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***Cristóbal Balenciaga, Moda y Patrimonio - Conversaciones* [Cristóbal Balenciaga. Fashion and Heritage - Conversations]. An exhibition by Judith Clark at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, Getaria (San Sebastian), March, 24 2018 – January, 24 2019.**

**Reviewed by Victoria de Lorenzo**

### **Bio.**

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### **Introduction.**

*Cristóbal Balenciaga Fashion and Heritage – Conversations* (abbreviated to *Conversations* in this review) took place at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. The Museoa, which opened in 2011 in Cristóbal Balenciaga’s (1895-1972) native town of Getaria, is dedicated to the study and preservation of the couturier’s legacy.<sup>1</sup> Motivated by the European Union’s celebratory slogan for 2018: “European Year of Cultural Heritage: where the past meets the future”, the Museoa proposed a series of three shows. These explore the apparent paradox between fashion’s ephemerality and heritage as an enduring notion, using Cristóbal Balenciaga’s career as a case study. *Conversations* was on show between March 2018 and January 2019, preceding the “instalment” of *Cristóbal Balenciaga Fashion and Heritage – Contexts* (March 2019 –January 2020).<sup>2</sup>

*Conversations* sprang from a highly stimulating curatorial research question: How was the canon of Cristóbal Balenciaga’s work constructed throughout his career, making him both a constant reference for his contemporaries and for our cultural heritage? The Museoa approached exhibition curator Judith Clark to reflect on these issues through a display. The result was expressed formally through five distinct rooms within a serpentine floor plan. Each

room was allocated an open space and a collection of niche-like windows inserted along the meandering route of the exhibition space, showing approximately 115 objects – mostly from the Museoa’s collections, but augmented by external loans.

Before addressing the specific content of *Conversations*, it is necessary to highlight that the Museoa works without a permanent display. *Conversations* could not refer visitors specifically to any hypothetical comprehensive permanent show of the couturier’s work, but at the same time had to embrace this notion. This is a very important feature to be taken into account in order to understand the complexities that the curatorial discourse encountered: notably in terms of the range of visitors to the museum. The Museoa welcomes approximately 45,000 visitors per year. During spring and summer these tend to be international tourists, whilst during the winter it is mostly national visitors and school trips. Thus, while the average visitor may have some knowledge of the work of Cristóbal Balenciaga, the museum assumes they are engaging with a general public.<sup>3</sup>In brief, *Conversations* had to meet two major requirements: firstly, to address the particular curatorial statement – to investigate the patrimonial value of fashion and specifically that of Balenciaga, and secondly to offer a broad overview of Balenciaga’s work to the general public.

In an attempt to embrace the two requirements of the show, the exhibition had a double narrative: it positioned an examination of Balenciaga’s professional evolution within historiographical parentheses. The exhibition developed sequentially in four general thematic stages: his early career years and influences (1917-1937), formal exploration (1937-1951), evolution and revolution (1951-1959) and refinement and abstraction (1960-1968). “Comments” were generated at each stage through particular arrangements of the display cases. A number of these included elements that referred to past exhibitions of Balenciaga’s work, or incorporated textile conservation *attrezzo* (props used behind the scenes of the museum).

### **Relational Conversations**

The exhibition opened with a panel with a signed statement by Judith Clark on the double narrative approach.<sup>4</sup> Besides the general explanation, the panel incorporated the names of those curators or scholars to whom the exhibition would refer: Diana Vreeland, Marie-André

Jouvé, Lesley E. Miller, Pamela Golbin, Hamish Bowles, Miren Arzalluz, Kaat Debo and Olivier Saillard. This list referenced experts on Cristóbal Balenciaga. However, although most of the visitors who visit the Museoa have heard of Cristóbal Balenciaga, can it be presumed that they are also aware of the names of those who have published on him or exhibited his work?

