

The Met Gala is the biggest fashion event of the year. And all the celebrities strutting along the carpet and shelling out \$50k for a ticket... are truly there to support the Costume Institute. The whole night is a fundraiser for the Metropolitan Museum's fashion collection. They're all parading up those fancy carpeted steps to go see the fashion exhibit on display. Which means they're all going to see the handiwork of Joyce Fung.

**Joyce:** [00:00:05] Uh, my name is Joyce Fung. I'm a senior research associate of, uh, installation at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [00:00:14][8.8]

Far below the red carpet festivities. In the basement of the Met, in a windowless studio Joyce Fung, the senior research association of installation, dresses the mannequins for the fashion exhibits

**Joyce:** [00:00:17] We're in the installation studio of the, uh, Costume Institute. And this is where we dress the mannequins for display in exhibitions and also for photography.

**Joyce:** [00:28:29] So I'm here year round, and then when we get to preparing the spring exhibition, which is our largest, I usually bring in at least one dressing assistant.

And you might think, as I did, "what? How does one person, let alone multiple people, spend all day dressing mannequins?" But it takes a long time to put a mannequin in an outfit. If you're doing it right.

**Joyce:** [00:04:53] I mean, sometimes there's something that's really difficult, so it might take an entire day, but that's generally for historical things. [00:05:14] I would say basic dressing. Something can take, you know, half an hour to an hour.

Admittedly sometimes it takes me like half an hour to get dressed, but most of that is about deciding what to wear. Joyce is not doing that. The outfit is already prescribed.

[00:18:01] I mean, we'll refer to the. The runway picture. So that will direct our dressing

For the show that Joyce is installing- which is a collection of the work of Karl Lagerfeld, there's a huge wall full of runway photos of the outfit the curation team has selected.

**Joyce:** [00:04:24] But I love having this board where I have little thumbnails because as soon as we dress something, we cross it out. And it's the best feeling at the end of the day is to cross out the the picture of the dress that we finished. [00:04:48][23.6]

But dressing every mannequin takes so long, in part, because every single mannequin, underneath the designer clothes, will be wearing the exact same thing. Which is pantyhose. Multiple pairs of pantyhose.

**Joyce:** [00:08:55] we end up buying it, you know, bulk online. We'll get, like, you know, 100 pairs. Oh, I'm trying to find white pantyhose if you know a source.

**Avery:** [00:09:17] Are they hard to find? [00:09:17][0.4]

**Joyce:** [00:09:18] They are now. [00:09:18][0.4]

Joyce then casually turned to sleek, hidden cabinet, and opened a drawer

**Avery:** [00:10:55] Stop it. Is this your storage of tights? [00:10:58][3.0]

**Avery:** [00:11:03] That's so many tights!. [00:11:09] It's a huge drawer. I think that's what I thought adult womanhood would look like. I'm like, No wonder you can't find white tights. The Met has them all.

Professional-level high-grade mannequins, as you'll learn, require a lot of pantyhose. And beyond that, mannequins require a ton of thought and consideration. Which might seem silly, considering ... how niche it is to go to a fashion exhibit. Or even how increasingly rare it is to shop somewhere in person or see elaborate shop displays. But so much of our consumer habits, and our relationships to clothing, is determined by who– or what– we see modeling it.

**BREAK**

I feel like if you're at all insecure about your body or your finances or your understanding of conceptual art... runway fashion shows are not relatable. I didn't like them at all growing up. I just did get them. I didn't understand them. I didn't even think I enjoyed fashion at all. Until I saw clothes displayed in a museum.

And displaying clothes in a museum is so different than seeing them in a shop. In the commercial world, fashion is all about looking forward to what's next and new and happening. And it's in a museum where you can actually look at clothes and collections from the past. And there's something about that, about taking it out of the realm of retail that you can see that these garments are truly art.

**Dr. Petrov:** [01:09:51] *It is a different form of encounter than in a store. Then in a fashion magazine, on a catwalk. Because the object is real.*

Dr. Julia Petrov is a curator at the Royal Alberta Museum in Canada

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:00:08] and I am the author of Fashion History Museums Inventing the Display of Dress.

And a history of clothing display is very much a history of mannequins

[00:09:20] And of course you need mannequins in order to be able to, to display clothing, although I say need, but that hasn't necessarily been the case.

