

Luella Bartley Is Back, With Sculptures, Drawings of Complex Bodies

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LONDON — Luella Bartley is moving on, shifting from fashion to fine art, although she’s still thinking about curves and the complexities of the female form.

Her new show, with fellow designer-turned-artist Sara Berman, is called “Armoured,” and runs until June 11 at KH Gallery in London. The sculptures, paintings and drawings by the two women show the body, covered and uncovered, and the picture isn’t always pretty.

The title was drawn from a poem by the fashion curator Judith Clark and the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, while the show features new work by Berman and Bartley, who explore the female experience, specifically in relation to the body and space.

Berman’s colorful paintings deal with the semiotics of dress, and armor, while Bartley has created stark, white sculptures of bandaged, contorted limbs, bent into awkward angles.

She has also drawn and painted the naked female body twisted into different postures and with exaggerated proportions. Berman’s subjects are concealed figures, protected by their clothing, while Bartley’s figures bare all.

In an interview, Bartley said she began drawing after taking time off work for personal reasons. She soon found that she couldn’t stop — and she plans to keep going.

“I just felt compelled to draw, to explore feelings that I couldn’t verbalize. So I drew and drew and drew and it was a very personal exploration, and not necessarily something that I thought would even be shown [in public]. But it feels very natural, and the right thing for me to be doing now,” she said.

Until now Bartley had never shown publicly before, although her early work was presented recently in collaboration with Miuccia Prada for a Miu Miu ad campaign.

She has described her approach to art as “wrestling with self” and her drawings are made with a sharp, scratchy pencil and a long, “sword-like” brush. Her sculptures are made from clay, which she has bandaged with white plaster.

Bartley has had a long and successful career in fashion: She was most recently global design director for Calvin Klein Jeans and is the cofounder of Hillier Bartley, the ready-to-wear and accessories label with Katie Hillier. She served as head of women’s rtw design at Marc by Marc Jacobs and was the founder and designer of her namesake line, Luella, which shut in 2009.

She won the Designer of the Year award in 2008 at the British Fashion Awards and received an MBE, or Member of the Order of the British Empire, from Queen Elizabeth II in 2010.



“Folds II” by Sara Berman, part of the “Armoured” show in London. *Image Courtesy of KH Gallery*



Luella Bartley's sculpture *Solitude*, part of the "Armoured" show. *Image Courtesy of KH Gallery*

Asked how her fashion background influenced her approach to art, Bartley said that, as a designer, she was always thinking about "women and their attitudes towards their bodies, sexuality and femininity. But in fashion, for me, it was very much about the image, about a mask, and the exterior."

By contrast, with these new works, Bartley said she's completely exposing herself and her thoughts, "doing something that is very raw, naked and exposed. It's quite vulnerable, quite brave, something that felt really important for me to do, as a woman."

She added that her art is "much more visceral" than her fashion designs ever were. In fashion, Bartley said she was dealing with "a theoretical idea of a young woman. I would play with ideas of sexuality and create very prim ideas that were also quite sick. But it wasn't a visceral look at the body like what I am doing now."

She said that, well before the show, she and Berman took long walks and talked about their ideas, then went back to their studios to draw, paint and sculpt. She said the works sit together as a conversation."



Luella Bartley's oil on paper work, "Opposing Selves." *Image Courtesy of KH Gallery*

Some of Berman's women have been created at a larger-than-life scale that appear to overwhelm the space and are obscured themselves by thick, bulky garments that in some cases restrict the movement of, or access to, the body.

Berman, who used to design an eponymous collection with her sister Amiee Berman, and who served as the co-creative director of the British cashmere label N.Peal, said the show is the fruit of her's and Bartley's "very beautiful, honest dialogue about femininity, and what it's like to be in our bodies at this stage of our life."

She believes "the act of acknowledging one's armor draws attention to inevitable softness underneath."

Asked about her plans for the future, Bartley said she's in no hurry to return to fashion.

“I really hope to pursue the art,” she said, adding that the founder of KH Gallery, Kristin Hjellegjerde, has officially taken her on “and right now I feel really compelled to just progress. I have so many more things that I want to explore, and experiment with,” she said.

KH Gallery has locations in London, Norway and Berlin and operates as an incubator space where young artists can experiment. The gallery says its aim is to stick with artists for the long term and to “inspire the collectors of tomorrow.”

Later this year Hjellegjerde will expand to the U.S., opening a new space in Palm Beach.