It seems paradoxical that scholars' and curators' names were highlighted to visitors on the first panel, but space was devoted, at least indirectly, to showcasing Balenciaga's professional exchanges. The window that followed the opening panel displayed a 1928 dress by Balenciaga close to an open album with sketches by Lanvin, and a design by Balenciaga that echoed the Lanvin (**Figure 1**). It could be deduced (by a fashion historian, but probably not the public) that the idea behind the presentation of the list of scholars in correlation with this Balenciaga-Lanvin window was that all researchers *converse* and build discourses with each other, either through practice, like Balenciaga, or through theory/exhibition making. However, this assumption produced a presentation which was obscure for non-experts, although it was a pleasurable take on the subject for professionals.

The windows that followed provided visitors with a less ambiguous overview of Cristóbal Balenciaga's first steps as a couturier. Early creations, such as a 1912 guipure dress (CBM 1998.01ac) <sup>5</sup> exemplified the seventeen-year-old Balenciaga's technical dexterity in his cousin's honeymoon dress. Early business records helped to convey how Balenciaga's impact on Parisian haute couture was not the fortuitous outburst of a virtuoso, but the consolidation of an experienced dressmaker and businessperson (Arzalluz 2011). This room functioned as an introduction to the life and work of Balenciaga.

Room 2 set Balenciaga's first decades in a dialogue, with nightgowns, cocktail and wedding dresses and day outfits ranging from 1939 to 1953. These were presented alongside other objects that worked as referential footnotes – conversations, either between Balenciaga and the heritage that had inspired him (**Figure 2**) or between Balenciaga's heritage and the historiographical and museological devices that keep it alive: i.e., some windows reenacted

past shows on Balenciaga, others displayed -behind glass- past exhibition catalogues. On two platforms, four suits with radically different silhouettes evidenced Balenciaga's formal investigations (**Figure 3**). The set design helped the viewer to move around the dresses and appreciate them fully from every angle. This multiple perspective was reinforced by a juxtaposed digital learning resource in which the internal architecture of the least visible jackets was shown through a number of videos. This piece was difficult to see because it had been covered in Melinex drapery. A label, in English only, quoted a conversation between Judith Clark and Caroline Evans in which they explained that the drapery was a reference to Olivier Saillard's 2017 installation in Florence, *The Ephemeral Museum of Fashion*, in which he had reflected on "...the ironies of conservation in the face of the fragility of textile...".<sup>6</sup>

Preserving the ephemeral was the equivalent, according to Clark, of the artistic use of casting.<sup>7</sup> Was this an explanation, or an excuse to justify the presence of the freestanding cast hands by Naomi Filmer on the same platform? The hands worked as metonyms for the social conventions associated with the period and the social class that Balenciaga dressed. It is important to bear in mind that Balenciaga's creations were made to fulfil the aesthetic aspirations of female individuals whose apparel had to naturally match their "bespoke behavior". Balenciaga's technique echoed a thoughtful consciousness of embodiment, and it served this purpose (Guinness 1973, 15; Miller 2007, 60-103; Emiliias 2017, 68-70, 167-175). However, it would be simplistic to read Clark's references to Saillard's or Filmer's work as purely informative. Saillard's *installation* was a reference to Clark's own trajectory as exhibition maker/fashion installer— more specifically to the 1999 exhibition of Filmer's jewellery at the Judith Clark Costume Gallery (Palmer, 2003) and to the 2004-2005 fashion installation, made in collaboration with Filmer and Evans, *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*. Clark was stressing her indisputable contribution to the new curatorial approaches (Melchior 2014, 10). With a critical lens, acknowledging that exhibitions are sites of negotiation of curatorial authority (Longair 2015), it is difficult not to see these quotes as legitimising connotative devices.

Notwithstanding, the obvious questions that arise are: what would have the ordinary visitor have understood? To whom was this (meta) exhibition room addressed? The feeling was that there were two levels of information. This in itself it is not a problem if the exhibition facilitates learning resources to overcome this potential gap. But here, the catalogues on display could not be consulted, and the names of the scholars mentioned were unexplained. The gap remained unsurmountable.