Because before readymade clothes, you would buy *cloth* to then bring to a tailor or a dressmaker, or to sew at home. And those bolts of cloth weren't displayed on a mannequin. Mannequins, or human forms, used to be only used in *making* the clothes.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:08:38] *Mannequins, for example, are invented as tailors dummies to make the the production of clothing particularly ready to wear clothing that's not tailor made for a particular individual easier. You have the replacement body.*

These were forms without heads, without limbs. Just torsos.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:08:54] *You also then have the use of these tailors dummies to display those ready to wear items, [00:09:01][7.2]*

That was one versions of the genesis of the commercial mannequin. It was a sewing dummy that came into the spotlight. Department stores and museums alike were using these really crude headless torsos.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:47:24] *The Costume Institute had the very, very early mannequins. The body itself was very rudimentary. So probably the body was made out of like chicken wire and stuffing. But but the heads were papier maché portrait heads.*

Which is creepy. But the other alternatives to mannequins weren't much better.

[00:09:20] There's lots of examples...of just like pinning clothing to a wall.

Let me say this up front. If the clothes aren't on a human model, everything else is creepy. You put human clothes on an inanimate thing, it's weird. And especially in a museum, which is tiptoeing around the sort of macabre fact these clothes were probably worn by someone who is now dead. And propping them up is like making them a sort of effigy. And that's exactly how the idea of the fashion museum arguably began. It was about paying tribute to dead people!

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:03:30] *like coronation garments, you get things like bishops, garments, that kind of thing, or you might get relics.*

In westminster Abby, tunics and armor are hung above the tombs of famous military figures.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:27:41] *So you get very rudimentary bodies for that. You also get things like effigies.*

So like Westminster Abbey has a large collection of royal effigies

Before embalming or perhaps even despite embalming. When you parade the body of a monarch through the streets or you invite viewing or whatever, you have a wood or wax effigy of that... body.

Was that supposed to fool people?

I dont know if it was supposed to fool people but the idea was if you're going to have this encounter, you wanna see something.

So the royal effigies were really a sight.

lying on display, wearing the clothes of that individual usually or many times. If they were made out of wax, they were actually made from the the death mask of the individual.

Which is where the modern wax museum comes from.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:29:11] So the effigies is where you get wax museums from. Madame Tussaud is a specialist in creating death masks for during the time of the French Revolution. And then she flees with the death masks.

And it was this time when everyone was sort of perversely fascinated by the x french monarchy. So she makes a traveling exhibit with replicas of like, the French royal family. And Madame Tussaud expanded her collection from there. Which would also include the *clothes* of famous people.

**Joyce:** [00:11:16] Madame Tussauds, you know, like she would collect the clothes, you know, of Napoleon or Marie Antoinette, and they would dress these clothes on a wax figure that was basically an effigy of famous people. [00:11:31][15.0]

Joyce Fung, back at the met.

**Joyce:** [00:10:45]If you think back to the wax figure. that really is the sort of the, the original mannequin is, is the wax figure. [00:11:42] I would say, you know, the modern day fashion exhibition is is a child descendant of that kind of display.

So in shops and in museums, now you can see descendants of the both headless sewer's form *and* the descendants of the full body figures, complete with heads and limbs. In fact, both shops and museums- even really high caliber museums like the met- sometimes use the same mannequins.

**Joyce:** [00:12:04] the mannequins that we're using to show contemporary fashion, these are actually retail mannequins. [00:12:19][15.3]

**Avery:** [00:12:20] They are? [00:12:20][0.1]

**Joyce:** [00:12:21] They are.

One particular mannequin. Which I never noticed is everywhere.

**Joyce:** [00:12:31]And, you know, you see her at Bergdorf Goodman, you'll see her at J.Crew. And so she's, you know, a very high quality, I would say, famous retail mannequin.

She is called the schlappi. Or the schlappi? There's an umlaut over the a.

**Joyce:** [00:12:31] But normally we use what they call the schleppi mannequin.

These are super high end and cost about a thousand dollars.

