



STEP INTO PARADISE

Jenny Kee — Linda Jackson — Georgina Safe
 MAAS Media and Thames & Hudson
 Exhibition in Sydney, at MAAS, Powerhouse
 Museum, Ultimo.
 17 October 2019–22 March 2020

ZANDRA RHODES 50 FABULOUS YEARS IN FASHION

Dennis Northdruff — Dame Zandra Rhodes
 Yale University Press, New Haven and London
 Exhibition in London, at the Fashion and
 Textile Museum
 83 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XF
 27th September 2019–26th January 2020

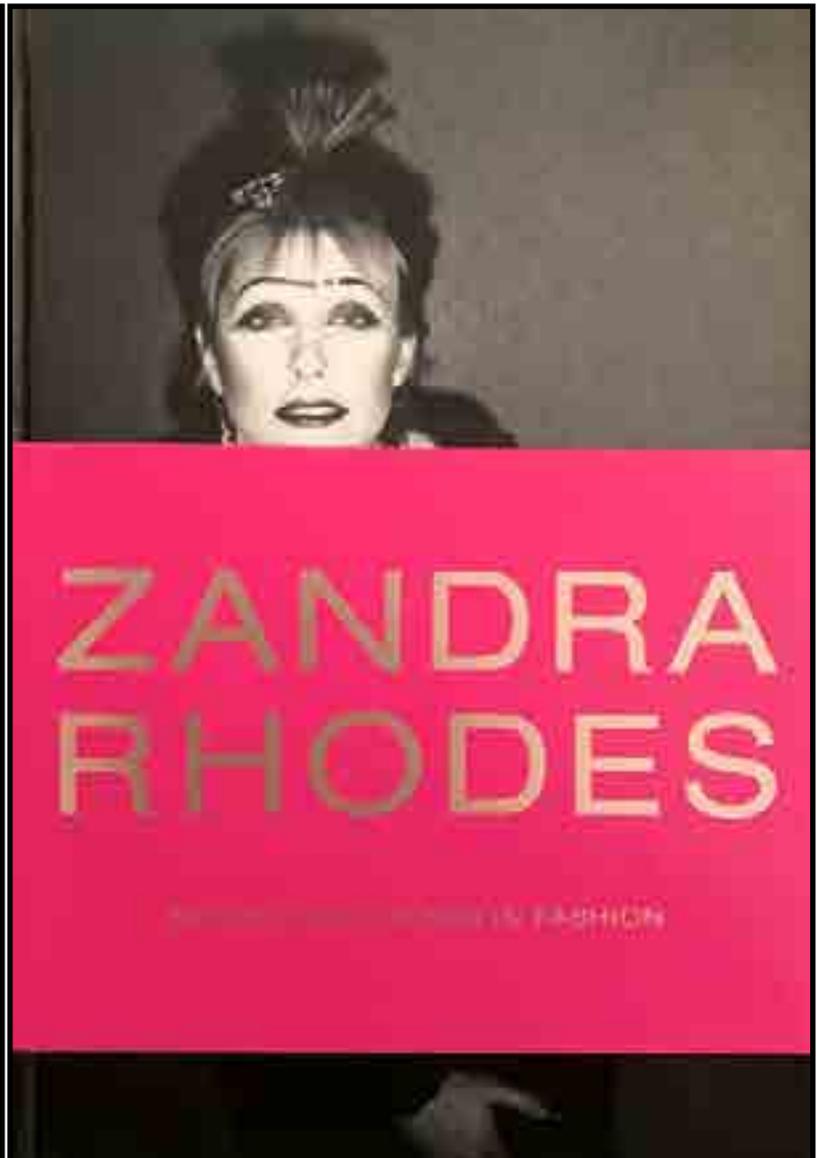
BOTH BOOKS ACCOMPANY MAJOR EXHIBITIONS in the designers' home countries. Both books reveal artists unrivalled for the longevity of their designing talents. Both books show designers characterized by their identifiable, created looks. Both books feature works of astonishing textile design by fashion practitioners from the same time frame and with the serendipitous publishing release of this treasury of material, offer a unique opportunity to look at the two alongside each other, particularly at so many seeming similarities and yet so many very real differences.

The book *Step into Paradise* delivers far more than the cover suggests. Once opened, a colour-filled, spirit-lifting, page after page flick through, offers a continual delight to the eye. This is true disruption, something Zandra Rhodes talks about with her designing process, but *Step into Paradise* shows what true disruption is ... Australian style.