Fortunately, this was not the case for Room 3. Although entitled “Evolution and Revolution (1951-1959)”, it addressed the solemn refinement of the House and its aura. Predominantly grey and beige dresses inside rectangular metal structures, similar to the display cases used for *Balenciaga L’ouvre au noir* (Morin 2019) set the mood. The business of day-to-day life was referred to through documentation. The quotidian nature of bills and receipts contrasted with a lavish installation which reproduced Janine Janet’s 1952 window design for Balenciaga’s main shop in Paris. In other words, the reality of a business versus its marketing tools. Black-and-white photographs showing Balenciaga’s mannequins also enabled a comparison between the way Balenciaga’s garments were offered to his potential clients and the way they were communicated in magazines or are now revisited by curators in exhibitions. Business records, sketches and the inclusion of the *vendeuses’* uniforms recreated the commercial and shopping experience of the House (**Figure 4**).

Hats and accessories, also exhibited in Room 3, enabled a better contextualisation of the pieces on display. Mannequins lacked heads or accessories except for some which were equipped with gloved arms. Adorned and gestural mannequins could have conveyed the nuances of haute couture’s immaterial culture (its embodiment, or consumer experience). However, if we pay attention to the Museoa’s yearly exhibition plan, and to the fact that it lacks a permanent collection, this decision makes perfect sense. The museum’s previous show, focusing on an individual client, Rachel L. Mellon (Givenchy et.al. 2017), had presented seated, expressive mannequins with heads. *Conversations* was an abstract account of fashion and heritage consisting of headless mannequins, complemented nonetheless by the separate display of headwear.

Rooms 4 and 5 were, perhaps, the most conventional ones. By this, I mean that they touched on two of the most outstanding issues relating to Balenciaga's work: the shape of his silhouettes and how this was achieved. Balenciaga's pattern development for sack, tunic or baby doll dresses was communicated through the grouping of garments with similar volumes against geometric figures in the background. The first window (A) in Room 5 also included six toiles. I wish these could have been displayed closer to the eye so that each line or correction was more visible. Conversely, recreations on transparent plastic evoked the "air" that invaded the space of the body through Balenciaga's purifying process. The investigation into Balenciaga's sculptural forms facilitated a new reference (**Figure 5**) to the recent exhibition *Balenciaga l'ouvre au noir* which took place at the Musée Bourdelle sculpture museum in Paris (Morin, 2019).

It was a pity that there was no precise mention of Balenciaga's work on, and obsession with, the perfect sleeve (Guinness 1973, 17; Tejedor, min.37.17; Emilias 2017, 230) because the variety of sleeve patterns exhibited throughout was breathtaking. On the other hand, Balenciaga's silhouette evolution was underlined by fashion magazine covers in Room 4, explaining his post-1956 communication policy: possibly in an internal reference to a smaller exhibition on fashion photography that was also taking place at the Museoa at the same time as *Conversations*.<sup>8</sup>

### **Learning Resources, labels and behind-the-scenes props.**

Given the complexity of the conversations within *Conversations* (as it were), abundant supporting resources would have been expected. By this, I refer mainly to a much-needed space where published catalogues or related information on the exhibitions referred to was available to the public.

Digital tablets with videos (**Figure 6**) showing the inner constructions of certain garments were available in most rooms. These engaging resources facilitated a better understanding of

all the complexities involved in the making process, and enhanced the exhibited toiles. Recent Balenciaga exhibitions have tended to exhibit the toiles beside the final product, projecting the idea that first came the pattern and then the dress. Perhaps textiles could be juxtaposed with toiles in order to stress how, for Balenciaga, textiles did not accommodate a pre-designed shape. Forms were released from the material.

