

High-End Culture Comes to Shopping Malls

MAY 6, 2015



Clothing in "The Fashion Project" at the Bal Harbour Shops in Florida. Credit Ryan Stone for The New York Times

Kathy Row took a look at the discreetly lettered sign pointing her to "The Fashion Project." Her curiosity piqued, she trotted up the three flights of stairs to the top of the mall in Bal Harbour, Fla.

"I was expecting an amazing new boutique," said Ms. Row, a commercial real estate consultant visiting from Dallas late last month. Instead, she encountered, adjacent to the sprawling Neiman Marcus store, a minimalist space, all poured cement floors and exposed air ducts, the unlikely backdrop for a series of Victorian-style display cabinets housing, appropriately, fashion curiosities.

Among its attractions were a 1912 costume designed by Léon Bakst for the Ballets Russes and an oddly segmented "remote control" dress designed in 1999 by Hussein Chalayan, each on loan from the collection of Judith Clark, the London curator of this modestly scaled event.

"This is a pleasant surprise for me," Ms. Row murmured, her gaze darting from a Schiaparelli cape to a Victorian-inspired gown made from paperlike Tyvek. "I feel like I've experienced something with depth rather than just bringing home another plastic shopping bag."

In this palm-encircled mall, where deep-pocketed visitors part with sizable sums for an Hermès bag or serpentine Bulgari watch, the program is an anomaly. But in the landscape of luxury retailing, such a fusion of culture and commerce is increasingly the standard, viewed as a necessary adjunct to the ritual of getting and spending.

“Today people expect so much more from the shopping experience than they did traditionally,” said Mitchell Oakley Smith, the author, with Alison Kubler, of “Art/Fashion in the 21st Century.” “The lines are blurring between commerce and creativity so that people feel they’re coming away with more than just a transaction.”

The merchant reaps a particular advantage, he said. “It’s a way for traditional brick-and-mortar stores to lure back customers,” he said, “by offering an experience that rivals the digital transaction.”

Something on the order of the Buckminster Fuller giant sphere drawing visitors to the Design District in Miami, or the outsize assemblage of colorful blocks by the sculptor Joel Shapiro riveting attention at NorthPark Center mall in Dallas.

Such displays have a calculated appeal to the same cultural high rollers who seek out luxury fashion much in the way they may scour [Art Basel](#) for art trophies, noted Elizabeth Currid, the author of “The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City.”

“High-end retail,” she said, “is part and parcel of that kind of omnivorous cultural consumption.”

The notion of selling culture cheek by jowl with fashion dates at least to the golden era of department stores, as fans of “Mr Selfridge” on PBS are well aware. Less known perhaps, is that Macy’s in New York undertook to unveil a series of works by Mark Rothko as far back as 1942.

That tradition has been emphatically revived in the Design District, where images like a John Baldessari metallicized “canvas,” the size of a movie screen and mounted on a parking lot wall, reside in the vicinity of luxury emporiums like Valentino, Versace and Louis Vuitton.

Craig Robins, the district’s developer, spoke of a lofty aim: to create nothing less, he said, than “a nonmuseum, a living space that breaks down the confines of museum or gallery walls.”

That idea may well resonate with Cathy Leff, the former director of the Wolfsonian-FIU museum, who enlisted Ms. Clark to create the Bal Harbour exhibition, its modest scale belying the scope of its ambition.

“This is more than just an exhibition space,” Ms. Leff said. “It’s a cultural space,” one that aims to attract people not only to the show, which runs through May 21, but to the loosely related readings, talks and films scheduled at Bal Harbour in the coming weeks.

Mr. Oakley Smith, for one, is impressed. “It’s interesting that Judith Clark comes from such a rigorous academic and fashion curatorial background,” he said. “Applying that kind of knowledge and expertise to a shopping environment is rare.

“Ten years ago, it would not have happened.”