**Avery:** [00:12:50] How do you know if you're looking at a schlappi mannequin?

**Joyce:** [00:12:54] Well, she has a semi abstract face. I guess it's hard to describe you. I know it when I see it. [00:13:02][8.7]

It's an egg head with a faint suggestion of a nose. But the face isn't the most important part of the schlappi- in fact, for this show the the met commissioned some beautiful custom heads that look like figurines Lagerfeld used to collect. But the Met is still using the schlappi body. The main thing about the schlappi is that she is really tall

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:45:20] *schlappi, for example, which you've probably seen without knowing they create these like enormous seven foot tall mannequins with really, really, really long arms, legs, and they look great for high fashion items, but then they look very odd for historical things because the hem is two feet off the ground . It's bizarre!*

So for historical garments, sometimes, museums will use distinct mannequins. Like Joyce pointed out a mannequin with a corseted waist.

**Joyce:** [00:07:13] That one is a special lady. Um, she's a mannequin for 18th century costumes.

And for the Karl Lagerfeld show, since it transcends a few decades, Joyce sticks with the Schlappi. Even though this ubiquitous mannequin is a bit anachronistic.

**Joyce:** [00:38:28] *he schlappi, is basically a body from the 1960s, 1970s*

Because different eras have different bodies. These days, a lot of new mannequins are coming out that look like we do now.

**Joyce:** [00:39:02] *What you see sometimes in the retail environment is, you know, a mannequin might be more athletic looking or, you know, the bust is larger. And if a store is selling, um, you know, casual clothing...the mannequin that they use will be different than a store that's selling, uh, evening dresses.*

But Joyce doesn't just pop the clothes on like a store can. A retail display can take so many more liberties than a museum.

**Joyce:** [00:05:05] *when we, you know, go to a department store or look at a, you know, a window and, you know, to make the the clothes really nicely. You see, they put giant t pins through the costumes to, to send it in at the waist or what have you.*

In a museum, they're not going to pin the clothes or clip them or amend them or potentially damage them in any way. They are not going to change the costume to fit the mannequin.

**Joyce:** [00:05:37] *So our preference is to first pad up the mannequin to fit the costume* [00:04:39] ... And so that's where the pantyhose come in

Basically Joyce is using all those pantyhose to make the mannequin a custom bodysuit.

**Joyce:** [00:11:53] right now she's got the bottom leggings on, so I'm creating, uh, the. The top.

Joyce puts one pair of pantyhose on the legs of the mannequin and snips off the feet, so they are like leggings.

The shirt, so I have to make a little hole for her head. [00:12:05][11.6]

Then she takes another pair of pantyhose and cuts a hole in the crotch. So the legs and armless torso of the mannequin are now covered in a layer of pantyhose. Which means joyce can then put stuffing in the pantyhose- like quilt stuffing from a craft store- to make the chest or hips bigger to fit the clothes.

We might have to add a little something to the mannequins to make the costumes fit well.

*Joyce: [00:06:46] sometimes we've been adding a bit of hip padding because that generally helps the skirts of a gown look fuller*

And she also takes off the mannequin arms and wraps them in pantyhose too. So that she could add more bicep if need be.

**Joyce:** [00:30:48] And I think you need to really have an idea of anatomy also about, you know, how to pad the body, too, to make it larger, you know. So I think it's fashion. It's a bit of a, you know, a sculpture. So it's like art.

**Avery:** [00:18:51] You're buttoning this shirt so, like, lovingly. [00:19:11][19.4]

Joyce snips away any visible sign of the underlying pantyhose. And she cross references the runway image for styling

**Joyce:** [00:25:51] So it looks like the runway picture shows it unzipped. So we're going to just style it that way.

Joyce might add more padding here or there, rearranging folds or puffing out sleeves.

**Joyce:** [00:35:34] Yeah, I think the styling part is I think, you know, making it livelier, um, sometimes is it's, you know, how you, you tie a ribbon, you know, or how you arrange, you know, the ruffles, you know, around, around the neckline. [00:34:59] ...and you know that those are the interventions that, you know, the dresser is doing to sort of, uh, bring life to the costume on the on the mannequin. [00:35:30][30.5]

Bring life to the mannequin. Make this effigy come alive. It's fundamentally weird. And we all know it.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:30:36] ...So, yeah, I think everyone is on in on the theater, but it's the uncanny ness of it that makes it work.

Because Dr. Petrov says, the mannequin is a stand in for the person or the model who may have once worn that garment. But It's also a stand in for the viewer. They represent both at once,. Because We cant help but see ourselves in the mannequins.