In terms of textiles, I would like to emphasise one of the most successful learning resources. In Room 2, beside the open platforms, there was a chart on a folding screen which recalled the charts made seasonally at the House of Balenciaga that were employed to match each fabric with its corresponding mannequin and the workshop in charge (Miller 2017, 82-83). Beside this, two hanging files described each fabric with all the texts translated into Basque, Spanish, French and English. Although the samples at *Conversations* were contemporary recreations, and of lower quality than those employed by Balenciaga, they still offered a unique source of haptic information to those unfamiliar with textile materiality and its lexicon.<sup>9</sup>

Language generosity is another key feature of the exhibition. For those living in Spanish regions with two official languages this would be normal. Exhibition panels must be in at least the two official languages, and also in English. Given San Sebastian's proximity to France, and the number of French visitors there, the Museoa was prompted to include translations in this language, and also maintain English. The linguistic gesture of having panels in four languages is unusual in larger and better-resourced museums in the English-speaking world. It is to be commended and demonstrates not only the range of visitors but the museum's interest in engaging a wide public.

However, as is too often the case, the labels were not as readable as the panels due to the placement, font size, and the low lighting. Object labels included the necessary information: dates, place and authorship (if known, other than Balenciaga), type of object (dress, fashion magazine, catalogue...), the occasion for which the object was made (evening, wedding...), collection and object number. Only for those objects which had belonged to Balenciaga's



private collection was provenance also given. Labels could not indicate details of the donor or wearer, because the idea of a private legacy could have distorted the broader focus of *Conversations*. In brief, although the content of the labels was adequate, close attention was necessary and either a larger font or an higher location would have been preferable. The particulars of each design were not highlighted or deemed significant.

In recent exhibitions, using museum storage and conservation resources as props has become very popular (Morin 2019, 3; Harden 2014, 131-134). In *Conversations*, transportation crates or museum garment covers alluded to the tools associated with textile heritage preservation. This behind-the-scenes effect revealed to the general public some of the “magic” of the museum, which tends to appear as a hidden centre of knowledge-making to a large majority (Geoghegan 2010, 1469). However, the question is, once more, whether visitors realised that, for example, what was exhibited in Room 5, Window F, was a transportation crate, and how it is used (**Figure 7**).

A fully colored illustrated 52-page publication was also available for purchase at a very reasonable price (Itxaso et.al. 2018). Unfortunately, it was only by acquiring this book that a useful detailed explanatory leaflet (**Figure 8**) could be acquired. If this documentation where Clark’s research process is visually explained had been handed to visitors at the entrance to the exhibition, it would have at least provided some intellectual context for those less familiar with the historiography of Balenciaga’s work and museum practice.

In conclusion, at a time when the role of fashion exhibitions and fashion heritage has reached broader public debate (*Forbes*, March 4, 2019), the Museoa cunningly proposed *Conversations* as an explicit dialogue between fashion and heritage. Whilst the curatorial strategy was extremely compelling, it resulted in two asymmetrical layers of interpretation. This was very pleasurable for experts but unclear, obscure and perhaps confusing to the general visitor. Having said this, it has to be taken into account that *Conversations* also had to fulfil the expectations of a “permanent display” of Balenciaga’s work, which could have

become a curatorial interference. Overall, *Cristobal Balenciaga. Fashion and Heritage* is a well-judged project with two more promising prospective shows.

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<sup>1</sup> Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa occupies a modern building annexed to a majestic villa, formally the residence of the Marquises of Casa Torres, patrons of Balenciaga during the early years of his career. For an analysis in English of the role of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa in comparison to other exhibitions on the "boy from Guetaria", see: Charlotte Nicklas. 2013. "Tradition and Innovation: Recent Balenciaga Exhibitions." *Fashion Theory* 17(4), 431-444

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note how this later exhibition is described on the website exactly as that, "instalment": "Contexts, in this new instalment, prompts us to seek out the common places between history and fashion, the spaces behind the curtain, where everything's done, the hows before the whys, and the formal parallelisms between the then of haute couture and the now of the museum work." [online: <http://www.cristobalbalenciagamuseoa.com/en/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/cristobal-balenciaga-fashion-and-heritage-contexts.html>] The title and exact dates for the third exhibition are yet to be confirmed.