ART-AS-WORN

Designers that have stood the test of time

Two books — Two mega exhibitions
Review by Helene Markstein



Dame Zandra Rhodes was an artistic force of nature, a legend, a fashion polymath. Rhodes pioneered how prints could be worn. 'To make it in fashion you need to be persistent in the pursuit of your individuality - willingness to disrupt the status quo.' Approaching her work as an artist, not as a fashion designer, her thinking far transcended fashion. Rhodes, as well as transforming whole environments into theatre, designed fantastical clothing costumes for the Opera, turning fashion into costume ... the ultimate scenographer in action.

Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson, friends who started with a giddy passion, a youthful exuberance for putting things together with personal style and flair. A collaboration that, through time, worked to take them to their position of international renown. A palpable joy of design, idealistic stylists, designing their patterns, prints and garments. Everything they created, they wanted to wear... it was all personal. A fortunate creative serendipity. The shared creative spirit which developed into a relationship with the perfect complementing of each other.

Falling between every category ... boundaries undefined, uniquely interesting. This is not mainstream fashion as such, neither high nor low, 'kind of' haute, sort of 'art, wearable, at least for pages of magazines, body art, perhaps? Rarely revealing the wearer's shape, perhaps a shoulder ... eccentric for the time and in retrospect proving a timelessness that is rare and fulfilled only because of its mostly consistent, unique vocabulary. Fabric became a canvas, a celebration of printed pattern.

Zandra Rhodes, at the same time, was a major contributor to the world of fashion through textile print design, but Rhodes was 'something else', a legend. She became the quintessential British Designer.

Think of an Australian Designer? Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson would probably be the first that come to mind. In their early days, they were considered more at the forefront of a small eccentric group of independents. As far as fashion was concerned, they didn't so much as transform Australian fashion but elevated a section to a Wearability of Art. Somewhere between Fashion and costume? Art for the body? Over time they became the most recognizable Australian designers, their designs, bright, brash, bold, rough around the edges.

Rhodes was 'something else', a legend. She became the quintessential British Designer



Not quite thrown together, but if that 'worked', then, yes! Carefully assembled to an inner compunction to fulfill a personal satisfaction of placement. A genuine and original flair in a time when Australian fashion needed to be accepted for itself by Europe, to offset the inevitable cultural cringe of copy. Flamingo Park stuck determinedly to their own thing. It was the most powerful direction for them. This trajectory powered towards a fusing, for a distinctive direction of Australian identity.

It may have something to do with the light ... the exhausting intensity of saturated colour ... maybe something to do with the way we see in Australia where colours need to be brighter, aniline dye, impossibly high res. London can cope with a less saturated colour field, the colours themselves may be perceived as an over-bright rainbow extravaganza. Put alongside Australian brights, European and British colour fields pale significantly.

What makes the works of Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson stand so far outside the prevailing attitudes over the years is a distinctly Australian take on



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fashion, textile design and wearable art. Strongly and uniquely 'Australiana'. I had always thought Zandra Rhodes' work was a breath of freshness, a delight of robust colour playfulness, but placing her new book *50 Fabulous years of Fashion* alongside *Step into Paradise*, it comes across as somewhat dull. The textile design and the fashioned styling of garments offer a sophisticated finesse in careful, seemingly played down design, disclosing a decorum almost. Rhodes garments, side by side in comparison are coming from a far finer aesthetic than the frocks from the Flamingo Park Frock Salon, in Sydney's Strand Arcade.

In everyday reality, Flamingo Park was a small island, a colourful little shop upstairs in the Strand Arcade, a 'maelstrom' of inverted interest, much splash and loudness and High Anxiety! Sydney artist and café society. Flamingo Park's early days had barely a domestic profile, let alone an international one. Unless one was involved in some way, one could be excused for not really being acquainted with any of it.

If you were aware of their presence in the Sydney scene during those early days, the book certainly captures the feeling of the era. Viewing in person ... at the accompanying exhibition in 2019, there is visual shock of the overwhelming rush of multi colours, a cornucopia of multi cross designs overlaid and seemingly miss- matched. One against the other, a consistent razzle-dazzle amongst giant colour blocks of pattern, room after room after room.

