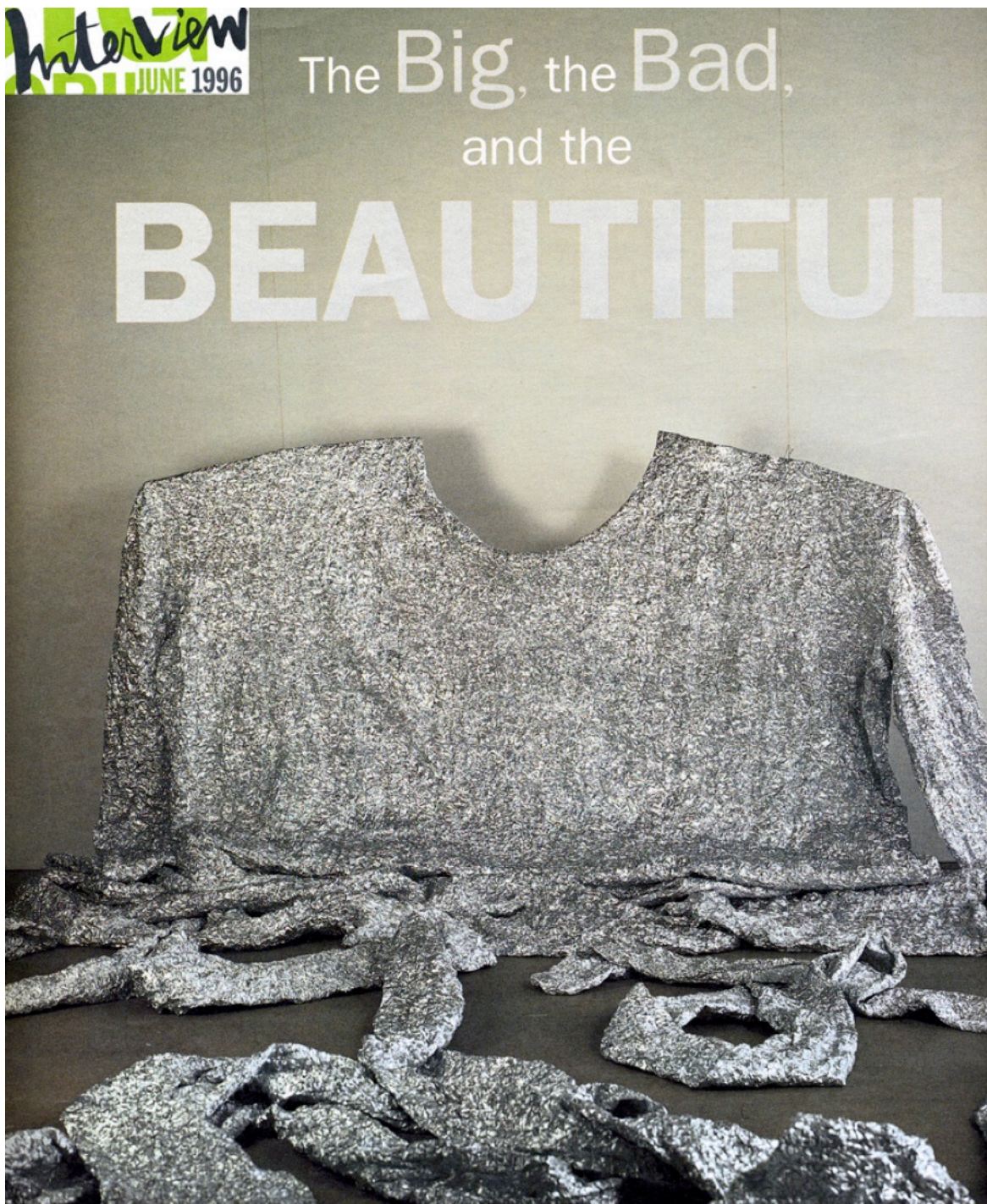