<sup>3</sup> In 2016 the museum welcomed 45,000 visitors, 46% of which were non-Spanish (23% from France, 4% USA, 2.7% U.K. and 2.5% German); 22% Basque and the remaining 32% from other Spanish regions. Online [http://www.cristobalbalenciagamuseoa.com/default/documentos/188\_es-descarga\_nota\_de\_prensa.pdf]

<sup>4</sup> "...The exhibition *Cristobal Balenciaga: Fashion and Heritage* collects together moments in the history of the houses Balenciaga established in Spain and in Paris, and each chapter illuminates different modes of display...The exhibition format allows us to build up associations and conversations across collections...My own conversations and installations pay homage to the new routes through the archive in the way that a new visitor might, finding one's own associations with the material. The design therefore quotes remembered past exhibitions that have paid attention to Balenciaga, bringing another kind of reference to the project...that are shown along the route as props..." Judith Clark, exhibition panel for *Cristóbal Balenciaga. Fashion and Heritage - Conversations*. An exhibition by Judith Clark at Balenciaga Museoa, Getaria (San Sebastian), March, 24 2018 – January, 24 2019.

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<sup>5</sup> To search in the Cristobal Balenciaga Museoa collections, check the Basque-museums search engine: <https://apps.euskadi.eus/emtime/coleccion-online/museo-cristobal-balenciaga/museo-93>

<sup>6</sup> *The Ephemeral Museum of Fashion*, An exhibition curated by Olivier Saillard at arranged in the Pitti Palace, Florence, June 6 – October 22, 2017 [<https://www.uffizi.it/en/events/the-ephemeral-museum-of-fashion>]

<sup>7</sup> “J.C.: The draped Melinex over the garment is a homage to the Il Museo Effimero della Moda installed by Olivier Saillard at Palazzo Pitti, 2017 which itself performed the ironies of conversation the face of the fragility of textile, synonymous with our own lives. The poignant attempt to fix a moment in order to be able to look at it again, is at the heart of the museum project and jeweller Naomi Filmer’s work. / C.E. The Jesmonite gesture... you have asked for the rhetorical question to which Naomi Filmer’s hands are the answer. 1. Why is the gesture best captured by casting? 2. If the cast is a ghost, a trace or a memory of a past action, how are these materialised in the cast? 3. What remains? What can be activated? The cast is indexical. In a single hand gesture, the cast captures the performativity of fashion: the cocktail hour in 1952, the park promenade in 1914, the Twiggy slouch in 1967. It makes the immaterial material, turns the time into space, makes an entity of a gesture. Yet the cast gesture is not irrevocably fossilized: the object remains immanent with possibility. The gesture suggests” Caroline Evans and Judith Clark in conversation, 2018, exhibition panel for *Conversations*.

<sup>8</sup> *Distinción. A Century of Fashion Photography*. Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, October 9, 2018- January 27, 2019. Produced by the Museu del Disseny de Barcelona (Barcelona Museum of Design).

<sup>9</sup> For further information on Balenciaga’s textile research and Balenciaga’s textile suppliers, see: Thomas Isler et. al.2010. *Soie Pirate. The History of Abraham Ltd.* edited by the Swiss National Museum. Zürich, Scheidegger & Spiess; Catherine Join-Diéterle (ed). 2015. *Balenciaga: Master of Lace*. Paris, Somogy éditions d'art; Lesley E Miller. 2017. “From Cloth to Collections.” and “Appendix: Balenciaga’s Suppliers.” In *Balenciaga. Shaping Fashion*, London, V&A Publishing, pp.117-155; pp.186-189.