What defined the era? A melting pot of so many things and ideas worldwide, that all these designers took from and contributed to. Rhodes considered her work a reflection of the times, across all categories, including her fashion and legendary

Fashion Shows. A fusing of rock music, fashion, a posing as 'art'. Likewise, the Flamingo Follies shows of Kee and Jackson. A riot of colour and pattern, performance, theatricality and uniquely site-specific locations, for the spectacular show of works, on beautiful models and showcasing all manner of artists for sets, painted backdrops, choreography, hair, make up and jewellery.

The two books cross over, both books reference each other regarding the Fashion Shows. Rhodes quotes Kee, reminiscing in her book: *A Big Life*, from the ultimate fantasy show in 1972, themed 'I Love Lilies' as being the highlight event of Jenny Kee's London fashion experience. "I was transfixed. Zandra's work was dramatic, graceful, rich with history yet absolutely original. I decided, then and there, that this woman was a genius" (Kee in Rhodes, p.199). Kee writes of the Zandra Rhodes showings in London 1972, of being inspired by the 'themes', having the garments and music together as theatrical performance. The 1974 Flamingo Follies show cross influences, from Linda's viewing of a Dior Show in Paris, the theatre of choreographer Martha Graham





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and Jenny's memorable viewing of the Ossie Clark and Zandra Rhodes Show in London.

On Appropriation, all the print design work is heavily influenced from other places, things and people, with similar borrowings from the same era and cultures of the world. A rich life in travel gave inspiration from everywhere and everyone, Australian indigenous culture to Cretian antiquities, the Ballet Russe, Sonia DeLaunay, with a nod to, or straight out brash appropriation.

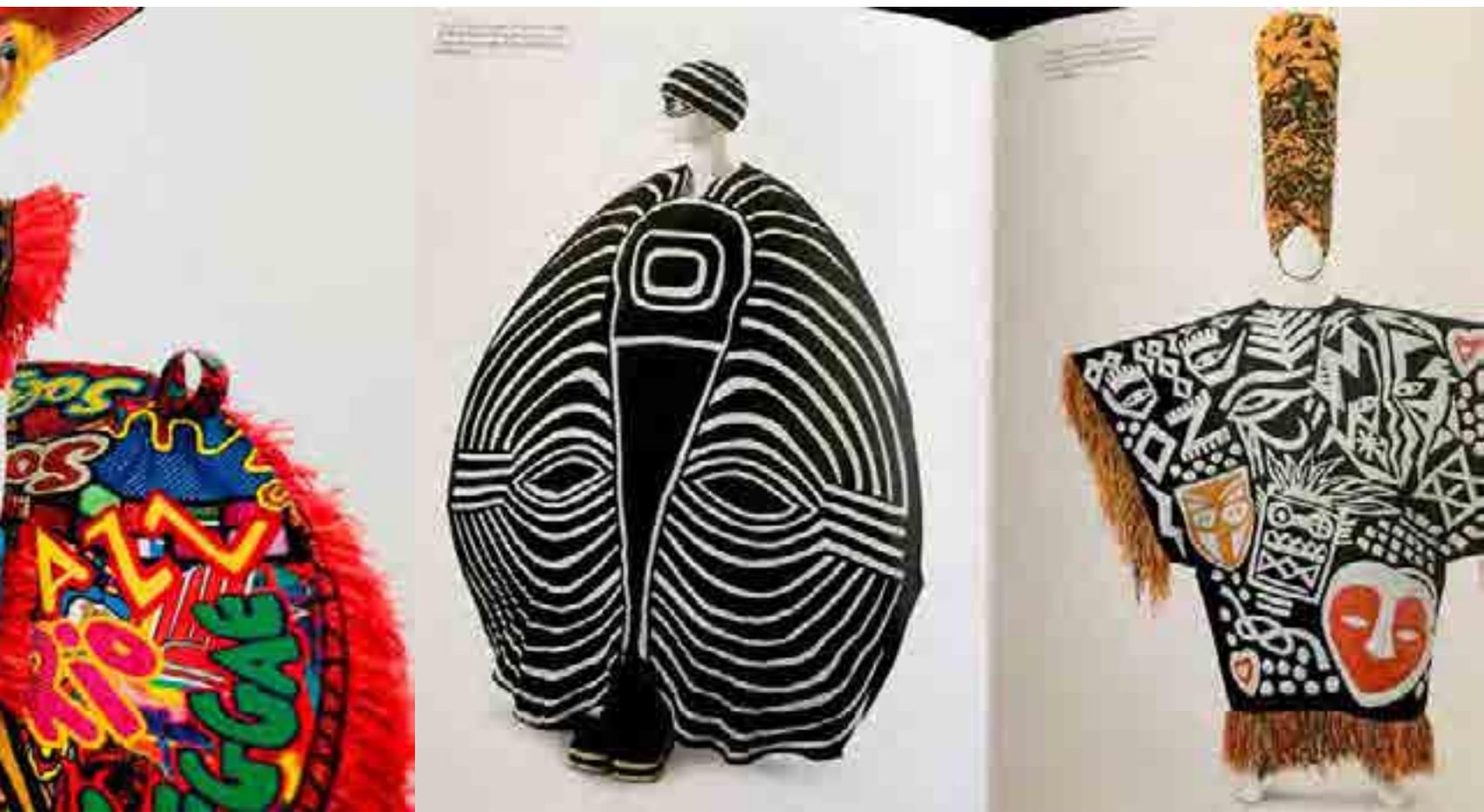
Creative Designers have always stolen, taken, developed from everywhere and everyone.