**Dr. Petrov:** [00:23:14] People do relate to it. They they they kind of measure themselves up against it and say, okay, what could I wear that? Would I wear that? Did someone I know where that.

We know how to approach clothes. We know how to read them. Mostly people are more able to make opinions about fashion, than, say, oil paintings or sculpture.

*And I think part of that has to do with the way that we've been acculturated as consumers of fashion. Where we are constantly thinking about self presentation.*

And so fashion shows have become major draws for museums. They have name recognition and mass appeal.

**Joyce:** [00:54:29] You know, you're always trying to create the next blockbuster, so it has to get better and better and bigger and bigger. [00:54:36][6.7]

Which means that there will be more and more mannequins for Joyce to dress. Which is exhausting to think about, because this one mannequin I watched was modeling a very simple ensemble: just a skirt and a jacket and shirt- it took Joyce 29 minutes and 28 seconds

**Joyce:** [00:24:00] We're working with an exhibition of, like, 100 mannequins, you know.

But its not like people come *for* the mannequins. Most of the time, they're the silent workers in the fashion economy. I say most of the time, because there are huge exceptions. In a way that was even bigger than the ubiquitous schlappi.

After the break, the strange phenomenon of the celebrity mannequin. And why, even outside of the museum, or the store. I think we're all way more impacted by mannequin design than we might even know.

**==BREAK==**

So the context of all that mannequin talk.. Is that shop windows used to be so important.

**Katherine:** 00:43:50] So but yeah. Display design, it's definitely it's a huge it's a huge deal. 100%.

Katherine Pan is in the master's program at NYUs costume studies program.

**Katherine:** [00:42:28] Window display, I would say is the Instagram. Just explore page of the 1930s. It's where you get visual information about Products.

And this was true in every town and every shop. This is how you'd know what was in fashion- by looking at the window display. Even in your little store on the mainstreet in Hannibal Missouri. That's where Lester Gaba grew up.

**Katherine:** [00:06:27] Lester Gaba was born in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1907. He according to his biography, he was very inspired by like the clothing store on the main Street in his hometown. And the mannequins within it,

And so he became a sculptor. He went to art school in Chicago. And then he moved to New York.

**Katherine:** [00:11:02] he's able to ingratiate himself into a social circle in New York City. And he like participating in like a variety of different projects, mostly making mannequins

He made mannequins for stores like B Altman and Best and Company and Lord and Taylor. And you could always tell which mannequins were Gaba's. They were distinct

**Katherine:** [00:03:16] Well, he was he's one of the American sort of mannequin makers sculptor who started to make, like, more realistic mannequins or mannequins modeled off of real people.

Lester Gaba's mannequins were posed in ways that real people would sit and stand. He made lines of mannequins that were based real people. On celebrities, on movie stars, on debutantes. On normal everyday folks.

**Katherine:** [00:13:04] The mannequins will like represent real women with wrinkles with like, imperfections on their body. So he did he did a lot of series, I think in 1932 he did a series of mannequins called the Gaba Girls and that's what made him a fixture in New York City.

And in 1937, Gaba made a new line of his signature Gaba Girls for Saks Fifth Avenue. And one of these mannequins was seated languorously, bent over one knee, smoking a cigarette. This was Cynthia.

**Katherine:** [00:20:43] he modeled her after a woman who works at Saks Custom Salon named Cynthia Wells. Who- poor girl

**Avery:** we know nothing about her

**Katherine:** we know nothing about her.

The most that we know about Cynthia is from photographs of this very detailed copy of her. Very detailed.



**Katherine:** [00:14:41] And if there's one photo where you can see, like, she has spine, like the ridges in hers, like musculature, like everything she, he really like. Yeah. He. And according to one clip, a piece of writing that describes her very closely, one of her feet is like slightly bigger than the other. [00:14:59][17.9]

**Avery:** [00:14:59] Oh, my God. He gave her idiosyncrasy! [00:15:00][1.5]

**Katherine:** [00:15:02] She's like a little bit uneven. she has freckles. yeah, it's it's pretty detailed.

To Lester Gaba, Cynthia was his finest work.

**Katherine:** [00:21:04] he talks about how she looks so like that mannequin came out to look so chic and have this like. Irresistible quality about her that he immediately ordered a copy of her and putting in his apartment.