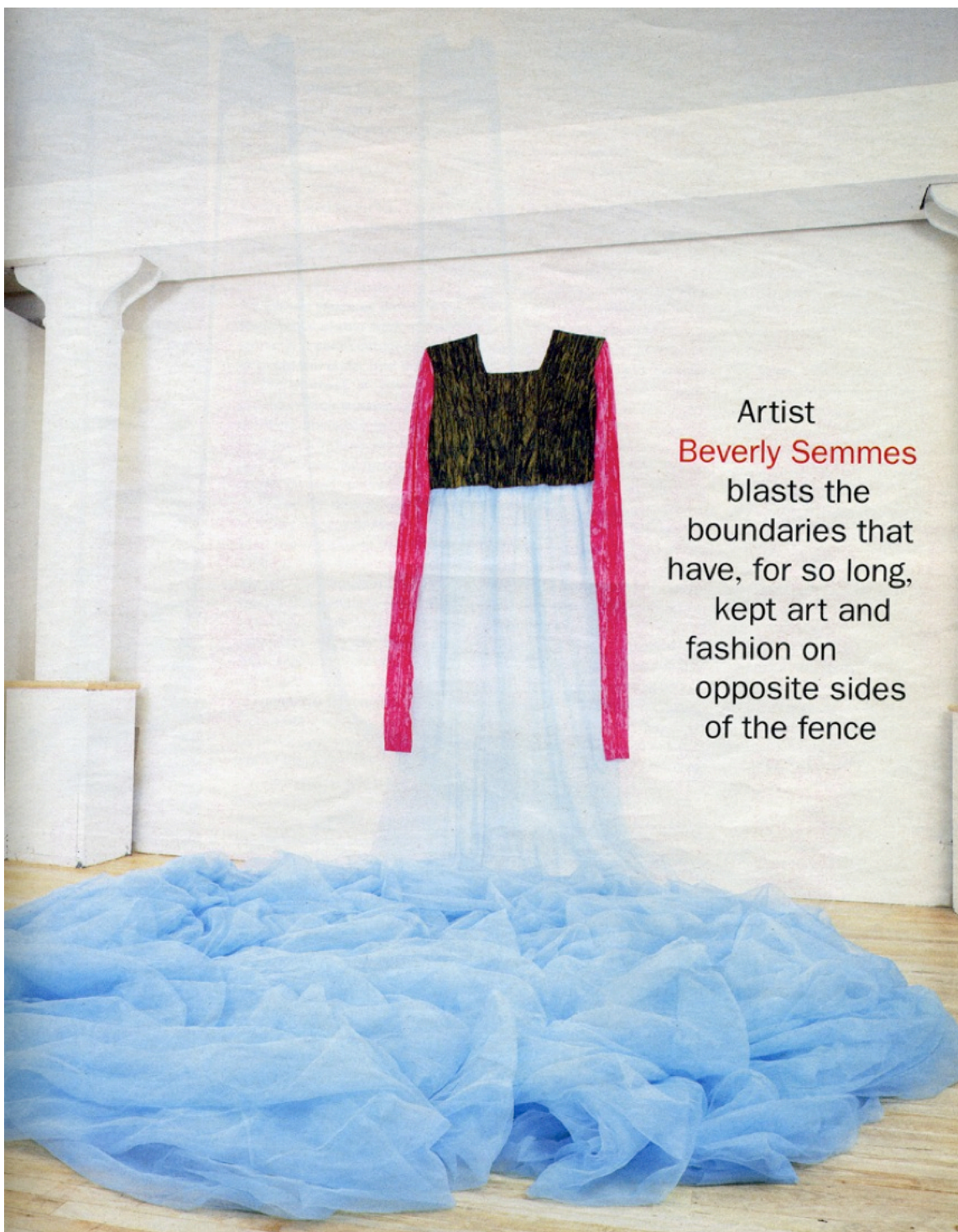


