

Exhibitionism: 50 Years of The Museum at FIT: Part Two Transcript

[Valerie Steele]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture podcast series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion. If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag fashion culture.

[Emma McClendon]

Hello, this is Emma McClendon. I'm the associate curator of costume at The Museum at FIT and I'm joined by my colleagues.

[Elizabeth Way]

Elizabeth Way, assistant curator of costume.

[Melissa Marra]

Melissa Marra, curator of education and research.

[Emma McClendon]

Today we're going to talk about The Museum at FIT's fashion and textile history gallery. For those of you who might not be as familiar with it, this is one of two gallery spaces we have at The Museum at FIT. It's located on our lobby level just right when you walk in and the goal of this space is to show the history of fashion through a new theme, a new focal lens with each exhibition. Each show draws exclusively from our permanent collection and it runs for about six months at a time. They're a bit longer than our special exhibitions which are only about three months. Melissa, you were here when they first started, so do you remember anything particular about maybe that first rotation?

[Melissa Marra]

Oh yeah. I remember when it first opened in 2005\ . One of our director Valerie Steele's goals for the gallery was that she really hoped that it would help visitors understand the important cultural, social, and technological changes that fashion can demonstrate. I think what she really wanted people to come away with was that fashion is not just a blank mirror that reflects the spirit of the times but actually that it is itself apart of living history, which was really really a unique theme for the gallery at the time. I think the idea for the space was that by exploring the past we can better understand the present.

[Elizabeth Way]

One of the reasons why the three of us are here speaking about the history gallery is that all three of us curate shows there pretty regularly. Melissa has done some shows like Force of Nature, Emma did The Body and Denim, and one of the things we wanted to talk about is how we research our shows. People always ask us this. The first thing they ask is how long it takes. For me it takes about 18 months. I feel like by the time we get our proposals approved to the time we open, about a year and a half. And also for me a big part of the research is actually going into our collection. We have this huge collection, over 50,000 objects that we're very lucky to have on site. We can just walk into the collection whenever we want, possibly not as often as we want. But it's right there for us to look at. That really, just by looking at the objects, helps inspire themes for shows.

[Melissa Marra]

I also think one of the unique aspects research wise of the gallery is that some of the topics that people have focused on have been things so far removed that you would associate with fashion, that we've had formed advisory committees. Right. To help advise us and give guidance as we were researching helping us to make sure we're on the right track. For Force of Nature, we had an advisory committee that had people from the Wildlife Conservation Society, a curator from the American Museum of Natural History, someone from a bio lab. It was really fun and interesting to have all these perspectives. And all these people you wouldn't normally associate with fashion.

[Elizabeth Way]

How did, I'm just curious, how did your advisory committee react when you asked them to be on this committee to support a fashion exhibition?

[Melissa Marra]

They were all super excited. I think they love this kind of interdisciplinary approach and these ways to sort of shed a new light on the topics and the areas that they study.

[Elizabeth Way]

For Black Fashion Designers we also had an advisory committee because it was a controversial topic. We wanted to make sure we got it right and so we really wanted a lot of voices from the fashion industry, from journalists, from models, from designers, to academics. We really wanted to have a lot of voices in to make sure that we were really telling a story as broadly as possible. It was really fun to have all of those people together. They helped us find new objects. They brought in their stories from working in the industry and so it was

really eye opening. The other major source of research for black fashion designers was Women's Wear Daily. There's not a lot of secondary research written about black designers. We had to go back to the newspapers, back to the contemporary press to get as much information as possible. Having the advisory committee really helped us fill-in some blanks.

[Melissa Marra]

Emma, you had an advisory committee also right when you did The Body show.

[Emma McClendon]

Yeah and The Body similar to Black Fashion Designers it was much more filled out with industry people than maybe Force of Nature was. We had models, agents. We had industry insiders designers. We also had activists. It was a very kind of politically charged topic. Sarah Ziff of The Model Alliance was on our advisory committee. But we also had academics, people from other institutions like Harvard and Temple University and King's College in London coming in to really offer a very diverse perspective on the topic and help fill out this history with a broad sense of perspective. But what was also great was that starting with this advisory committee from early on, it gave us a great foundation to then build a symposium later on in the run of the show and I know that you guys also had symposiums that kind of formed around these topics because they were so potent for the current social and political climate. For The Body, a lot of our advisory committee members ended up speaking at a one-day symposium for the show, which just was able to expand on some of the themes and topics raised in the exhibition and open up a broader dialogue with our audience and viewership around the city and in the college.

