

Whimsy to Wear : Art: Playful work reflects Lunna Menoh's perceptions but is non-judgmental, she insists. It is on display at South Coast Plaza.

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

COSTA MESA — Lun*na Menoh's work explores such hefty topics as sexual politics, social psychology and personal identity. But, like the star-studded moniker she's fashioned for herself, it's all done up with decorative whimsy.

"It's very playful," said the erstwhile Atsuko Shimizu, who changed her name years ago to avert mix-ups with a neighbor who had a nearly identical name and address.

A former fashion designer who melds contemporary art and couture, Menoh displays her wearable sculpture in "Boutique Mystique," at Laguna Art Museum's South Coast Plaza satellite. The exhibition opens today and runs through Dec. 4.

Made of velvet, brocade, tulle and so on, her fanciful creations (from the past five years) include a woman's vanity that doubles as a bra, a head-to-toe hat that envelops its wearer, and corseted, box-like "dresses" that make wearers appear as lasciviously packaged gifts.

Their playfulness bespeaks Menoh's desire, she said recently, to reflect various realities she perceives--the way women are objectified, for example--but to avoid passing judgment.

"My work doesn't say something is good or bad," the Los Angeles artist said recently during an interview at the gallery. "It's not about what you should or should not do."

That approach stems from her belief that what may be negative for one person may be positive for another, Menoh said, citing "Gentleman's Closet" by way of explanation.

The piece, which consists essentially of cuffs and collars of quite similar men's shirts hanging from a clothing rack, refers to the idea that men's fashions have not changed much over time, Menoh said. That alludes to the idea that men still hold more social power than women.

The fact that society doesn't want men to change may be repugnant to some, she said, but a blessing to others who "need that bondage," those hard-and-fast sexual roles to feel an invulnerable sense of identity.

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The same non-judgmental, humorous commentary infuses such works as "Indoor Game I" and "Indoor Game II," the box-like affairs meant to showcase wearers' legs, garters and all, and "Peeking Bra," Menoh's cheery vanity-cum-brassiere.

The latter, crafted of turquoise velvet and trimmed in pearls, sports something of a vanity table's top, hollowed out so that if the piece were worn, the wearer's breasts would more or less be covered by the vanity's upper half, unless the bra-shaped contraption is adjusted to expose the nipples.

"Women used to be considered part of the furniture" and often are still viewed only as sexual objects, Menoh said, quick to reiterate that she doesn't mean to knock the idea, but attempts to have fun with it instead.

The artist, who exhibited her pieces on live models at Art L.A. '93, an international contemporary art festival, turns her attention to the power of thought in "Hat Dress," the all-enveloping hat that resembles a black cage with cloth-covered metal bars. On the bars cling large letters, attached with Velcro, which can be moved about.

"The thoughts we have control our actions, language controls our whole body," she said. "One person may think it looks like a cage, but another might think it's like a child's puzzle." A jovial 37-year-old who moved here from her native Japan five years ago, Menoh attributes her equivocal attitude to her upbringing. In general, she said, the Japanese are less judgmental than Westerners.

It was in Tokyo that she attended fashion school, but after her first foray into the field, discovered that she had no taste for "the business part of it." So, although she had attended only a few fine-art classes, she decided to combine her long-held love for art and apparel. She's never looked back.

"Clothing is very interesting to me," she said with a smile, because it is both an expression of who we are and something to hide behind. "It's very tricky."

* "Boutique Mystique" runs through Dec. 4 at Laguna Art Museum's satellite in South Coast Plaza, 3333 Bristol St., Costa Mesa. Hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Free. (714) 662-3366.