So Cynthia lived in Lester Gaba's apartment, forever languorously bent over one knee smoking a cigarette. And one of Gaba's high society friends, the famous milliner Lily Dache, was also taken with her.

[00:21:36] she's like, Oh, this. She looks great. She needs to be there for my salon's opening.

So Lester brought her to the opening. Cynthia was a hit. People were like "bring her to my party!"

**Avery:** [00:21:48] so it was sort of like an inside joke, like, Oh, ha ha. Bring your mannequin over. [00:21:51][3.0]

**Katherine:** [00:21:51] 100%. I think she was an inside joke for a long time,

But the joke got bigger and bigger. Because by 1937, Lester Gaba has grown quite famous.

**Katherine:** [00:11:10] And he like he appears like every other day on Women's Wear Daily is just like. Lester GABA is the judge of of of this contes. He he he does a lot of fashion show, too, for like brands stage fashion shows. He he has his hand in like, like everything almost.

And so Cynthia started to come with Gaba to everything.

**Katherine:** [00:22:36] literally lugging her around to, like, attend parties.[00:47:57] Like, for example, in Town and country there in 1938, there was this picture of, like, a party that obviously Cynthia goes to and it's like it's a benefit, I think, for the Manhattanville Nursery Association and a lot of like, like counts princesses and like. Like a lot of. Like very. High profile individuals are there and Cynthia is just photograph among like I think next to a Bloomingdale in the photo and. [00:48:30][33.1]

**Avery:** [00:48:32] Like a member of the family of. [00:48:33][1.6]

**Katherine:** [00:48:34] Like a member of the family I forgot his name but like he's a blooming he's a Bloomingdale a member of the family and yeah, in the, you know, in the texts is that that Gaba that like entertains the crowd by taking off Cynthia's hand.

The joke had taken a turn for the macabre. Like in this 1937 Life Magazine profile of Cynthia

**Katherine:** [00:44:49] But this one is it's all of these are curated of like like life goes to a party with Cynthia, with socialite Cynthia, and it's all staged

In the Life Magazine profile, Cynthia wakes up to fan letters and party invitations littered over her bed. Then she and Lester Gaba hit the town.

**Katherine:** [00:45:28] they don't take photo of him like lugging her around all day. But like, you know, she appears in a bus with him sitting next to her like they go have lunch and then dinner and then they go watch an opera at the theater box. And then she he takes her home in this very provocative pose. It was overflowing with not even implied but pretty direct sexual perversity. Like calling her a call girl saying Lester Gaba is her benefactor

Because then this profile gets soooo straaaange

*And and then it's like and then that's like the weird part of him. Like, just, like, slowly taking her apart, like undressing her.*

And then the last picture in the spread, is just a bunch of black satin bags. All the pieces of Cynthia. Looking like dissected body parts.

*[00:46:22] it's like. Cynthia all packed up! like, [00:46:26] So that that's like, horrifying but like, I guess very interesting.*

Verrrrrry interesting. It sort of made you wonder what was up with Cynthia and Lester.

**Katherine:** [00:40:01] it's like he also perform as a couple with Cynthia, right?

It looks like some perverse version of the myth of Pygmalion.

**Katherine:** [00:36:45] This ancient story of Pygmalion, right? Of course. He carves a woman out of ivory, falls in love with her and Venus like he prays on Venus, and Venus turns into his wife. Like what? He turns into a woman and he marries. [00:37:00][14.8]

But that's not entirely what's going on with Gaba and Cynthia

**Katherine:.** [00:39:51] Like, it's it's a more complex relationship, definitely than the Pygmalion thing [00:39:19] I am pretty sure he's gay. [00:39:22][2.8]

He was gay. If you listen to the episode of 99% Invisible called Mannequin Pixie Dream Girl, you can hear that Gaba would come out later in life and spend summers in fire island- whole nine yards. And so, yes, at the time Cynthia was a bit of a beard. But that wasn't all she was.

**Katherine:** [00:26:38] *she's been to Paris, for God's sake, right? So she is like she is a celebrity. She's like a hot moment.*

Cynthia had fans. Cynthia had modeling gigs for print. Cynthia even had a cameo in the 1938 Jack Benny movie Artists and Models abroad.

[00:42:45] Oh, I beg your pardon, madam, I. I can. I can explain this intrusion.

