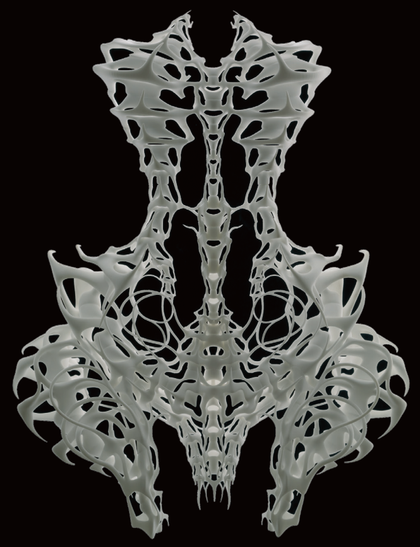
TRANSFORMING FASHION

Cincinnati Art Museum brings avant-garde fashion designer to the Midwest

words by Crystal Hammon



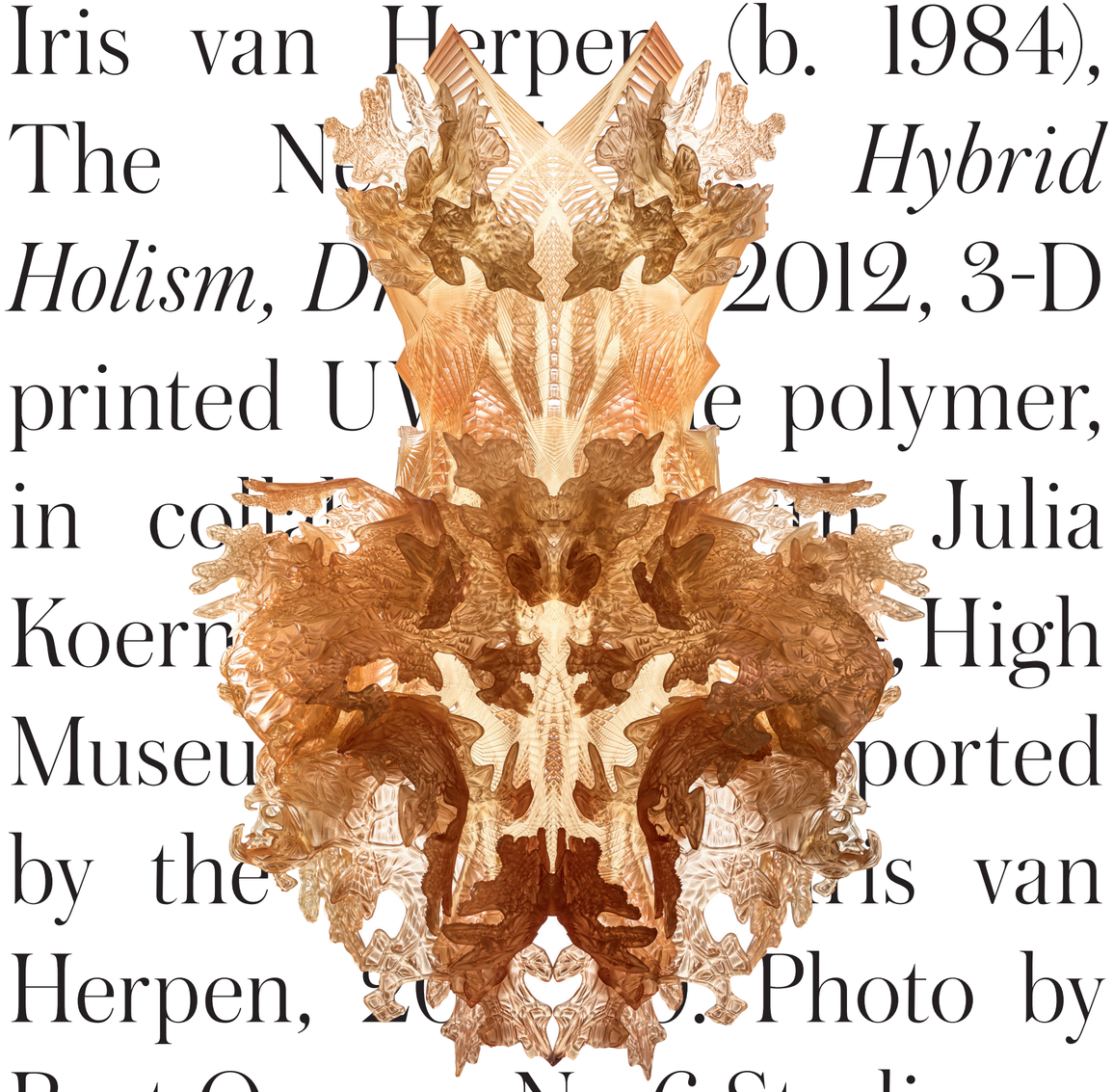


Image: Hybrid Holism Dress, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Hybrid Holism, Dress*, 2012, 3-D printed UV-curable polymer, in collaboration with Julia Koerner and Materialise, High Museum of Art, Supported by the Friends of Iris van Herpen, 2015.170. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios

Image: Voltage Dress, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Voltage, Dress,* January 2013, laser-cut 3-D polyester film lace and microfiber, in collaboration with Philip Beesley, Groninger Museum, 2017.0008. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // **Image: Biopiracy Dress**, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Biopiracy, Dress,* March 2014, 3-D printed thermoplastic polyurethane 92A-1 with silicon coating, in collaboration with Julia Koerner and Materialise, Collection of Phoenix Museum of Art, Gift of Arizona Costume Institute. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // **Image: Capriole Ensemble**, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Capriole, Ensemble*, July 2011, 3-D printed polyamide, in collaboration with Isaie Bloch and Materialise, Groninger Museum, 2012.0209. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // **Image: Hybrid Holism Dress**, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Hybrid Holism, Dress,* July 2012, 3-D printed UV-curable polymer, in collaboration with Julia Koerner and Materialise, High Museum of Art, Supported by the Friends of Iris van Herpen, 2015.170. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // **Image: Radiation Invasion Dress**, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Radiation Invasion, Dress,* September 2009, faux leather, gold foil, cotton and tulle, Groninger Museum, 2012.0201. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // **Image: Chemical Crows Dress**, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Chemical Crows, Dress,* Collar, January 2008, ribs of children's umbrellas and cow leather, Groninger Museum, 2012.0192.a-b. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // Image: Refinery Smoke Dress, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Refinery Smoke, Dress,* July 2008, untreated woven metal gauze and cow leather, Groninger Museum, 2012.0196. