

*Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body: An*  
Analysis of Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer  
1997 Collection

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## Abstract

In September of 1996, Comme des Garçons presented their “worst” collection to date. The clothes were mocked by the press and became an unflattering joke among 1990’s media outlets, earning it’s nickname of the “Lumps and Bumps” show. 30 years later, the show is widely accepted as a masterpiece, the bizarre shapes of the collection are spoken about with deep respect by fashion designers, it's honored in exhibitions around the world and it is extremely sought after by collectors. Comme des Garçons’ Spring/Summer 1997 collection is *fashion’s most influential collection of all time*.

## Chapter 1

It wouldn’t be possible to talk about this collection without mentioning a 1986 collection by a British designer named Georgina Godley titled “Lump and Bump”, a collection inspired by a study of African fertility dolls. Georgina Godley’s way of exaggerating women’s curves didn’t really fit with the decade’s main fashion trends—either tight, sporty clothes that showed off the body or loose, shapeless avant-garde dresses. Godley began her fashion career in the early 1980’s in an era where most of the important designers were making unisex, androgynous clothing. Gender barriers were being broken down, and old-fashioned no longer seemed relevant (Almond). She wanted the garments to be inhabited by the female form as an expression of fecundity and power. To construct the collection, Godley started with Barbie dolls, which she saw as a "distortion of the female form", and modeled clay on them until they felt right (The MET, 2020) There are plenty of notable similarities between Godley and Kawakubo's show and many critics label the similarities as “theft” but the simplest way to explain the difference

between the collections is that Georgina Godley's collection very closely resembles actual human anatomy, whereas Kawakubo's collection doesn't resemble a human form at all.

## Chapter 2

The idea that God made humans in his own image becomes hard to believe when one compares their reflection to the almost divine figures seen on fashion runways. It suggests either a cruel creator or one lacking beauty. This highlights the painful disconnect between how we think we should appear and how we actually do. Lamont (2020) identifies this as a deep sense of loss tied to the act of getting dressed. It's the space between what we desire and what is realistically accessible—between the luxury designer piece and the affordable imitation, our actual body and our idealized self-image, how clothes look in the store and how they appear on a regular person, and finally, the difference between how they fit that person and how they fit the model.

Since this show took place in 1996, this collection takes place in a “sexy” era of fashion, and if you look at the first look of the collection, Rei tricks the audience into thinking she is participating in the sexual revolution of fashion, then the model turns, and we see the lumps. The most common interpretation of this show is extremely simplistic and often sounds something like “Rei Kawakubo is rejecting norms about the body,” and while this show is a rejection of norms, there is so much more that deserves a closer examination.

The ultimate goal of Rei Kawakubo is to create something new, she goes past the notion of challenging what clothes are. The show has lots of variations of gingham, which is associated with stay-at-home moms, and it's worth noting that every model has red makeup around the eye that looks like the type of bruising that comes after a facelift. At no point in the show do the lumps resemble a human body; the lumps are always in the wrong place. For example, the

images below of Kawakubo's looks from the collection is obviously not supposed to be the models butt or breast, the padding is too high for anyone to think it is supposed to represent the actual body parts of the model. There's also an enormous amount of asymmetry in almost every look, the right shoulder is higher than the left shoulder, there's some sort of bulge in most looks. All forms of balance that humans strive for are being interrupted by these lumps of padding.

The amount of change that our body standards have changed in just a few years is unbelievable. The 1980s were a huge shift for body standards. Women were joining the workplace, power shoulders were having their moment, and along with all of these changes came body standard changes. Caroline Evans argues that "Rei began to sketch new possibilities of subjecthood, a subjecthood which was not concerned with containing the body but with extending it, via new networks and communications".



Rei Kawakubo's S/S '97 Collection



Georgina Godley's 1986 "Lump & Bump Collection"



## Chapter 3

The collection also reflects broader social tensions, particularly around disability and how bodily difference is represented or aestheticized. In postwar Japanese society, people with disabilities often navigated social invisibility, pressure to pass as able-bodied, and institutional efforts to normalize physical appearance. Within this context, presenting visibly “imperfect” forms on a fashion runway—especially on tall, thin, white models, raises complex questions. While the garments may disrupt mainstream beauty ideals, they also turn markers of disability into aesthetic statements, divorced from the lived experience of those who inhabit such bodies permanently.

This dynamic reflects a paradox. On one hand, the collection resists Western beauty norms by exaggerating the very features typically concealed or corrected. On the other hand, it risks reinforcing a tradition of using “difference” for shock or novelty within elite cultural spaces. The grotesque becomes fashionable, but only when detached from the social and political realities of those whose bodies do not conform to conventional standards. As such, the collection can be read as both a critique of aesthetic norms and a mirror to the uneven distribution of power over who is allowed to embody difference and who is simply forced to.

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