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To cite this article: Laura Jovic (2018): Hand and Heart Shall Never Part: The Fashion Collaboration of Linda Jackson and David McDiarmid, Fashion Theory

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1467103>



Published online: 14 May 2018.



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# Hand and Heart Shall Never Part: The Fashion Collaboration of Linda Jackson and David McDiarmid

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**Wollongong Art Gallery, September 24, 2016–February 12, 2017**

Art, fashion, friendship and collaboration; these are the themes that lie at the core of the exhibition *Hand and Heart Shall Never Part: The Fashion Collaboration of Linda Jackson and David McDiarmid* conceived by Sydney-based curator and academic Sally Gray and mounted by the Wollongong Art Gallery, New South Wales. The title, taken from a nineteenth-century Valentine's Day message favored by McDiarmid, reflects the sentiment which underpinned the shared artistic vision of two friends—artist, designer and gay activist David McDiarmid and the then

Sydney-based fashion designer Linda Jackson—who collaborated and nurtured each other's work from 1975 to 1994. The outfits on display were designed by Jackson and made from textiles which were hand-painted by McDiarmid. As one-off pieces the majority were made available for sale under Jackson's labels. Showcasing the breadth of their work across nearly 20 years, the exhibition importantly traces the ideas and working methods that inspired and guided this fashion collaboration.

Displayed in one large gallery area divided by a central wall, this compact exhibition filled the space with an explosion of color, pattern and design that articulated the duo's search for an immersive artistic experience in which fashion played a central role. Designing and making outfits, experimenting and exchanging ideas were part of Jackson and McDiarmid's quest to live a creative life on every level. As a young fashion designer, Jackson launched her career in Australia in 1973 after returning from an extended period of travel overseas. In the same year Jackson and McDiarmid met through their mutual friend, the artist Peter Tully, whose avant-garde jewelry, made from plastic and found objects, was also included in the exhibition. Jackson and McDiarmid were part of a wider friendship group, which provided an important catalyst for artistic exchange and creation. Jackson's collaboration with designer and boutique owner Jenny Kee, who opened her *Flamingo Park* frock shop in Sydney in 1973, is well documented (Maynard 2001; Kee 2006; Gray 2017). Kee and Jackson worked together until 1982 when Jackson started her *Bush Couture* label and their designs have become the stuff of Australian fashion history. Their search for an original Australian fashion aesthetic based on local motifs and themes garnered them acclaim at home and abroad. *Hand and Heart* is the first time though that an exhibition has focused on Jackson and McDiarmid's creative relationship.

Many of the items displayed in this exhibition were presented in Kee and Jackson's ground breaking *Flamingo Follies* parades staged in Sydney from 1974 to 1981. These parades were a vibrant combination of fashion, art and music and drew a large audience of local supporters (Jovic 2012, 5–6). The opening wall of the exhibition *Hand and Heart* featured an enlarged black and white photograph of Jackson and McDiarmid taken by William Yang on the occasion of the second *Flamingo Follies* parade held at the Bondi Pavillion in 1975. With the sea behind them, it captures a moment at the start of their collaboration when outfits designed by Jackson and painted by McDiarmid were shown for the first time (Figure 1).

The exhibition was presented in a series of theme-based cases. In the first room the cases were divided into the topics of Russian Ballet influenced design; Sonia Delaunay; Opal and Paua shell; Graffiti and the second room focused on Australiana; Designs inspired by Indigenous art; and Gifts. Each grouping was arranged against a carefully considered color. The walls of the exhibition space, painted in a candy colored pink, were punctuated by inset cases, the back walls of which were painted in strong greens, deep

**Figure 1**

Entrance wall to the exhibition with "Russian Ballet influenced design" case. Image © Wollongong Art Gallery.



blues, red, orange and yellow, reflecting Jackson and McDiarmid's love of color and the brave and lavish way they used it in their work (Figure 2).

The first case displayed an early outfit produced by the duo in 1977. McDiarmid painted a tabard and matching pants, made from cream vintage crepe, with a design inspired by Leon Bakst's costumes for the 1912 Russian Ballet production of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Here one sees the lines and squiggles that were to become McDiarmid's distinctive calligraphic style. Jackson and McDiarmid were intensely interested in early twentieth-century art and design, in particular the designs for Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and the art of Sonia Delaunay. Both had a profound influence on their work and creative thinking.

The opposite case presented an aspect of McDiarmid and Jackson's working practice. It featured the *Opal Lightning* red silk taffeta kimono

**Figure 2**

View of first room showing “Graffiti”, “Opal and Paua Shell”, “Sonia Delaunay” and “Opal Lightning” cases. Image © Wollongong Art Gallery.

