

Slip into something silly

BY DAVID PAGEL

DEC. 16, 2006 12 AM PT

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Show more sharing options](#)

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Lun*na Menoh's idiosyncratic outfits are often compared to the clothes models wear as they strut down the runway. Both types of clothing are unconstrained by the pragmatism of everyday garb and invite fantasy as they signify a wearer's taste, prestige and desirability.

But at Track 16 Gallery, the comparison wears thin well before you see the nearly 40 pieces in Menoh's 18-year survey, organized by guest curator Kristine McKenna. It's more accurate, and less pretentious, to compare the L.A. artist's deliciously silly dresses, jackets and handbags to the costumes students made for school plays before parental committees took over and put an end to DIY kids doing their own thing.

Menoh's costumes are labors of love. Most are made from inexpensive fabrics, household items and craft shop odds and ends.

ADVERTISEMENT

"Water Ballet," from 1989, resembles a serendipitous collision among an umbrella, several shower curtains and something Tinker Bell might wear -- if she were not a pint-size fairy but a small-town seamstress with a taste for bright vinyl and a fascination with cartoon sea creatures.

"Theater Dress," also from 1989, takes viewers back to the court of Louis XIV, as seen through the eyes of a precocious teenager who knows that bending the rules is

often more fun than breaking them. The form-fitting dress is a miniature version of a theater's stage, complete with layers of draped velvet, tasseled ropes and a hand-painted image of an empty stage, which covers the wearer's crotch -- and draws your eye to it, like a moth to a flame.

"Chandelier Dress," from 1991, is a beautiful trap that celebrates extravagance and tongue-in-cheek humor. The elaborate contraption, made of plastic beads, chunks of plexiglass, synthetic feathers and faux fur, puts most Halloween costumes to shame. But it would be laughed off the stage if worn by a professional showgirl.

"Thingamabob," from 1995, is a wig gone wrong. From the collar of an ordinary white dress shirt, Menoh has suspended long strands of artificially tinted hair. This hair shirt is for exhibitionists, not penitents. It makes playful fun of the idea that art is often dismissed as the emperor's new clothes.

Other costumes include dollhouse-size doors and cloth flaps that open onto miniature dioramas and sentimental collages. Floral upholstery, artificial turf and plastic flowers give other outfits the homey feel of cobbled-together crafts.

Three brocaded skirts with stiff armatures include peep-show windows. But there's nothing risqué or distasteful about Menoh's outfits. Lumpen goofiness trumps sexy slickness in her amusingly wholesome works.

The quaint charm of Menoh's garments comes off as mere cuteness in her seven handbags, which have the presence of over-designed Surrealist clichés. Crafted to resemble such things as a bird cage, a garden, a framed painting and an empty room, these homemade accessories lack the scale and dopey earnestness of the artist's more ambitious outfits. They too explicitly recall Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, without adding enough nuttiness to stand on their own.

Seven paintings from 1998-2006 are similarly bland. Each depicts the clean or stained collar of a dress shirt, set against a black background. Some include vests and jackets, and their titles identify them as belonging to Sigmund Freud, Yves Saint Laurent, Roland Barthes and the Beatles.

Menoh uses shirt collars more effectively in her three most recent garments, a wedding dress (1999), woman's suit (1999) and casual outfit (2001). All are made of collars cut from men's white dress shirts she purchased in secondhand stores.

These piecemeal outfits combine the penny-pinching sensibility of inveterate scavengers with a touch of elegance and a whiff of pelt-gathering savagery. Neither corny nor endearing, they leave the let's-pretend innocence of Menoh's earlier works behind to more directly engage the brutal beauty of reality.

*

'Lun*na Menoh: 1988-2006'

Where: Track 16 Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Bergamot Station, Santa Monica

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Ends: Dec. 23

Price: Free

Contact: (310) 264-4678; www.track16.com