[Elizabeth Way]

One last thing I want to say about research is even though the history gallery really focuses on our own collection, we still do incorporate a lot of theory and I know theory is a very strong suit for Emma and Melissa brought in so much scientific theory and history into the show. It really is a balance between fashion theory, other academic theory disciplines, and looking at the objects.

[Emma McClendon]

Kind of building on that, when looking at our collection I always really like to find pieces that maybe haven't been on view before or haven't been on view for a while. Or maybe there's a whole section of the collection that we as curators who have so much contact with the collection know so well that it's there but it never really gets to see the light of day. We don't talk about it openly that we have this

athletic wear collection, or we have this denim collection for example. One of the shows that I most recently curated at the museum focused on the history of denim and this show really grew out of the time that I spent in the collection, pulling pieces for research, putting objects away, pulling them out for different shows. I noticed that we had a lot of denim pieces from different time periods. They weren't actually stored in one spot so it took me a while to realize the breadth of the denim collection that we had. This sparked this sort of idea of looking at the history and led me to really go in and pull out each piece and start to see that we had this very clear chronology and timeline, which is actually quite rare for a fashion museum.

Typically denim as workwear people don't keep it, hold onto it for a long periods of time so there's not a lot of examples of denim that survived much less held in fashion collections and museums because quite often fashion collections will focus more on high fashion than they will on workwear or everyday clothing. I started looking at all the different pieces and the numbers and when they came into the collection and soon started to realize that we actually had acquired them all around the same 5-10 year period which was when Richard Martin, previous director here at the museum who later went on to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was an incredibly important pioneer in the field of fashion studies. He had actually brought a lot of these pieces into the collection. He even donated some of them himself. It was a really interesting project also from that perspective. The history of our own institution to sort of almost follow this breadcrumb trail of a former curator from decades before. It was really exciting to put that on view and weave that history of our own institution into the show itself. But also I know so many of our history gallery shows have this goal of bringing out pieces that have never been on view before.

A recent show that we had by our colleague Colleen Hill was called Unraveled and it looked at garments that typically don't get put on view in collections because they might be unfinished, or they might have wear or tear to the pieces so they don't look quote unquote perfect and flawless. But this was so exciting because we got to bring out so many pieces, so many amazing examples of the fashion process that never get to be on view. I think my favorite piece from that show were these panels from a Vionnet couture dress from the 1920s that would've formed the front of the dress I believe and there are examples of the finished dress in other collections. We can see how they would've actually attached to the garment, how they would've hung on the body, but we only have the unfinished panels themselves and so it's very hard to think of a context to show these in. But within this themed exhibition, they worked fantastically and visitors really enjoyed seeing that in process aspect of a garment rather than just the finished, kind of flawless, perfect item.

[Melissa Marra]

Yeah I mean just kind of going on that unfinished or imperfect garments that were featured in Unraveled. I also love the aspect of that exhibition that brought in the stories that are associated with garments and the memories that we have around them. I think that is something that anybody can relate to. Right. We all have things in our closet. It was just a really great example of finding a new way to look in our collection to bring out pieces and then this whole dialogue and conversation that it spurred after that.

[Emma McClendon]

You did that a lot with Force of Nature and even Fashion & Politics, finding new ways to frame objects that maybe have been on view before.

[Melissa Marra]

Yeah I mean with Force of Nature, it was a show about fashion and the natural world and the different ways fashion takes inspiration from the natural world. When I went into the collection, I was looking or I was thinking rather, okay there's going to be pieces that people expect to see. Right. We want to see some floral pieces. We want to see some animal prints. We want to see some maybe eco related designs. But then I had to go in with this sort of different set of eyes and kind of looking through this lens of some scientific theories or scientific principles that maybe also get applied to fashion. For example we had this Bill Blass dress and it was a very simple dress. It was navy blue and it had this sunburst pleating down the front. Probably not something you would expect to see in an exhibition Force of Nature but that was a really wonderful opportunity to use that sunburst pleating to talk about symmetry. Right and how symmetry is so important in fashion design. It's really the foundation of all the patterns that we see in nature and so you can draw those relations and comparisons.