**Figure 3**

Case containing *Opal Lightning* kimono, 1984. Image © Wollongong Art Gallery.



made for the model Penelope Tree in 1984 and painted by McDiarmid after he had moved to New York in 1979. During the eight years McDiarmid lived in New York, Jackson sent him fabrics and garment pieces which he painted on his kitchen table. At times McDiarmid sent back instructions and comments. Four swatches of fabric on which McDiarmid had tested a red paint provided an insight into the mechanics of the collaboration. On one he told Jackson which fabric was most suitable—“Linda, this is fabulous to paint on!” Jackson always worked with natural fibers, silk taffeta and chiffon being a mainstay. Eschewing preliminary sketches, McDiarmid painted straight on to the fabric creating energetic designs that filled the lengths he was sent (Figure 3).

The kimono shape of *Opal Lightning* and other works indicates how Jackson responded to McDiarmid’s work by privileging McDiarmid’s “canvas” and creating garments cut with minimal seaming. In a similar manner, the display of the works in the exhibition highlighted the idea that these were conceived as unique artworks. The garments and textiles were almost entirely displayed suspended, either from rods threaded through

**Figure 4**

“Sonia Delaunay” case. Image  
© Wollongong Art Gallery.



the sleeves or on coat hangers, allowing McDiarmid’s painted designs to be viewed in their entirety.

The following case in the first room, painted in a bright yellow, featured works influenced by the artist Sonia Delaunay. The discovery of her art was a revelation for Jackson and McDiarmid and their creative circle. Delaunay’s experiments with color and its juxtapositions spurred their own creations. In the late 1970s McDiarmid painted light-weight organza and chiffons with lines and concentric circles of juxtaposed colors. These were assembled into ethereal-looking shift dresses and delicate floating scarves, all of which could be layered to produce an individual look. Exhibited alongside these were a couple of T-shirts McDiarmid emblazoned with Delaunay-inspired designs comprising circles and chequerboard patterns of line and color. These were accompanied by a 1970 color lithograph by Delaunay titled *Composition* and a *Delaunay Delight* necklace made by Peter Tully in c.1978 featuring an acrylic circle, square and triangle (Figure 4).

In the early 1980s Jackson travelled to Central Australia and the opal fields of New South Wales. The opal and the iridescent New Zealand paua shell provided the inspiration for outfits and fabrics which referenced the multi-colored and shimmering nature of these two local “gems”. A shirt, skirt, scarves and a pair of suede boots, all embellished with opal and paua shell painted designs executed between 1983 and 1984, were displayed in a case painted in a rich dusky pink. The lines of color which flow in free-form squiggles and loops on the garments suggest a type of calligraphy. McDiarmid played with words, symbols and phrases in his work and the pattern of the black taffeta backdrop displayed in this case contains the text “Is this the black opal?” referring to one of the distinctive forms of Australian opal.

Jackson and McDiarmid’s work was heavily informed by the natural and built environments that surrounded them. While Jackson looked to



**Figure 5**

“Graffiti” case. Image ©  
Wollongong Art Gallery.



places such as the Australian bush and outback or the environs of Sydney harbor for inspiration, McDiarmid’s years in New York in the 1980s immersed him in the gritty urban landscape of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Here he looked to the visual culture of the street, sending Jackson fabrics painted with graffiti-inspired patterns and text. Set against an apple-green background, the final case in the first section of the exhibition explores McDiarmid’s use of graffiti and text, which he applied to shirts, skirts, scarves and a homespun Egyptian cotton caftan. Dating from 1984, these outfits express an urban tribal aesthetic which McDiarmid was tapping into in New York. Most striking are the painted T-shirts which he produced for friends and which he sold in shops in London, New York, Los Angeles and Sydney. McDiarmid used calligraphy to articulate and cement friendships and he produced T-shirts for friends that bore the name of the wearer cryptically embedded in the design. One of those on display reads “Linda” and another plays with the word “Sydney” (Figure 5). A further use of calligraphy was exhibited in the two large banners which were hung on either side of the central dividing wall. Bearing the words “Spring Fever” and “Linda Jackson”, the banners played on text as both signage and pattern. McDiarmid painted these for the windows of Jackson’s *Bush Couture* studio and retail space in William street, Darlinghurst while visiting Sydney in 1984 (Figure 6).

The second half of the exhibition was displayed across three cases. During the 1970s and 1980s Jackson and Kee were searching for a way to express a distinctive Australian fashion identity. They looked to the local environment and the colors of the Australian landscape to develop their design language. In the Australiana section, presented in a case painted in a deep blue, Gray explores Jackson and McDiarmid’s different relationship to “Australianness”. In the catalogue Gray identifies Jackson’s deep attachment to land and country which saw her look to the bush and the coastline

**Figure 6**

*Spring Fever* banner, 1984 with *The Fire Opal* poncho, c.1983 and “Australiana” case in background. Image © Wollongong Art Gallery.



for inspiration, while McDiarmid played with ideas of kitsch and irony. (Gray 2016, 22) McDiarmid’s irony is found in the large map of Australia, titled *My Country* made from a 1950s Formica table top. It was displayed behind a couple of delicately painted garments bearing gum leaves and gum blossoms made for *Flamingo Park* and one of Jackson’s screen-printed gum leaf design kimonos made for her *Bush Couture* label.