Through time this has always fostered education, growth and has been the artistic prerogative. About appropriation ... the printed pattern is timeless. Design principles are also not affected by the passage of time. From the beginning of time, like the line, the circle, the spiral, the leaf shape. The spark that comes from seemingly cultural appropriation, how it is adapted and where that can go, depends on the depth of your imagination.

How designers use it, is the thing ...

Rhodes, in an earlier book, *Zandra Rhodes: A Lifelong Love Affair with Textiles*, (2005) looks at Zandra's



creative process and the textile printing process, talks of laying out how she developed her ideas from the many similar areas of appropriation. From a starting inspiration, taking her first drawings then reacting, playing further, with her own work generated by the original stimulus to where her imagination would then take her.

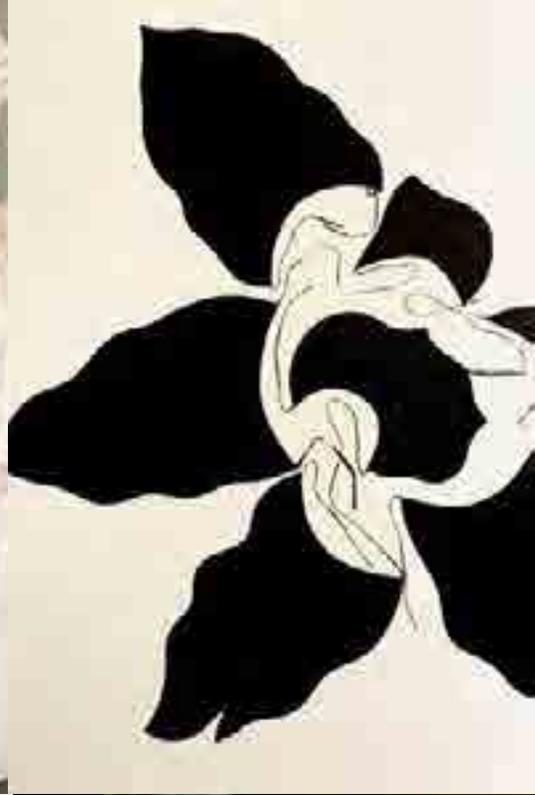
See random examples of Rhodes designers 'play' in 'Chinese Squares' pp 64-65, 'Mount Olympus' pp 78-83, 'Medieval' collection pp 84-89, 'Manhattan' pp 92-93, 'Sparkling Sequin' design pp 166-167. A take on Hieronymus Bosch painting from 1490-1500 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' for the Valentino collection pp 194-197.

A universal source of inspiration for designers over all the creative arts is in the tribal, primitive, indigenous, the 'not made here', somewhere else. Elements and principles of design emerge throughout all mankind's history, from all over the globe. Every designer has sought, at one time or another, a thread of interest to borrow, mimic or follow. What one does with that information is what is interesting. How one pursues the interest proves the designer's skill and worth and usually exposes

their education or lack of, in their chosen fields. Patterns that referenced certain objects being subtly subversive in their appropriation, were of artistic interest to Zandra Rhodes. Her art documents the post-modernists that opposed formalities of the tasteful, instead embracing all cultures, all sub cultures, all eras.