Another example might be a piece, it was Comme des Garçons from her Rising Sun collection in 2007. I think fashion people would normally know that collection as being a very nationalistic collection. The kind of motifs of the clothes were taken from the big red circle of the Japanese flag. But doing a little research there's also the Japanese crane which is very much a symbol, a nationalistic symbol of the country and also has the same color scheme, the same red circle. Again, taking that unique lens and drawing comparisons that people might not have normally recognized if they had seen that piece on display before.

[Elizabeth Way]

One of my favorite pieces that you had in Force of Nature was this

beautiful over the top dress from the 1860s that had this textile that was woven in all of these different iterations and you used it to think about Darwin's theories and about sexual selection and women being kind of the opposite in nature where male species are showing off with their beautiful plumage, where as in fashion with people we found it the opposite of that period. I was able to use the same dress in my current show Fabric In Fashion to talk about the industrial revolution and the manufacturing of textiles. The same dress was able to tell two different stories.

[Melissa Marra]

Yeah which I think is fun for also people who come to the gallery who are regulars at the museum to see these pieces shown in different ways.

[Elizabeth Way]

Another great opportunity when it comes to objects in the history gallery is for us to collect for our overall collection. Everything in the history gallery like Emma had said belongs to our permanent collection. This gives us an opportunity to keep the collection current. For two shows that I did, Global Fashion Capitals and also Black Fashion Designers, we brought in a large number of objects into the collection around those two shows. For Global Fashion Capitals, we were looking at fashion that was made in cities outside of the four capitals that we think of, Paris, London, New York, and Milan. We brought in designers from Shanghai, from Moscow, and St. Petersburg. We got new pieces from Berlin. It was really exciting to kind of look at the fashion landscape and find out what was going on in that moment. It was in 2016 I believe and it was really a show about what was happening worldwide in contemporary design at that moment.

For Black Fashion Designers, we did have a few pieces in the collection that represented some black fashion designers but we really wanted more. We were able to collect from contemporary designers. We asked designers to go into their archive and give us things. Also our advisory committee helped us track down pieces from like the 50s, 60s, and 70s that were actually very hard to find. But now we have this really beautiful collection at FIT that represents the history of black fashion design.

[Emma McClendon]

I think that with Black Fashion Designers that kind of ties into another really great aspect of the history gallery which is that we are able to connect it to current events and even give a historical perspective to some of these really very hot topics in the fashion conversation that are going on right now.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely. People always ask both me and my co-curator when we did Black Fashion Designers like how did you know to do this at this moment when all of this press was coming out. I was like we thought of this two years ago.

[Laughter]

[Elizabeth Way]

But this is something that keeps coming up in the press, so it seemed very prescient and it was. We were really happy that it was adding to the current conversation. But it was definitely something that had been in the air for a long time. My co-curator on that show Ariele Elia also did a show called Faking It that looked at counterfeits and copies in the fashion industry which is again something that we've been talking about that's been an issue, a challenge in fashion design for a very long time. She was actually able to trace it back to the 19th century. We wouldn't have thought of it that way. But you know fake bags, designers being copied by other designers. This is something that people talk about a lot. I know that for The Body you had very very contemporary issues that were really popular in the press then and still very important.

[Emma McClendon]

Absolutely. With the The Body again this was an instance where I got a lot of questions about why I did this show now. Why I did it when I did it. I had been very fascinated with this notion of the ideal body, the ideal fashion body, and how malleable and changeable it seemed to be. I'd always been fascinated in that while studying. This just took on the particular incarnation it did after you know years of researching or thinking about this topic. When I first started to incubate the idea and pitch it to our director Valerie Steele, there was already the beginnings of this kind of grassroots body positivity movement on social media. The fashion industry was beginning to talk about it. It was really percolating. But it was really wonderful to see how the conversation really blossomed over the year and a half two years that I was doing research up until this exhibition opened at the end of 2017.

I wish that I could say that I knew that it would be the conversation on body positivity and body diversity and the need for that. I wish I could say that I knew how big it was going to be in end of 2017 2018 but unfortunately it was just something that interested me. I think for all of us as curators we research and look at things that interest us first and foremost. That leads us into different projects and different avenues. There might be some topic that we pick up on in one show and then that leads us to something else for another show and

it's not always about predicting what is or isn't going to be on trend at the moment that a show opens. Although it's great when it is on trend.