[00:43:00] Oh, wait a minute. That's a dummy!

[00:43:04] Oh, that's a shame.

*So and I think the more she appears, the bigger she gets, Right? That's how it works.*

**Avery:** [00:36:18] *And it's so easy to look back and be like, oh, 1937. You know, people were so simple and silly getting their inspiration from, like, this not real person from this mannequin. But the other part of your thesis is... We do that now. [00:36:34][15.7]*

**Katherine:** [00:37:04] *Yeah I think we never stopped doing that. Throughout history there's always like this desire to create like a perfect person with whatever technology is available to you. So of course, we still are doing that. And that's why the second part of my my thesis is about Lil Miquela just Miquela now Miquela Sosa, who i...is definitely like very representative of like the type of work that Cynthia does.*

Miquela is an influencer.

**Katherine:** [00:49:58] *She is a digital influencer on Instagram, and by digital I meant that her existence is digital. She's a digital avatar. [00:50:15][16.3]*

**Avery:** [00:50:15] *She's not a person. [00:50:16][0.6]*

**Katherine:** [00:50:16] *She's not a person. And she is involved in a lot. She's also a singer. She makes music. She on Spotify, she has a YouTube channel, she has Twitter, and she. But most of her work is done on Instagram. She's a fashion influencer. I would say mostly.*

**Avery:** [00:51:47] *But does she actually model real clothes? [00:51:49][1.9]*

**Katherine:** [00:51:50] *Yes. [00:51:50][0.0]*

**Avery:** [00:51:51] *That like humans can buy? [00:51:52][0.8]*

**Katherine:** [00:51:52] Yes, yes, yes. [00:51:53][1.1]She created by Brud, a L.A. based. Media studio [00:50:46][29.2]

**Avery:** [00:52:22] How many followers does she have? [00:52:23][1.1]

**Katherine:** [00:52:24] Close to 3 million. [00:52:25][0.8]

**Avery:** [00:52:27] Do people know she's not a real human? [00:52:28][1.7]

**Katherine:** [00:52:29] Yes. Yes.

But like Cynthia, the humans are in on it. It's like a not joke joke.

[00:54:52] She has, like, selfies taken with real people. .. and they're like, kind of like underground was like cool figures. Artists.

Miquela is going to cool things and hanging out with cool people. Like Cynthia, she looks uncannily real, but you can tell she's not human. And like Cynthia, Miquela is distinct.

**Katherine:** [01:00:35] On how Miquela looks. She Brazilian American. [01:01:46] kind of racially ambiguous but still very much in. Line with what people are looking for in an attractive. Instagram fashion influencer. Right? light skin, thick, bushy eyebrows, like big eyes. She is bisexual or pansexual? She is. Yeah, she's very she doesn't label herself, but she's definitely queer in some kind of way. And that is her identity, right. Which is completely manufactured by the team behind her

Miquela looks the right way and says all the right things

**Katherine:** [01:02:40] she is being created to be like to succeed on Instagram, like she is modeled after people who have succeed. Instagram

She's a product of her environment. SO was the seven foot tall schlappi. So was Cynthia. Miquela, and any number of her fellow digital influencers are direct descendants of Cynthia. Because to Lester Gaba, Cynthia wasn't just a joke or a lark or a beard.

**Katherine:** [00:47:35] Because he's not bringing Cynthia everywhere just because it's his job. He's trying to work it.

When Cynthia did photo shoots and films, Lester Gaba made money!

**Katherine:** [00:27:46] Yeah, it's. He's. He's working through Cynthia 100%. [00:39:51] Like, it's almost like he's living through Cynthia a little bit,

Literally, Lester Gaba writes some columns in Cynthia's voice.

**Katherine:** [00:41:24] I'm Cynthia, and I'm so disappointed. I like all the design that's been coming.

Which is what the team behind Miquela does.

**Katherine:** [00:54:16] *the captions are like very genuine. Like the writing team does a really good job of like mimicking the language of like a young 19 year old girl who's like in L.A., just like, you know, trying to become a influencer.*

And so Miquela is much believable than Cynthia. She has a way more complex personality that's easier to connect with. And that's what made it so unsettling for me.