All three artists were travellers. Much of their work and inspiration came from these journeys. In a wonderful A to Z alphabetic deconstruction on Rhodes and her Eastern inspirations, Rajeev Sethi, a collaborator of Zandra Rhodes (Sethi, 123) speaks of the time-honoured vocabularies coming from an entirely new language, found on opening the Pandora's box of new iconographies that comes with travel and new visual inputs. In Rhodes' case, with profound expressions of artistic brilliance.

Likewise, in Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson's separate expeditions in looking for opal, it became the height of the creative flame. Beyond their beloved Waratah, in journeys through the bush, beyond the flora and fauna. For Kee and Jackson's work, an obvious hiatus that pushed the textile print creativity a notch higher. A tension almost in the development that comes





with the design maturity in their individual work. Years later some of the designs are still fresh and maintain the original effect of purity of design. Even if you love, hate or are tired of it ... it still has the capacity to arrest, quicken the blood. It barely needs a garment to show itself, as the photographs of the bolts of fabric thrown about the models show in the parades. This opal design while totally simple, catches the complexity and fire of the stone.

When there is heat in the design, decidedly, there a stronger impulse and the appreciation and aspect is apparent, even from the photographs and speaks directly to the heart. The spirituality all the designers bring to their work, clearly adding a quality, connecting a richer meaning into the garment or print. See: 'Waratah' pp 142-143, 'Black Banksia' p 146, 'Red Desert' Skirt and top, pp 212-213 and 'White Waratah Warrior; Walking the Sacred Path' pp 240-241. 'Zen Gold Waratah Bush Kimono' p 243.



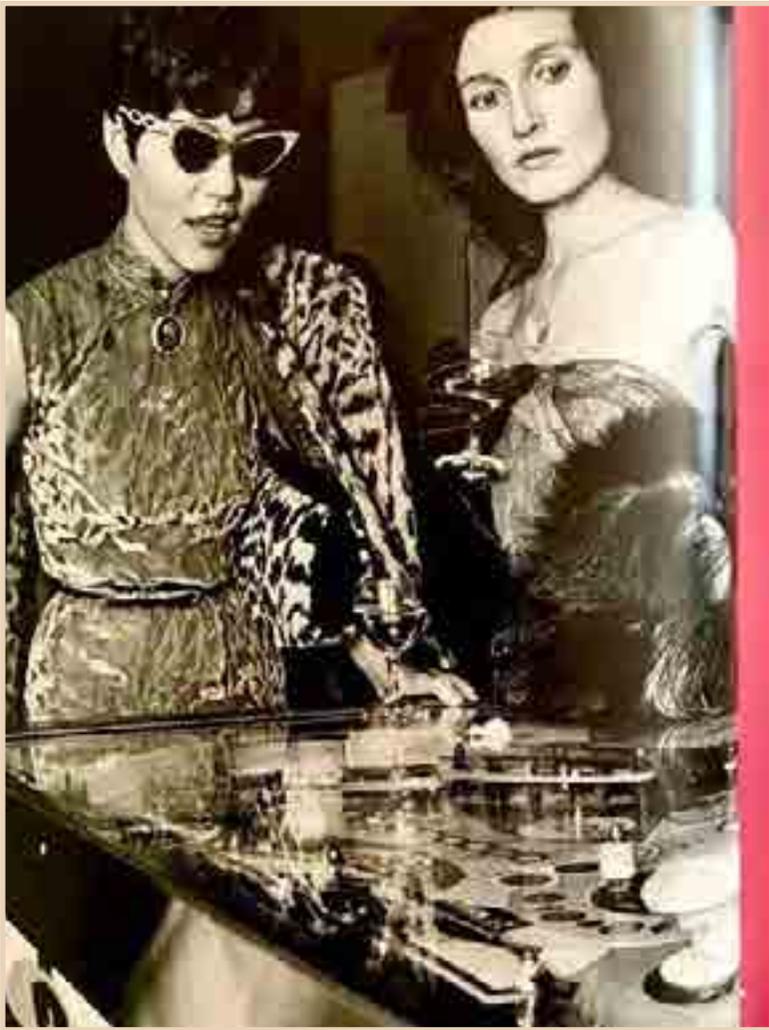
For those 'funny' or 'eccentric' Oz designers, to those who became the pioneers of recognisable Australian style, the invitation from SOCOG for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games took Kee's design work into the international realm. An enormous challenge for the scale of the brief, capturing Australia's multi-culturalism through the five continents represented by the Olympic rings. From Kee's pages of paintings and sketches to wondrous, iconic, large complex, sculptural forms, requiring time and great skill. Relying on the Blue Mountains incredible local artistic expertise and talents: costume designer Paula Martin, textile designer Greg Somerville and costume maker Chloe Simcox, an amazing creative collaboration which produced extraordinary results pp 230-237.