[Laughter]

[Emma McClendon]

So Melissa I know that when we've talked in the past you've mentioned how some of your past shows have kind of flowed together and given inspiration to the next shows.

[Melissa Marra]

Yeah well I think sometimes we all see the shows that each other are putting up and these like little seeds of inspiration get sewn here and there. For example, I curated a show called Fashion & Politics with my colleague at the time Jennifer Farley that was back in 2009 I think. That was a very timely exhibition because we had the presidential election going on at the time. We got lots of designers to replicate the dresses that Michelle Obama wore and we featured them in the show. They were very popular but one of the sort of ways that we were looking at the exhibition was not just politics like campaign politics but sort of social politics, class politics. There was one section towards the end of the exhibition because it was chronology that started to look at sustainable fashion. We had a piece by a Rhode Island designer. Her name was Katie Brierley and she worked with all natural dyes.

We had another piece by the brand Noir that was very big at the time for using organic cottons and when we were doing that my colleague Jennifer Farley started thinking about fashion's relationship with the environment and then she got together with Colleen Hill and I think it was a year later, a year and a half later. They curated a really popular exhibition at MFIT which was called Eco-Fashion: Going Green and that was not only very timely but it was really interesting because they didn't just look at this concept of contemporary sustainable fashion because the mandate of the gallery was to look at over 200 years of fashion. They went back and they started looking at all the good and bad practices that fashion sort of has and the way it has impacted the environment and they even did a book with Bloomsbury on the topic.

Some of our topics are extremely timely and this kind of serendipitous way that they emerge right at the right moments. For example something like Fashion & Politics the idea came about because one of my first jobs here I was the museum's cataloger and we had gotten in this set of men's suspenders and I remember there was these two suspenders that were donated together. One was these red, white, and blue themed suspenders. They were striped. The other pair had these little red

embroidered republican elephants and I was looking at them and cataloging them and I was thinking wow here's a way that fashion is you know reflecting campaign politics but how else does fashion express the politics that we have. Then I went to my colleague Jennifer and I said maybe we can start thinking about something like this and then a year later our exhibition was born.

[Emma McClendon]

Yeah I mean with Denim it was similar where I was seeing all of these objects in the exhibition and I was thinking oh it would be great to look at the history of denim and so I started to put together the proposal and pitch it to our director Valerie Steele. I remember distinctly. This was the summer of 2014 and at the time it's kind of hard for us to imagine now at the time denim was really not doing well. There was no denim on the runways, no designer denim really happening. The kind of wave of really expensive denim of the earlier 2000s had really kind of gone away completely.

I remember when I first pitched the show, Valerie was like oh this is great really interesting but you have to address at the end how denim is doing so badly now. I remember thinking yeah okay definitely have to touch on that because that's where we are. Then next month or two months September 2014 hits and the designers start to show the spring 2015 collections and all of a sudden denim's everywhere. There was just this explosion of denim across Chloé and Fendi and all of these brands. You know that carried into Vetements and Balenciaga and now everyone still has denim in their collections and so again this was another example of it seeming just really on trend at the time that the show opened in later 2015 that of course we're going to talk about denim because it's so popular right now. But when we pitched it, it really came out of looking at objects, being in the collection, just the nature of our jobs and being surrounded by these beautiful pieces, and it was really kind of lucky maybe something that's out there in the general feeling of things that kind of brought it all together.

[Melissa Marra]

Well Emma even a show like Force of Nature which was about a marriage between fashion and the natural world was literally born out of my marriage in my personal life because I'm married to someone who works in the sciences and you know I had sort of been thinking about it for years but I would take my husband along with me to these fashion exhibitions and I would be marveling at the beauty of these designs or the construction or talking about the history and he'd be running around being like *gasp* that's the shape of a lobster or that looks like a butterfly.

[Laughter]

[Melissa Marra]

I'd roll my eyes but after a while I'd started to think about these types of inspiration and where'd they come from and these sort of merging of different disciplines so really we do find inspiration everywhere.

[Elizabeth Way]

We definitely look at not just our collection but exhibitions that go on at other museums and you know other things happening you know around the world. But one thing I wanted to ask you about Emma and get you talk a little more about which I thought was really cool is for your research for Denim you actually visited the Levi archives.

