



From left, a still from the opening titles for HBO's "True Detective" by the Elastic design studio and Neri Oxman's "Otaared" (2014), a 3-D printed wearable device for extraterrestrial explorers.

# In the Eye of the Beholder, and Even the Nose

This year's version of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum's always interesting Design Triennial boldly ventures to tackle one of the most controversial topics in today's visual culture. With more than 250 works by 63 designers from around the world in a jam-packed, two-floor show, "Beauty" is a mixed, visually cacophonous bag in terms of quality.

**KEN JOHNSON**  
**ART REVIEW**

But whether or not everything in it qualifies as incontrovertibly beautiful, it's an exciting opportunity to meditate on the perennially confounding questions: What is beauty? And what is it good for?

For thinkers from Plato to Keats, the beautiful was a universally supreme notion on par with Truth and Goodness. But with the rise of Modern art and its frequently obstreperous challenges to conventional taste, beauty became suspect as an artistic goal. Progressively minded critics these days tend to evaluate art and design for their abilities to promote new ideas and behav-

**Beauty — Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial**  
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

iors, usually in favor of politically liberal aims. Mere beauty has come to be seen as a conservative — if not morally decadent — value.

The exhibition probably won't change many minds about that divide. Consider the first item to greet visitors to the second-floor installation, a ball gown by Giambattista Valli. It consists of a flouncy, tulle skirt that fades from crimson at its top to pale pink near the floor. It's surprisingly topped by a red shirt with white piping resembling a bowling shirt or a waitress uniform. Besides being gorgeous, then, it's also a witty play with incongruous signifiers, a kind of a joke appealing to high-end fashion sophisticates.

Appropriately, Mr. Valli's haute couture dress appears in a section titled

"Beauty — Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial," continues through Aug. 12 at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 2 East 91st Street, Manhattan; 212-849-8400, cooperhewitt.org.



"Gomer Pyeland," left, and "Theodora" from the Afreaks series by the Haas Brothers, in collaboration with South African beaders known as the Haas Sisters.

"Extravagant" — "the domain of glamour, seduction and excess," as a museum label puts it.

At the funky end of the aesthetic spectrum is a collection of goofy, cartoonish stuffed creatures called Afreaks: dog-size chimeras covered in intricately patterned colored beads, by the Haas Brothers, the twins Nikolai and Simon. They are products of a collaboration between the brothers and a group of about 25 expert beaders — all women who now proudly call themselves the Haas Sisters and who live in Khayelitsha, South Africa, a settlement

near Cape Town. The Haases didn't just contract the women to fabricate predetermined designs but involved them from the start in visualizing imaginary animals and determining as well as executing the beadwork. In these sweetly grotesque beasts you see visual beauty — in the beaded patterns if not the comically ugly critters — admirably united with human goodness.

Between Mr. Valli's gown and the Haas Brothers' and Sisters' Afreaks are hundreds of useful objects, including lamps, furniture and office products, as well as jewelry, weavings and graphically punchy posters. Large photographs depict improbable women's hairdos by Guido Palau and makeup by Pat McGrath. Displayed on mannequin hands are elaborately ornamental fingernails, painted and with tiny, jewel-like sculptural elements by the Japanese manicurist Naomi Yasuda.

Pop-Victorian wallpaper by Studio Job accents the museum's stairwells. An installation in one closet-size room represents a Smell Lab where the Berlin-based aroma designer Sissel Tolaas "simulates complex and often transgressive olfactory experiences." Outside the lab, Ms. Tolaas has covered a 14-foot-wide wall with scratch-and-sniff paint imbued with smells of Central Park, including grass, car exhaust and horse manure.

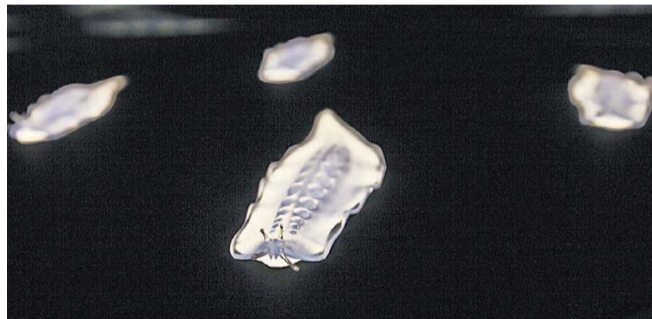
Nearly everything is more or less stylish, elegant and sensuously attractive. But if you're looking for a kind of beauty that stuns, that makes your pulse race, gives your stomach butterflies and pushes you to the brink of fainting, you'll be disappointed. There's little that you could call mind-bogglingly beautiful in the show, which was organized by Andrea Lipps and Ellen Lupton, both Cooper Hewitt curators, in consultation with an international committee of six advisers. It looks as if it was determined by committee. That's a weakness, but it's a strength, too, if you see the exhibition as an open-ended inquiry. In that respect, the catalog is particularly useful as the bulk of it is devoted to interviews in which nearly all the designers are asked for their thoughts about beauty. Jean Yu, a Korean-American designer of Minimalist women's undergarments, says: "It has a transporting quality. I feel light and buoyant and can move past the 'container' to feel connected to all else."

Some of the show's most intriguing items are science fictional. Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, a British artist with no

formal scientific training, designs small, artificial life-forms that are intended to help cleanse the earth of pollutants. A set of four slugs, 3-D printed in clear resin, represent machines engineered to neutralize acidic soils. Neri Oxman, founder of the MIT Media Lab's Mediated Matter group, has created a pair of 3-D printed, weirdly organic, vividly colorful wearable devices for extraterrestrial explorers. A museum label explains, "Oxman imagines seeding printed internal capillaries with microorganisms that could digest biological waste and hydrocarbons, enabling human survival on distant planets." Shades of "Dune," or "The Martian."

The exhibition's most provocative examples of beauty, playing on a screen, are opening titles and credits

for several critically acclaimed TV shows by Elastic, a design studio in Santa Monica, Calif. Those for both seasons of "True Detectives" are surrealistic montages of worried faces, bleak landscapes and atmospheric commotion, summing up with terrific intensity the show's noirish melodrama. One for "Masters of Sex" is a comical sequence of sexually suggestive but not explicit images, like an erupting champagne bottle. Such short movies project a kind of beauty that burrows through the eyes and into the souls of millions all over the globe and around the clock. Whether that's a good sort of beauty is debatable, depending on how suspicious you may be of the entertainment industry. But it's hard to resist its canny allure.



Clockwise from right: a gown by Giambattista Valli; a video still from Arcade Fire's "Just a Reflektor," by Aaron Koblin and Vincent Morisset; Jenny E. Sabin's "PolyThread Knitted Textile Pavilion"; and Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg's "Models, Mobile Bioremediation Unit, From Designing for the Sixth Extinction."

