

# the Stranger

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ALL THE TRAPPINGS

An Attractive Shell of an Exhibition at SAM

By Jen Graves

Crowds kept gathering in a small gallery on the third floor of Seattle Art Museum last Saturday. The lights were down and cameras were flashing. Everyone involved in the photo shoot was wearing all white. At the center of attention were three beanpoleish female models encased in full-body unitards that stretched all the way down over double-stacked platforms with stiletto heels. On top of these unbroken white surfaces rested striking pieces of clothing made of brightly colored paper—vests like armor, skirts with ribbons of overlapping material, all vivid and modernist to catch the eye—made by New York fashion designer Mary Ping using leftover marketing posters for previous SAM exhibitions.

In some ways, this performance by Ping and Mika Tajima, called *Deep Focus*, was only a shell of an exhibition. It had all the trappings, but none of the conventional meat. Instead of priceless artworks, there were models wearing cut up advertisements for priceless artworks by Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder. Instead of a lone genius artist at the helm, every white-costumed person performed a role: fashion designer, art director, photographer, lighting assistant, makeup artist, model.

Though it was a photo shoot, the photographs were not finished products but potentially reusable byproducts. Every time the photographer snapped the flash, his carefully constructed shot would appear on a laptop screen and a flat-screen TV. But that image would disappear as soon as the next came up. Tajima said the photographs might be used to create new posters; she wasn't sure of their fate yet. Most of the paper clothing would probably be worn out and headed for the recycling bin by the end of the five-hour shoot.

*Deep Focus* was itself reusing an installation Tajima had already created: *After the Martini Shot*, which took up residence in the museum last July and lasts through June 17. *After the Martini Shot* is, like *Deep*

Focus, a series of attractive, interchangeable shells.

Tajima's own paintings, videos, and sculptures—new and past—mix with iconic works of art borrowed from SAM's permanent collection, movable office-cubicle furniture, an art storage cage, and lighting and a backdrop from a production set. Mirrors incorporated throughout throw images around the room. (A mirrored sandwich board set across from a SAM-owned Warhol screen print of flowers in the art-storage cage makes it look like the Warhol is printed on the sandwich board—finally turned into a cheap ad. Warhol would be pleased.)

By disregarding the usual distinctions in status between design, art, documentation, and advertising, Tajima reveals instead a sort of contemporary gluttony of images and objects in which valuation is up for grabs. Is it any wonder that part of the inspiration for *After the Martini Shot* was the collapse of Washington Mutual, which left offices full of furniture but bereft of activity or value just a few floors up? On Saturday, during the flashing photography of *Deep Focus*, the crowd might have wondered whether an event was being documented or whether an event was occurring for the sake of creating documents (photographs). But neither was true. An event and its documents, an artwork and its advertisements, were all collapsing in on each other in a fine-looking, exhausted heap.