[Emma McClendon]

Yes, I was very fortunate. I applied for funding to go out to California and actually go to the Levi's Strauss & Co. archive. They have an amazing collection of not just the actual jeans and objects from the 19th century which they do have which were super interesting to see but they also have an amazing collection of advertisements there as well. One thing that I was really struck by was how much the history of denim and the advertisements of even Levi's overlaps with fashions own interest in sportswear in the 1940s and 50s. Claire McCardell how she's always designing these play clothes and other things and using denim even in them and then we see some of those styles echoed in Levi's advertisements. So it's not just cowboys. It's not just this sort of very romanticized vision of this American male in his jeans on the back of a horse. It's also very much linked and overlapping and having this cross-pollination with the fashion industry itself and so in the show I really wanted to bring out some more of that and show how the history of something as ubiquitous and well-known as denim is not as linear and not exactly how we imagined it to be.

[Elizabeth Way]

I think that's something that we all discover through our shows. The history of how we think something is. It's always a little bit different. It's always a little more complicated. It always goes back a little further than we think it does.

[Emma McClendon]

And I mean Liz I think that that really kind of came to the fore in particularly in Black Fashion Designers. How you linked a lot of the designers that you included to other kind of contemporary events that were going on and maybe show another side to it.

[Elizabeth Way]

Yeah we really did want to kind of expand on this history of black fashion designers. I mean a lot of black fashion designers who worked in the industry are forgotten today. But actually a lot of fashion designers period that worked in the industry in the past are forgotten today. We really did want to bring kind of new narratives, new stories, and reintroduce them. One of the nicest things that people said about the show is that even people who are really familiar with this research said they discovered a designer they hadn't heard of. That was really fulfilling for us. But of course the challenge with that show was that the material object doesn't always exist. We started the show in the 1950s which is really really recent for the starting point of a history gallery show but unfortunately of course there were makers going back 18th-19th century in the US but we just don't have those objects.

[Emma McClendon]

For Denim you know it was great because we had this rich collection. But for The Body it meant that I did have to go out and seek some very kind of targeted new acquisitions. Particularly from more contemporary designers but also bringing in examples of plus size fashion from more recent collections. Also examples from recent collections of designers who are thinking about people with diverse abilities and using technology to think of garments solutions for people of all types of abilities and so it was a challenge to think about how to incorporate also some of the more theoretical ideas of that exhibition into a show that really is purely visual. How to convey that to the audience.

[Elizabeth Way]

Now might be a really good time to talk about how we acquire objects. Emma talked about asking designers and of course that's another challenge as a double-edged sword because we don't do loans in this gallery. A designer of course wants to be a part of a collection like ours but sometimes they only have one object and they don't want to necessarily give it up for good. One of the main ways we acquire objects is just simply to ask the designer to donate it to us and if it's available and that goes smoothly that's a really great way to get objects.

[Melissa Marra]

And sometimes you can't get the piece that you want from the designer and that can be really frustrating and then you're like okay what do we do now. You're scouring eBay or you're looking on Etsy for vintage clothes that might sort fit a concept that you're looking for. I just also think it's interesting to point out when you're limited to an object that's in your permanent collection you know the challenge of

what happens when you can't find the right thing to make that statement that you want to say. It can be really frustrating but it also really does force you to think broader. Right. Because you have to think outside the box to find a way you're like you now I have to talk about plastics and futurism of the 1960s but we don't have those pair of white Courrèges sunglasses. We do now. But maybe at the time you didn't when you were working on an exhibition so what can we do. How can I address this? What can I use in place of it? Which is a challenge but sometimes is fun once you finally conquer it.

[Emma McClendon]

I mean I know again going back to The Body because the biggest challenge for me for that show was that almost any piece could be considered in relation to the body because fundamentally clothing is about going on a physical form. So kind of trying to pick and choose what topics to think about but then again how to bring in some of those more theoretical political aspects to it and also ensure people are thinking about those themes as they move through the show. The way that I ended incorporating those ideas was through video. I know the video, digital elements, imagery that sometimes ends up being a key way to bring in something that's harder to show through an object or loan or maybe you can't get the object.

