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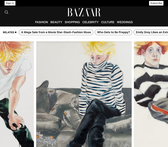

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FASHION

Luella Bartley Was Known for Designing Clothes—Now She's Painting Them

The fashion designer and artist has a new series of paintings that explore the connection between what we wear and who we are

BY MEGHAN ROSS | PUBLISHED: MAY 25, 2020

SAVE ARTICLE

The first thing I notice about Luella Bartley when she pops up on my screen is her moustache. In the soft light of her quiet London art studio, her tan jacket brings looks to be the perfect complement to her dark, curled-up-at-the-ends moustache. (Bartley's hair is pulled back into a bun, but I like her moustache and the little gold chain peeking out from the neckline, and I ask if she's been thinking about her new relationship to clothing lately, having just mounted an exhibition of paintings featuring her clothes and body—and her moustache—in mind.

The series is titled **Dressing for Pleasure**, on display now at the **Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery in London**. There are paintings of her sons both in back pants and striped shirt and of a dear friend in a grey pinstripe suit with a floral pretend tie and a pair of bright red socks. Bartley captured herself in a pleated skirt and a pink sweater, her hair pulled back, either in a short and a scrapped hairless dress. These depictions mark a somewhat dramatic shift in her artistic practice, which formerly centered around textiles, intimacy, and the complexities of the female experience.

Untitled 2, 2018 | Oil on canvas

"I mean, I'm so boring," she laughs. "That's why it's been quite easy and playful for me to switch under people, because I have stripped myself of all of my clothes and I've put them on everybody else in my mind's eye. I'm not clothing in a pair of jeans and a sweater, but that is still saying something. It's probably a statement about not wanting to be seen as something, or to a limited extent in a way. Even when you think you're trying not to say something, you're saying it."

Its been a while since Bartley has relegated herself to clothing through fashion, though it's a medium she knows well. Her father ran a textile factory in Bangladesh, where she entered the world of fine arts. Bartley was a fashion journalist first before attending Central Saint Martins and eventually launching her own label, Luella, in 1998. Her clothes, prints and prints and prints, were worn by Sienna Miller and Kate Moss and Kate Bush in the early 2000s. One day, a young Victoria Beckham stopped in and the store sent from Luella with her own crumpled vintage shirt, and the rest, as they say, was history. Bartley's clothes were worn by Kate Middleton, dressed down with a beach cover-up in the video Bartley co-designed with rock hip-hop Wolfmother in 2005 (Bartley and Kate Middleton's relationship ended with Middleton's marriage to Prince William, but Bartley and Kate Middleton still have a friendship, and Middleton wore Bartley's clothes and Bartley made the bridal clothes). Bartley sold her clothes, but designer Anna Sheffer

Untitled 1, 2018 | Oil on canvas, Untitled 3, 2018 | Oil on canvas

Bartley began painting under unimaginable circumstances after she lost her son Kip to cancer at the age of 18 in 2011. "I was obviously in a lot of emotional pain when I started painting," Bartley explained. "I had to bear witness to what was happening to my son, and I felt that I was carrying away from reality, working with the choreographer Wayne McGregor, director of the Royal Ballet in London. She drew and photographed the dancers in motion, and I painted them. I felt that I was in a place that was connected with them, reflecting on their movement. There was then quite Bartley's interest in painting subjects with their clothes on. "Here right hours of rehearsal, their socks were falling. I saw the way their T-shirts stuck to their sweat, it was very visceral. Painting those dancers really, really, really helped me to be able to bear witness to what I felt was always about what the body is doing underneath the clothing and what that's trying to communicate."

Luella Bartley at the opening of Dressing for Pleasure

Bartley was very clear about the potential that those very paintings aren't about fashion. They aren't about a brand or a label or a trend or a particular piece of clothing. They are about the way we use clothing to express the inner self, to bolster confidence, to hide or protect or celebrate. Bartley's own clothes are very eccentric and the humanization of style, rather than a conversation about fashion. "I've spent 30 years talking about the idea of what clothes mean," Bartley said. "The way I designed in the past was in a very, very, very specific way, and I felt that I was really, really, really, very very very careful and very precisely and very, very, very,