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios // Image: Hybrid Holism, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984), The Netherlands, *Hybrid Holism, Dress,* July 2012, metallic coated stripes, tulle and cotton, Collection of the designer. Photo by Bart Oomes, No 6 Studios

When Lady Gaga unveiled her namesake fragrance, Fame, in 2012, she stepped out of a horse-drawn carriage in front of Macy's New York City flagship store. She was clothed in wearable art—an Iris van Herpen dress made of laser-cut strips of black acrylic.

The rich and famous aren't the only ones reaching for van Herpen's haute couture. Her designs are also sought by museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

That explains why Cynthia Amnéus, the Cincinnati Art Museum's chief curator and curator of fashion arts and textiles, has spent nearly a decade tracking the 34-year-old fashion designer. Amnéus acquired a pair of the Dutch artist's shoes for the museum's collection in 2012. By then the world was on watch for van Herpen's next elevation of haute couture.

Just a year after her 2006 graduation from the ArtEZ Institute of Arts, where she studied fashion design, art, and sculpture, van Herpen started creating women's wear under her own label. Her annual collections of groundbreaking craftsmanship and materials quickly marked her as one of the world's most influential fashion designers. By 2011 van Herpen, then 27, was the youngest person ever to exhibit at Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week. She went on to win the prestigious ANDAM Award in 2014, France's national award for the development of fashion.

THE EVOLUTION OF A SAVANT

When Amnéus heard that Atlanta's High Museum of Art was organizing a 2015-2016 exhibit of van Herpen's work, she immediately reached out, hoping to bring the exhibition to the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM).

Aptly named Iris Van Herpen: Transforming Fashion, the exhibit visited the CAM from October 2017 through January 2018, following appearances at Atlanta's High Museum of Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and the Dallas Museum of Art, as well as the Groninger Museum in The Netherlands, where it originated.