In that exhibition, I set up interviews with different industry insiders and scholars and activists and put a large scale projection of that video in the very first room so that even if a visitor just walked in and heard 10 seconds or 30 seconds of what these different individuals are saying about the current state of the fashion industry and body politics that maybe they would take that snippet with them as they walked through and that would help form a lens for them to examine and consider the rest of the objects. Rather than trying to have every single object very overtly say that message.

[Elizabeth Way]

Well speaking about challenges in the history gallery. I think one major challenge is the static nature of the space. Melissa, why don't you talk to us a little more about that.

[Melissa Marra]

Unlike an exhibition downstairs where you can rearrange the platforms, you can change the wall color, you can add a sort of mise en scène. You cannot do that in the history gallery. I think each one of us or anyone of the curators who have done a show in that space, we're always approaching it with how can we address this space with our topic. How can we make it feel a little different? How can we do something that helps the narrative along when we really can't change the platforms at all. One of the things that I kind of grappled with

that a little bit with Force of Nature because I wanted it to be a thematic exhibition and I thought you know nature is this cool topic where you can feel engrossed in nature. We had sound in the gallery. We had birds of paradise tweeting away on a screen. We had, when you walked in, sounds of thunder and water.

But the other thing was the thematic nature of the way the show was organized. I tried to create little rooms. When you walked into the intro gallery, you had the sounds. When you walked into the next sort of bay, it was all about flowers. When you walked into the second bay, it sort of takes on this victorian perspective of nature and how we think about that. That was how I tried to create a mood within that gallery. Emma, when you did The Body, you kind of approached that gallery space in a different way.

[Emma McClendon]

Yeah. For actually both The Body and Denim, I did those shows chronologically. So that gave more of a straightforward layout where visitors could just go from one piece to the next and have this very linear progression of dates where you'd begin in the 18th century or the 19th century with the earliest piece and then you would loop around to conclude with the most contemporary pieces. But still I wanted to make the gallery look and feel like a different space from the show that had been there before. So what I've really tried to do in those shows was use sound but also video and lighting in a lot of cases. In Denim and The Body, in both cases, in the very first room I made it into this introductory space through the use of a very large scale production of a video. With Denim, I chose video from the historic Cone Mills White Oak plant which unfortunately now has closed. But it showed the way that denim fabric is actually made and woven. It starts from the spinning of the cotton yarn, goes through the dye.

[Elizabeth Way]

That was a very mesmerizing video.

[Laughter]

[Emma McClendon]

And the funny thing about that video too is that it had a background song that reverberated throughout the rest of the gallery space so it sort of set a tone musically in that stereotype of denim in that sort western wear feel but then also ultimately in that first room it had the beginnings of the textile itself because it was a show about a textile. With The Body, I chose these gobos that would project a cage like shadow onto the wall of the platforms and we dispersed those throughout the show and what I was most excited about that was that

this cage theme really reverberated throughout all the imagery and the entire space of the show.

Our main poster girl for the exhibition was this fantastic piece by contemporary label Chromat which was literally a pair of pants that are made out of a black cage. They're this cage around the wearers body and you can see that in the show Exhibitionism that's on right now. So that was our poster girl. And then you walk into the gallery and we had these historic dress forms that also had metal cages that formed a lot of the shape that cast a cage shadow and then there was an image from Vogue right in the first gallery that was a fashion photograph that was shot with a nude model behind a cage of measuring tapes. The whole point of that was to show how proportions and measurements and weight and body ideals are a prison for women and female consumers in the fashion industry and then this cage gobos went throughout the whole rest of the show. My goal for that was really to give the whole gallery space a sense of unease, a bit of creepiness. This wasn't necessarily a happy show.

[Melissa Marra]

The darker side of fashion.

[Emma McClendon]

This isn't really a happy yay topic so I wanted to add kind of the lights were kind of darker. It was a bit more dramatic in how we did it. We mounted a lot of pieces for that show floating. Not necessarily on a mannequin so there was a wonder bra hanging from the ceiling with a shadow projected on it and a rubber girdle from the 1930s that was sort displayed flat and against a black background. So it was a little creepy. It was meant to be a little bit like House of Horrors I guess in a way. There's also maternity corset and a child's corset that really I think shocked people when they first came in. But I remember Liz in Global Fashion Capitals you guys had a totally different approach to this space.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely. Often times we have a projection or something that lights up that attracts attention in the first room. That always helps engage people. But we created this style map, my co-curator and I. The idea behind it was that we would have this giant map and it would be fed by images from Instagram that we would be able to hashtag images and then we worked with a programmer to build an algorithm that would access these hashtags like Paris fashion week or Milan fashion week and be able to feed us with real time images. That was our grand dream. It did not work. I mean I couldn't go into the problems with the programming. When it's open-source from the public, people would take a picture of like a bagel and hashtag it paris fashion week. We did

want to control the images.