McFarland, Terence, "The Big, The Bad and The Beautiful", INTERVIEW MAGAZINE, June 1996. p. 92-95.





Artist
Beverly Semmes
blasts the
boundaries that
have, for so long,
kept art and
fashion on
opposite sides
of the fence



522 West 24th Street New York NY 10011 / tel 212 647 9111 / fax 212 647 9333
info@inglettgallery.com / www.inglettgallery.com

SUSAN INGLETT



PHOTOS: THE RUBELL FAMILY COLLECTION/MIAMI; COURTESY OF THE MICHAEL KLEIN GALLERY/NYC

TERENCE MCFARLAND: Beverly, your sculptural works use fabrics and clothing shapes in such a large scale. What's your relationship with fashion, both personally and in your art?

BEVERLY SEMMES: I'm very ambivalent about fashion. It's a constant source of anxiety for me. I always *mean* to dress up more, to care more about it, but half the time I can't seem to get myself to a store to buy a new pair of shoes.

TM: Do you welcome people's interpretation of your work as fashion or as a comment on fashion, or would you prefer that it's seen in the context of your background, which is sculpture?

BS: Well, obviously there's some relation to fashion just because they're clothes, and there's the fabric. But my work has less to do with what's on the runway this month and more to do with what Barbara Bush was wearing to the last Republican Party fundraiser. I'm really into that Barbara Bush style—kind of Peter Pan colors and big, boxy bodices, full skirts. To me, it's more about using the symbol of a dress than "fashion." The work I did at school was more abstract sculpture. I was doing large-scale pieces, but I had this feeling that the work was separate from me. One of the things that inspired me was this photograph I saw of the artist Louise Bourgeois, where she's standing on the stoop of a building and she's wearing this big coat with bulbous, breastlike latex forms all over it. There was no line drawn between her work and her body and herself. It really fascinated me and kind of gave me permission to go ahead with that idea.

TM: When did you start producing your "clothing-influenced" work?

BS: The first one was a pink feather coat I finished in 1988. I was obsessed with this formal, very manicured garden in upstate New York, and I made a garment to fit the space—to look like just another bush or shrub. I used it as a prop in this Super-8 film in which a friend and I slowly meander through the

hedges in this garden. After that, I kept trying to hang it at various shows, but it just didn't fit outside the context of the garden.

TM: At what point did the pieces begin to work on their own?

BS: At a big group show—all women—at BlumHelman Warehouse in 1991. I was given a corner to make an installation piece and started fooling around, setting up coats and some purple velvet bathrobes and hats and shoes—sort of as a dressing room people could enter—although I wouldn't have gone so far as to invite them to put the clothes on! And then, because the space had these incredibly high ceilings, I decided to hang the bathrobes so they trailed down the wall instead of on the floor. And they looked so much better. It was simple and straightforward enough for the viewers to project themselves into the piece and invent their own narratives. I liked leaving it open-ended.

TM: Other than in that early film, has anyone actually worn your pieces?

BS: Well, last year I designed the costumes and sets for a French dance company. It was a good experience, but also really frustrating because I had these definitive ideas about how I wanted the dancers to move in the dresses, and of course that wasn't my territory.

TM: Describe your large-scale, motorized piece *Big Silver*. How does it work?

BS: It begins with a big puddle of fabric on the floor—it's a kind of silver lamé but looks like tinfoil. And it's attached to a pulley with these very thin wires so it rises up, sort of hugging the wall like a curtain, and then it slowly becomes apparent that it's in the form of a dress rather than just—

TM: —a blob of fabric?

BS: [laughs] Right. It goes from a blob to a being. So this huge expanse of silver rises up to approximately twenty feet. But very slowly, like an iron lung. So slowly that you can stare at it and not really know it's moving. Yet the more

you look, the more it becomes apparent that it is, in fact, moving.

TM: Do you see your works as embodying different characters?

BS: I do think of my pieces as performers in a theater, but the early works had more distinct personalities for me. Recently they've become increasingly abstract.

TM: Tell me about *Blue Gowns*, which makes use of three identical pieces. Why multiples?

BS: I'm not really sure. Repetition is very formal, very reinforcing, very architectural. Those blue gowns look like columns to me.

TM: When I look at it, I think of three very strong female figures.

BS: *Blue Gowns* has been interpreted as representing The Mother—like you want to be held by its big maternal energy, but at the same time you feel repulsed, like you'll be smothered. It's sort of the idea of too-muchness. There's also this feeling that you don't want to let down your defenses in front of this thing.

TM: Have you ever thought about designing everyday clothes?

BS: I wouldn't even know where to begin. And I'd be such a fascist of a fashion designer! [laughs] I'd be like, "Stand here against this white wall and cover up your head. And if you *do* have to move, please move very slowly and mechanically." I've always felt that fashion is some kind of game, and I don't quite understand the rules. In a way, my work is my alter ego, which can be glamorous, or grand, or seductive, or larger-than-life. I have this clear sense of how I want these works to be seen, placed perfectly on the wall just the way I want them. But as for me and what I choose to wear day-to-day, I'd rather be invisible. ■

Editor's note: Beverly Semmes's work will be on exhibit at the following galleries: The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (through June 23); the Norton Gallery, West Palm Beach, Fla. (through July 7); the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va. (June 25 through September 9); and the Michael Klein Gallery, NYC, in October.

Artwork on this and the preceding pages: Page 92, *Big Silver* (1996), materials include electric-motor parts and ceramics; page 93, *Pink Arms* (1995), materials include velvet and organza; page 94, *Blue Gowns* (1993), materials include velvet and organza.

Interview by Terence McFarland

INTERVIEW June 1996 95