Like Kee and Jackson's work, Rhodes work has had very little analysis of the artistic context of the patterns or styling. Fashion or wearable art for that matter is rarely offered up for critique or deep analysis. Linda's engineered individual styling is of critical unique interest and these designs are well covered in the book. Sometimes only history, looking back well after the phenomenon has passed, gives an opportunity to shine a light, to look at what worked ... and what didn't. The impulse to apply the term 'Reducing art to the decorative' is a cheap shot, with the breadth of the works – the focused eye and mind – of all three artists, who share a fearlessness and determination to produce their work is confirmation of their artistry.



Kee and Jackson's work are painted canvases to cover the body, rough, basic shapes, squares and unstructured. Layers and layers, a heaviness ... a shapeless concealment? Made for all body types and all bodies wore them, in basic loose unfitted shapes laid one over the other; together with heads





swathed in patterned bolts of coloured cloth. The shape of the body ... of no interest. Whereas for Rhodes, the printed pattern being the essential component in her work, this comes from quite a different sensibility. Needing her garments to be controlled by the print, her acting duality, of creator and practitioner comes into play. Conceiving styles to be worn about, on a body. Rhodes designed specifically with the body in mind, cutting directly over the body. In an intuitive response to her hand, her 'line' followed. Creating a mood of things by what she was doing with the fabric. Incorporating the figure, essential to her artistic vision.

With Jackson and Kee's primitive design vocabulary, some designed patterns appear simplistic and not attempted to be fully realised or developed. Some garments rely heavily on the photographer's creative vision to become interesting. Their simplicity enveloped by the site specific location, bush or ocean, needing to be included for the overall appreciation by the eye.

Unashamedly exuberant with their passionate, brutalist styling is a visual shock. To come up against it after all these years, to see it clearly, as what was vaguely thought when first seeing it, to now think it so blatantly, crass, rough or unfinished. A celebration of nature, with an unsophisticated naivety. Not just defying traditions, but the antithesis. Some prints and the alignment and placings of patterned prints together appear as chaos. More like a riot, that would

*A quality that 'pops'
Over 50 years confirming it —
A wonderful gift*



not be fazed by tradition, or even the bright intensity of the Australian sun.

Both books are in a 'field' of their own. Neither fashion nor art. The real question ... is it any good? is beside the point. Is it textile design or fashion? Or wearable art? Also beside the point. These artists stand outside all these categories.

Rhodes' work offers a profound aesthetic intelligence.

'Textile prints my main forte, and it constantly amazes me how the print can control the whole look and shape of a garment. I suppose I'm the forerunner of the digital print revolution, as prints have always controlled the look of my garments before other designers would work out how to do this. My clothes are engineered to accommodate the placement of the prints, rather than cut from a continuous, repetitive yardage.' (Rhodes, p 51).

She remained true to her vision, pattern-driven garment design, well outside the industry at the time. She also pioneered 'the street' as a centre of fashion, elevating it to haute couture. 'Conceptual Chic', with punk looks showing tearing, slashes and safety pins.

'In recurring patterns, at least, the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another. Take heed in this growth that each member of it be strong and crisp. That the lines do not get thread or flabby or too far from their stock to

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sprout firmly and vigorously.' 'Some Hints on Pattern Designing' (William Morris 1899)
Compare this advice to Rhodes' squiggles and stroke: free, yet firm, bold and energetic.

Whilst this is nowhere near an in-depth critique, *Step into Paradise* as art – both book and exhibition - offer materials for the beginnings of an in-depth assessment of the life's work that conjures up both awe and respect for the sheer volume produced.

50 years of Fabulous Fashion is another wonderful opportunity to pore over the gifts of an era where individuality in design skill thrived and prospered and we are privileged to be able to wander through. From a larger than life talent, a fashion eminence – a true original. Where the design process is laid bare – as coming from her eyes, her mind, to her hand. As Rhodes says 'there's a higher channeling process for anyone who comes up with an original idea'.

Books of this calibre are so necessary for all of us who are inspired by this type of visual information and the making of it, and we are delighted to be able to view and analyse this material so generously given.

Helene Markstein