[Laughter]

[Elizabeth Way]

What we ended up doing was creating our own Instagram account for the show. Uploading images from these different fashion weeks hash tagging them and so it did work kind of more in practice than in theory. That was a really dynamic way to set out the geography of the show. Talk about the cities and you know I think maps are something that help people get a sense of the world obviously. It was fun I think to see where Delhi is in relation to St. Petersburg in relation to São Paulo and think about fashion moving around the globe in that way. So having a projection I think is something that really helps enliven the space.

[Melissa Marra]

The fact that the gallery pushes us to incorporate things like technology in the galleries and partner with other areas or other departments in the museum. We work with the media team to do the map. For Force of Nature, we had a special website that was science related to help with sort of the education aspect to the exhibition. Or even your current show now Liz Fabric In Fashion where we have the image mapping that is on the toile that projects all these beautiful patterns and textiles.

[Elizabeth Way]

That was another idea that I really wanted to help bring people into the gallery. You can see it from outside the exhibition space so hopefully it was drawing people in. But I worked with Tamsen, our digital media manager. She found this program so they could map out the projection and I used images of textiles that we actually hold in the collection. So it was a way for me to incorporate even more flat textiles. I have a lot of flat textiles in that show. But it's also really fun. I have this 18th century toile, this muslin copy of a dress we have in our collection and I'm overlaying it with Kente cloth and Nigerian striped fabric and Thai fabric and cheetah print and so it just gives you a nice perspective in these historical garments.

[Melissa Marra]

It creates a nice spectacle when you see it going into the gallery.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely. It's always fun to have a little spectacle.

[Emma McClendon]

You can tell as curators we're also always thinking about the public. It's always as much as it is academic and scholarly, we do also have to think about bringing people in and grabbing people's attention because the fashion and textile history gallery is at the lobby level. We can have an exhibition in that space, every six months, and the turnover between those exhibitions can be much faster than a typical exhibition. So we are able to show more stuff.

[Elizabeth Way]

All of the guys who build our sets, who secure the mannequins, our conservation team who dresses. They can unload and load that gallery in less than a week and that's really an extraordinary feat when we think about any other museum in the world or even our special exhibitions gallery which takes a little bit longer to setup and to install a show. It definitely can be a challenge but it has its benefits and it's like that for a reason.

[Emma McClendon]

And we probably should also note that the reason the exhibitions in the history gallery only are up for six months is because clothing by nature, clothing, textiles, accessories, what we're showing in that space, what we show here at the museum is by nature much more fragile than the types of objects you might see in other kinds of museums here in the city.

[Elizabeth Way]

You know light is so damaging to textiles and so one reason why we're able to have an exhibition up for six months which is really as long as you can safely put a garment on display is because we do keep those lights low and our conservation team monitors all of that and makes sure everything is as safe as possible.

[Melissa Marra]

It might be fun if we can each share one or two of our favorite stories or anecdotes or pieces from all of the shows that we have done in that space. What do you guys think?

[Emma McClendon]

I know for me one of my favorite things or one of the biggest sort of coos that I managed to get was for The Body we were in conversation with designer Christian Siriano and we managed to actually get the dress that he designed for Leslie Jones to wear to the premiere of Ghostbusters. And this was really important and I was really excited about it because if anyone listening remembers Leslie Jones before

Ghostbusters she had taken to Twitter and really called out the fashion industry for the fact that no designers were willing to dress her. That she was basically saying that I'm not sample size. I'm not the look that hey want for their "it" girls on the red carpet like huh funny that nobody is willing to dress me. To which Christian Siriano immediately replied on Twitter and said hi, I'm here, I'd love to and he created this gorgeous red gown. He said it was very much inspired by Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman and she looked fantastic on the red carpet. But the whole instance became a real flashpoint for the industry for the lack of body diversity. The need for a conversation about this and Leslie Jones was just so thrilled with Siriano and became a real collaboration between the two of them.