Although McDiarmid could be brash and bold, an early outfit from the first collection Jackson and McDiarmid showed in 1975 demonstrates a delicate calligraphic approach to design. Grey and black gum blossoms radiate from the neckline and waist of a flowing yellow vintage crepe dress. Two years later McDiarmid painted a red wool skirt in a similar manner with trailing gum leaf designs. This was displayed with a silk chiffon scarf he painted with dots and a map of Australia in 1980 and two of Tully’s *Australiana* acrylic necklaces from 1985 which featured cut-outs of the Opera House, Sydney Harbor Bridge, gum leaves and other iconic Australian motifs.

Jackson and McDiarmid forged their artistic practice at a vital time in Australia’s cultural history. After 23 years of a conservative Liberal-Country Party coalition, the Australian Labor Party, under the leadership of Gough Whitlam, came to power in 1972. Their campaign slogan “It’s Time”, captured the perceived need for change and opened the way for social and cultural reforms. Young creative Australians, many of who, like Jackson, McDiarmid, Tully and Kee, had gone overseas, saw this as the time to return to Australia, believing that opportunities would open up creatively and intellectually. With increased funding under the Whitlam government the arts were given a fillip. Films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Man from Snowy River* (1982) helped to change the way Australia envisaged itself and how it was viewed internationally.

As a part of the search for an Australian identity, Indigenous Australian art and culture was championed as an important element in the shaping of a distinctively Australian culture. In the section titled Designs inspired



**Figure 7**

“Designs inspired by Indigenous art” case. Image © Wollongong Art Gallery.



by Indigenous art, set against a deep orange background, Gray discusses McDiarmid’s use of motifs, such as hand and dot and cross-hatched designs, derived from Aboriginal art which, between 1977 and c.1982 he painted onto fabrics that became scarves, dresses, tunics and pants (Figure 7). The earliest piece on display is a *Flamingo Park* labeled grey wool crepe dress from 1977 which features designs of arrows, tracks and circles in black, white and brown. In the accompanying publication of the same name Gray fleshes out the creative and social context in which Jackson and McDiarmid worked and dedicates a section to “David’s Indigenous appropriations.” A number of years after these indigenous-inspired works were produced by McDiarmid and Jackson, Australia marked the bicentenary of British colonization in 1988. Although presented officially as a national celebration, the Bicentennial provoked alternative voices which drew attention to the plight of indigenous Australians. Awareness of the deleterious and offensive effects that appropriation of Aboriginal culture had on the traditional owners was emerging as a politically charged debate and questions around Australian identity, historical interpretation and indigenous culture came to the fore. While Gray points out that McDiarmid’s entire art practice was appropriative in a postmodern sense, she questions how a politically attuned artist such as McDiarmid could be apparently insensitive to the issues of cultural ownership surrounding Aboriginal art and iconography. (Gray 2016, 37) This is one of the strengths of the exhibition. Gray does not shy away from tackling hard questions. She approaches the subject with directness and clarity, grounding her discussion in a deep knowledge of time and place.

The last case, entitled *Gifts*, encapsulates the relationship between Jackson and McDiarmid that combined friendship, work and creativity. The two exchanged gifts of hand-made garments that incorporated sewn, embroidered, painted or appliquéd signatures, names and messages. This section, divided between two cases painted in a deep turquoise, shows two such items made for McDiarmid in Jackson’s studio. The 1977 blue felt waistcoat is embroidered and appliquéd with colored shapes and hearts

**Figure 8**

Linda Jackson, *Waistcoat*,  
1977. David McDiarmid estate,  
Sydney. Image © Wollongong  
Art Gallery.



and the phrase “Bon Voyage David” (Figure 8). The second item is another waistcoat, but conceived in a very different manner. Made in c.1982, it is constructed from screen-printed fabric shapes—hearts, leaves and Sturt Desert Peas—and the letter D. The hand-made “craftiness” of these pieces signifies the personal thought and effort put into gifts that expressed the creative nature of their friendship.

In this room a modest sized LED screen showed excerpts from *Flamingo Park* and *Bush Couture* parades from 1975 to the late 1980s, illustrating how the garments and patterns moved on the body and effectively worked as canvases in motion. Jackson and McDiarmid’s desire to express themselves through art and fashion sparked an energetic output of work in a collaboration which lasted almost twenty years. In 1994 Jackson ceased her fashion design label and left Sydney to live and paint in Central Australia. The following year McDiarmid died of AIDS-related conditions.

The exhibition *Hand and Heart* pays tribute to this creative friendship that was fuelled by a shared passion for art and fashion. Jackson and

McDiarmid's work not only marks a distinct period in Australian cultural and fashion history, it also provides an enduring artistic legacy that is being drawn on by a new wave of Australian designers. While presenting an insightful analysis of a creative partnership, the exhibition's mix of biography, art, fashion and shared lives successfully articulated the complex creative and political agendas that underpinned Jackson and McDiarmid's work and the cultural climate in Australia at the time.

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