

## Going Dutch: Cheerleaders, gimp-suits and Edith Sitwell at Amsterdam's Lichtening 2013

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Fashion, Fashion Sense

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Designs by Dewi Bekker as showcased at Lichtening 2013. Photography by Imke Lijthart and Henri Verhoef

I'm at Lichtening - which is a Dutch initiative, and a crafty one, showing the very best fashion graduates of seven Dutch academies in a single catwalk show. I was asked to be one of the judges on the panel, and I approached it with some apprehension. After all, despite knowing a number of Dutch designers' work, and some designers personally (Viktor and Rolf being the most famous, and former Fashion East-ers Michael van der Ham and Maarten van der Horst the most recent), I must confess I don't have a grasp on the concept of "Dutch fashion".

Van der Horst was a fellow panel-member, and as a Dutchman vehemently argued it didn't exist - at least, not in the way we recognise Dutch design, that stripped-down, pared-back feeling with lotsa slim and those spindly tapered legs you see everywhere in east London. And plenty other places besides. Mid-century Dutch has become twenty-first century cool. But is there a fashion equivalent?

Despite van der Horst's arguments, the whole concept of Lichtening seems to be to unite Dutch academies and fight for the country's relevance in a crowded fashion market. It's also, obviously, an incentive for students to excel. They get a global audience for their work, and also €10,000 to do whatever they wish with. The prize is awarded at BA level, so the assumption is many will use it to fund an MA, rather than as seed material for a business.

It's a nice concept: rather than the in-fighting you see in other countries, trying to pull the rug out from under each other and jockeying to steal graduates, each college sees themselves as part of a whole, each with something different to say. I may write my column about that next week, but it bears discussion here because it reflects on the designs we saw. One academic said that if she didn't think a student was right for her college, however great, she would direct them to where their talents could be best focussed. That takes a strong will - especially when so many schools are eager for students who flash the cash.

Personally, I feel it was also expressed in the overall strength of the designs I saw. And contrary to Maarten van der Horst's assertion (sorry Maarten!) I did see something that was very, very Dutch. There was an eccentricity and humour, a certain showmanship, and an unusual use of unexpected materials. You see that in the best of Viktor and Rolf's work, in some of van der Ham's bolder collage, and saw it in van der Horst's own graduate show of Hawaiian shirts cross-bred with nylon petticoats.

In a similar vein, Anne van den Boogaard of AMFI smashed together cheerleaders and pageant brides with eye-popping print graphics in an exuberant collection. Wende Hermesen of Utrecht School of the Arts took a pleated wool dress and painted slick a outline of, say, a t-shirt over its surface in gloss-paint. The paint bonded the pleats, some breaking free. It was simple, but arresting, and entirely unexpected. The same could be said of Dewi Bekker from The Hague. She made jackets from glue-together Lego-like plastic components, trousers from bonded cork. It was a touch whimsical but never too cloying. For some reason to my eyes it looked very Mitteleurope, rather than Dutch - there were no Lederhosen, but you were left with the impression you'd seen them. Does that make sense?

The overall winner, ArtEZ graduate Henriette Tilanus, saw Edith Sitwell in her plastic bead-festooned blooms clustered over tops, striped silks and denims bleached into glen-plaids. She was just about the only designer to use denim - and in an innovative and interesting way. It's interesting - but entirely coincidental - that the competition is sponsored by G-Star. I'm excited to see what she can do with them.

Finally, I have to talk about Maartje van Hooij. Because everyone will be talking about her. She called her collection "The New Bow Tie", and sent out a fringed gimp-suit clasped in the arms of a beefcake male-model like a post-modern Pietà. Or a Pietà meets a piñata. There was something carnival-esque in her massive styrofoam constructions encrusted with fabric sliced and ruffled into flowers or metres of silk bullion fringe in primary-brights. How were these bow ties? You get it if you looked at her sketches, where a gargantuan, amorphous blob is ambitiously daubed over a model's neck. A Chanel advert gets the treatment too, the bag blobbing ectoplasmically across the page. They looked like doodles you'd absentmindedly scribble while chatting on the phone, rather than the blueprint for a collection. But they made sense. Her soaring imagination was glorious, translating something so otherworldly into our world, but still keeping the scale, the wonder, the fantasy. It was really great. And really, really Dutch.



Anne van den Boogaard design showcased at Lichtening 2013. Photography by Valentine Vos



Maartje van Hooij. Photography by Mart Tebbens



Maartje van Hooij. Photography by Peter Sluiter



Maartje van Hooij. Photography by Mart Tebbens