[Melissa Marra]

I have to tell you that was one of my favorites from the exhibition.

[Laughter]

It was. I think it was also a really great addition that we got Christian Siriano to come and speak at The Body symposium that was held in conjunction with your show which I also thought was a, you know we do symposia or two every year, but that one had so much energy. There was such a positive vibe.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely. Thinking about my favorite moment of a show. For Black Fashion Designers again we talked about our advisory committee. I met Audrey Smaltz. She's a figure in New York fashion. I'd never met her before, of course heard of her. She reached into her personal archive and ended up donating a lot of pieces that filled in some really critical gaps into our collection. But she had been a black model in 1950s. She worked for Ebony Fashion Fair. She was a commentator for the fashion show. She has the Groundlings now and she runs fashion shows in New York Fashion Week. She's this amazing person. She donated a dress that was designed by a designer by Jon Weston and it was a dress that she wore in an advertisement in Ebony in the 1950s. She also wore to compete as Miss New York City as a beauty queen and so she had this beautiful ball gown that she's had in her closet literally for over 50 years and she was so generous in giving that to the museum and having that on display.

When she came to see the show during our press preview, she was so moved. She was moved to tears by the designers, the friends that she had known throughout the industry who are no longer with us. But just meeting her and really you know as a pillar of the New York fashion industry going back for so long that was a really wonderful moment. We do get to meet some pretty cool people on the job, designers, artists, and journalists. But that was a really cool experience for me.

[Melissa Marra]

You guys had a roster of great people for your Black Fashion Designers advisory committee. Robin Givhan, André Leon Talley.

[Elizabeth Way]

André, yeah we were really lucky to have so many interested. Veronica Webb was on the committee. People were really interested and supportive and that was really great.

[Melissa Marra]

I think for me. I have two memorable things.

[Laughter]

[Melissa Marra]

One would be from Force of Nature acquiring a piece by Iris van Herpen from the collection which I think was a great feat for us and really exciting. When Force of Nature was approved that was one of the designers where my head went right there like can we get a piece by Iris van Herpen who of course is a Dutch designer who's doing really really exciting things that intersects sort of science, technology, and fashion. There was this big question. Which is the piece that we're going to get?

[Laughter]

[Melissa Marra]

I remember meeting with Valerie a couple times. We finally decided on this one piece that was a one of a kind piece that was created in collaboration with Daphne Guinness so it had these other two exciting little checks to it. But it was made to look like the image of water striking against a hard surface. The whole dress was made out of this resin and we were like it's beautiful. It's gorgeous, it's water, it's like the perfect thing for the show and we say this is the one we want to purchase. Then we get the measurements for it and our registrar is like this is very large.

[Laughter]

[Melissa Marra]

It was very delicate. So there was all of this scramble and planning and you know conservation wondering if it can fit in the elevator. Can we get it upstairs? How are we going to make a mount for it? But rest

assure it made it here in one piece and it was on display and it now is a wonderful addition to our collection.

[Emma McClendon]

But I mean that just goes to the point that exhibitions are so much more than the curators. They're so like a film set. It's like a film production. You do have so many elements to the production that it is a team endeavor. So it's not just about a piece that looks good. It's about can we get it here? Can we fit it in the elevator? Can we dress it on something?

[Melissa Marra]

How are we going to store it?

[Emma McClendon]

Exactly.

[Laughter]

[Elizabeth Way]

I'll pass it in storage every now and then. It lives in it's own little bay. This beautiful little splash of water in our collection.

[Melissa Marra]

Every exhibition has its own little set of challenges.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely.

[Emma McClendon]

But at the end of the day, they are just so much fun and we really enjoy putting them together and the history gallery is a very unique space.

[Elizabeth Way]

Absolutely.

[Emma McClendon]

Thank you for listening. That wraps up our conversation about The Museum at FIT's Fashion and Textile History Gallery. Again this is Emma McClendon.

[Elizabeth Way]

Elizabeth Way

[Melissa Marra]

and Melissa Marra.

[Elizabeth Way]

And you can come visit the history gallery. We are open Tuesday through Saturday. We're free and open to the public. Definitely come check it out.