paris constant that it's the exception when any offer insight. But, re-opening after a four-year renovation, the Palais Galliera does it with *Alaïa*. As well as paying homage to Azzedine Alaïa, the fashion museum wants to re-position our view of couture. It hopes to reinstate the ties between fashion and art, chic and leisure, broached by French artists of the late 19th century.

Underpinning its presentation is that movement's epiphany: that fashion is inseparable from any concept of 'the modern'. Partly, Alaïa's oeuvre is presented as proof of the concept. But theorising must take second place to the designer's confidence. His visceral, feminine shapes marry technical virtuosity and technological savvy. But, as the show insists, their uncanny equilibrium derives from a genuine grasp of couture history.

Presented here are 74 garments. All of them are inches away, with no glass between the viewer and the piece (many can also be studied from every side). Each is mounted on a moulded Perspex figure, which was created by design star Martin Szekely. On these forms, any support that might 'show' has been cut away – a delicate operation that was performed by hand. Because of this, the clothes exude a wonderful sense of life.

Alaïa's curator is Olivier Saillard, director of the Galliera and one of fashion's best historians. Saillard wants to make his museum the couture resource – without recourse to any type of popularising. (The institution has already stated it will have no digital tools. Visitors must engage with its holdings 'on their own terms, as sublime and historic objects'.)

This master purpose informs the whole of *Alaïa*. For instance, how does it tackle the question of celebrity? Not by displaying a bunch of 'once-worn-by' frocks. Instead, eight ballgowns made for Alaïa muses are taken across the street to the Musée d'Art Moderne. There, under a huge triptych by Matisse (*La Danse*), they become part of a dialogue between space and painting. When we think about such



art, this gesture suggests, couture is an equally valuable participant.

All the show's texts were written by Saillard. Filled with poetic metaphors and erudite anecdotes, they make the point that fashion is one ongoing story. While visitors learn about Alaïa's stretched, boiled wool, they also find his leather garments extolled as 'soft prisons made for consenting victims'. Like the show's dramatic press pics – recreated Hollywood glamour in black-and-white – such touches are creating a 'Galliera' identity.

In that service, *Alaïa* is a perfect fit. Not only is he the rare couturier who can do everything: design, cut, drape, tailor and finish. The work is also deeply embedded in the métier's history. His sleek jerseys here recall Chanel and Mme Grès. But a room of jackets and coats shows equal mastery of post-18th century tailoring.

Born in Tunisia in 1940, and trained in sculpture at the country's École des Beaux-Arts, Alaïa's story begins in French Colonial Africa. Not least through Algerian-born Yves Saint Laurent, that

history deeply affected 60s and 70s haute couture. Alaïa's own interpretations of light and colour, as well as his preference for the minimal, come straight out of the Franco-Maghrebi heritage.

His half-century of work unrolls quite seamlessly, as if made for a single catwalk. Although its expertise is visible from every angle, what the show emphasises is Alaïa's discretion. He may be widely identified with the go-go 80s – with a big-haired Tina Turner, showbiz and supermodels. But, as it turns out, Alaïa is no self-promoter. Operating outside the rigid couture calendar, he has never licensed 'products', never advertised and always shows his clothes without jewellery or accessories.

In short, Alaïa's devotion to his art seems pure. But does it deserve all Saillard's effusive poetics? Is it convincing as a metaphor of modernity? For my money, yes. The show is sophisticated, strategic and canny. But Alaïa's singular craft more than meets its challenge. *Cynthia Rose is a journalist and broadcaster based in Paris and London*

The history and industry behind pearls

Pearls

Victoria & Albert Museum, SW7
21 September 2013 – 19 January 2014
Catalogue £25 hb

Reviewed by Corinne Julius

Partnerships and collaborations are currently the Holy Grail in the world of exhibitions; they combine additional curatorial expertise, different perspectives and of course extra funding. And clearly they affect how a show is put together, as well as the content. *Pearls* is a collaboration between the V&A and the Qatar Museums Authority, presented in London as part of the Qatar UK 2013 Year of Culture. It contains over 200 pieces of jewellery, from Roman times to the present, drawn from the collections of the V&A and the QMA, as well as the Tate, British Museum, Royal Collection and such jewellery houses as Mikimoto, Tiffany & Co, Bulgari, Cartier, Lalique and YOKO London.

The Persian Gulf is one of the traditional homes of pearl fishing, and the exhibition begins with a selection of extraordinary and rare molluscs belonging to the QMA. Myth has taught us that pearls of varied colours are formed by a grain of sand in an oyster shell – the shells on show dramatically demonstrate that the beauty of the pearl comes from the intrusion of a parasite into any kind of mollusc, not infrequently a tapeworm, the intruder then coated with nacre (mother of pearl) to minimise the irritation. After this biological clarification, there is – as might be expected in such a collaborative venture – a display concerned with the Gulf's pearl diving and trading.

The meat of the show comes next – a chronological skim through history from the Romans to today, via some amazing pieces of jewellery, many with stories attached, such as Charles I's pearl eardrop worn at his execution, or the Rosebery pearl and diamond tiara given to Hannah de Rothschild on her marriage in 1878. As well as jewellery, we see embellishments for clothing, for example George III's striking set of state coat buttons, in blue enamel and pearl. Sadly there is little room for many of the portraits further exhibiting the glory of pearls as integral to costume in the

Below:
Installation view of *Alaïa*