**Katherine:** [01:14:12] *Like I was. I was like, doing this at first I was like horrified. Like what? What, what is going on? Like, we're really heading into, like, dystopia. But then the more I like, I was like, maybe this is inevitable.*

It makes sense there would be online versions of mannequins.

**Katherine:** [01:03:53] *these are manmade humanoid things, modeling fashion, right? Even like no matter what Miquela does, if you see a top on her and you think it's cute, she is supposedly where it's a human figure wearing, you're going to project yourself onto her. And how would that look on me?*

It's like we're still figuring out the right replacement for window displays. Increasingly, when I scroll through clothes on the internet, I start to notice all the different ways the clothes are presented. Some shops show their clothes floating in space, like they're on invisible mounts. Some use actual plastic mannequin bodies. Some places use a photograph of a human and then superimpose garments over the picture. Using the human like a mannequin. All of them are iterations of this weird fundamental tradition we have- of needing to see our clothes on some uncanny human likeness. How much weirder is Miquela?

*Obviously, we should examine it and look at it critically, like what's going on?*

Miquela's creator, Trevor McPhedries, declined to talk for this podcast. But he's defended Miquela in the past.

**Katherine:** [01:10:44] *he talks about how like the benefits of working for an avatar for creative people.*

When a writer, as a musician, a producer, works with a digital avatar, the artist can just focus on the creativity and production and let the avatar take the spotlight. I have often fantasize about having someone else read out my words exactly the way I want them to. So I can just focus on the writing and tape cutting. Not everyone wants to have to represent themselves all the time. And especially not in the burnout inducing world of influencers.

**Katherine:** [01:14:31] *That's tremendous labor of like quantifying your entire existence, quantifying your entire self into like metrics that you have to pay attention to all of that and like....marketing yourself, building a brand that is you, that's like tremendous. That's*

*like takes a tremendous toll on like your mental health Because it's impossible to fulfill that as just one person.*

So Miquela has a whole team doing all this work. And perhaps this is the only way to actually give fans what they want. Miquela can do what a real person cannot. She can be at all the parties. In different cities at the same time. She can wear every outfit. She can be everything to everyone.

**Katherine:** [01:09:46] *What they're going to do with Miquela next is that they're going to make her a lot more interactive so that her fans can decide her next move. [01:09:57] and the fans can decide, like, she's going to reject the boy, you know? Her fans will have a lot more control over her.*

Which is sort of what a lot of people want from their parasocial relationships .They want to feel close. They want to live vicariously. They want to feel like they know them. And with Miquela. They can.

**Katherine:** [01:13:19] *this person will never change. This person will never age, this person will not reject you. This person like it's not a celebrity that will like. I have this whole dark side that is invisible to the audience that will, like, betray you out of nowhere. You can project anything you'd like onto this person. You can do a lot with that.*

So that's the new factor. Is how much control we'll want over humanoids. Over these next level mannequins. If, we, the consumers, want to be the one to play pygmalion. To choose how we want our clothing presented to us.

**Katherine:** [01:05:51] *But yeah, I do think this is like fashion companies sort of like treading testing how warm the water is.*

Perhaps where customers can customize the models entirely

*like different skin tones, different ethnicity. Quote unquote, ethnicity. And you can, like, supposedly you'll be able to adjust their body to be, like, bigger and smaller so that you can see how the clothes will fit. And they did it for diversity reasons, but is that real diversity when it's not real people?*

And perhaps only if? when? we each have individual control will we each know for ourselves how we want to see our clothes presented. If we want our clothing to be sold to us on a headless body, or an abstracted form. Or a form that looks like you. Or perhaps a vision of perfection who cannot possibly exist. The truth of the matter is. No matter how you slice it. It's just going to be creepy.

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Articles of interest is made by me! With a hand from Charles MacFarlane

Theme music by Sasami, other music by Rhae Royal

To see a video of a schlappi mannequin being lovingly sculpted, go to [articlesofinterest.substack.com](http://articlesofinterest.substack.com)

Go check out Joyce Fung's work- I mean Kar Lagerfeld's work- next time you're at the met! And just know that the mannequins all have stocking bodysuits! Pictures of those also on the substack.

Special thanks to Mika Kiyono.

And I'm pacing myself with these stories- it takes like a week to write each one and then a week to like, lay it up and produce it. So I might take a bit of a pause before the next batch of 4. But I assure you- the show is coming back.