Haute couture has always had its skeptics—people who discount its usefulness or criticize its lack of accessibility. Judging from the initial reaction to the Cincinnati exhibition, van Herpen's work is no exception. But as museums hustle to reinvent themselves for the next generation of museumgoers, they are not always perturbed by controversy.

Amnéus was buoyed by conversations the exhibit stimulated in the CAM's social media feeds. "You might look at Iris's work and say, 'This is unwearable. This is crazy stuff. How could this possibly become something that I would wear?'" she says. "Iris is pushing the edge in terms of the aesthetic of dress and the technology she is using."

In fairness to the dubious viewer, one can only glimpse a sliver of Iris van Herpen's evolutionary ideas about fashion by looking at photographs of her designs or walking around them at a museum. Either experience subtracts from their ability to communicate.

Van Herpen grew up in a creative home where play and imagination were encouraged. Away from the influence of televisions, computers, and magazines, she crafted art, made her own clothes, and danced. Her otherworldly garments are meant to adorn a moving human body. Ideally, they are experienced in a three-dimensional world where they shimmer and breathe almost like living organisms.

A museum is no competition for a runway presentation drenched in music and sound, as van Herpen's work often is. Even without the multisensory experience, museum visitors of all ages were gobsmacked by van Herpen's imaginative use of materials, technology, and old-world couture techniques, according to Amnéus.

"One of the things that's interesting about Iris is the way she has progressed over time—from her Chemical Crows collection, where she is very controlling about every stitch that's taken on a piece, to the 2010 Crystallization collection, which began with an idea she didn't know how to make," Amnéus says.

That collection seems to signal a turning point in van Herpen's career. Early van Herpen collections are mostly handmade, but by 2009, she imagined clothes that couldn't be made with conventional techniques or materials. Inspired by nature, science, music, dance, art, and architecture, she began casting a wide net in search of expertise to bring her ideas to fruition.

FUSING TECHNOLOGY WITH FASHION

Relieved of commercial concerns that plague many fashion designers, van Herpen has access to a rare commodity among the creative class: complete artistic freedom. She uses that liberty to conduct interdisciplinary research and to plot elaborate experiments with innovative materials such as silicon, metal umbrella ribs, and transparent acrylic.

Van Herpen is credited with being the first fashion designer to use 3-D printing to create a dress. The Ice Dress, done in collaboration with 3D Systems, was included in her 2015 Magnetic Motion. Made of thin ribbons of transparent resin, the dress simulates an ice sculpture.

Stumped by creative ideas she was unable to execute on her own, van Herpen forged relationships with engineers, scientists, designers, and architects. Those collaborations were uncomfortable at first. She now views them as essential for opening her mind to alternative thinking.

One of her favorite collaborators is Philip Beesley, a Canadian architect known for designing responsive sculptures. This spring a Beesley installation will grace the four-story atrium of Luddy Hall, the new home for the School of Informatics and Computing, opening on Indiana University's Bloomington campus. Their first joint project came in 2013 with van Herpen's Voltage collection.

"I found a very happy conversation with Iris," Beesley says. "We come, arguably, from very different generations, from completely different parts of the world and different disciplines, and yet somehow, we have discovered common ground."

Their creative process, he says, is profoundly practical and deeply felt. Beesley often brings a highly technical point of view to their work, such as evaluating how a particular polymer performs under certain conditions.

"Iris might respond by draping a prototype of that material around her arm or around a model and both of us looking together, either in person or by Skype, at how this material might move and how it amplifies the way we might present ourselves or be sheltered by a piece of fabric," Beesley says.

Beesley describes their frequent collaborations as delicious exchanges that look at technology precisely and translate it into a dream state, infused with possibility. "Iris has quite an extraordinary precision coming from her long practice as a dancer and her stunning intelligence," he says.

Van Herpen fans are fascinated by her use of technology, but it's just another tool to the designer—never the source of inspiration. "I combine craftsmanship and technology within the same garment," she says in an interview with Sarah Schleuning, curator of decorative arts and design at the High Museum of Art. "Today, I like that when people look at my collections, they cannot see the difference anymore. People may think that something is 3-D printed when it's actually handmade, and the other way around." ✂