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### DESIGN

Local fashion icons Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson took Australiana to the world with their spirited explosions of colour, shape and texture. A new exhibition of their work captures the quirk and romance of their heyday.

By Tony Magnusson

## Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step Into Paradise



An installation view from Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step Into Paradise. CREDIT: ZAN WIMBERLEY

The fairy godmothers of Australian fashion are back. Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson: Step Into Paradise at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum is a joyful romp through almost half a century of fashion and textile design by two artists who realised early on that the hues, shapes and textures of our flora, fauna and landscapes are worth celebrating. In so doing, they demonstrated that this "wide brown land" is anything but.

Their style was never one for wallflowers. Embracing Australiana in all its wattle-and-waratah glory, as well as '50s glamour redux and the art of European Modernists such as Henri Matisse and Sonia Delaunay, Kee and Jackson developed a distinctive fashion vernacular that mixed high and low, romance and kitsch, with gleeful abandon. Their designs encompassed bold prints, graphic knits, dramatic silhouettes and plenty of appliqué, and this large and lavish survey has it all in spades.

Step Into Paradise begins in a dark, cabinet-of-curiosities-type space containing objects, photos, sound and video – including interviews – relating to their early years. They met in June 1973 as Kee, a Sydneysider raised in Bondi, was preparing to open "frock salon" Flamingo Park in the CBD's Strand Arcade. Although Kee had studied fashion design at East Sydney Technical College, it was living in London between 1965 and 1972 that turned out to be her real education. She landed a job at ultra-hip boutique Biba, before moving to Vern Lambert's famed vintage clothing stall at Chelsea Antique Market, selling outfits to countercultural rock stars, actors and models.

Three years younger than Kee, Jackson, a Melburnian who grew up in Beaumaris, had also recently returned from overseas, travelling through Asia and Europe with her then partner, Fran Moore, and

friend Peter Tully, an artist and jewellery designer. With dressmaking qualifications under her belt, Jackson was already designing clothes, and Kee promptly placed an order. Jackson had also studied photography under Paul Cox at Prahran Technical College – photographer and filmmaker Carol Jerrems, a friend, was in the year above her – and her camera would prove to be a constant companion throughout her career. In fact, many of the images in the show and accompanying catalogue were taken by Jackson.

Flamingo Park's combination of retro, romance, quirk and kitsch was a stomping success, and a highlight of this exhibition is a re-creation of the Strand Arcade store, right down to the peacock-blue walls, original sandblasted mirrors decorated with native-flower designs, frosted light fittings, potted palms and plastic pink flamingos. An adjoining room, in fire-engine red and Schiaparelli pink, mirrors the store's expansion, which occurred when Kee signed a lease on the shop next door to create more room for Jackson's designs. This space includes the store's namesake, Flamingo Park, 1971, a Hockney-esque, lawn-and-hedge landscape with pink flamingos by Kee's husband at the time, Australian artist Michael Ramsden.

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Early wardrobe hits abound, not least Jackson's Opera House outfit in blue-and-white linen, with the iconic sails of the recently opened building appliquéd above the hem of the skirt and across the bodice, and Kee's maniacally grinning Luna Park minidress, hand-knitted in wool. Also on display are Jackson's fashion homages to Matisse, Delaunay, Fernand Léger and Jean Cocteau, hand-painted by artist collaborators David McDiarmid and Charlotte Barnes, some accessorised with jewellery by Peter Tully. Examples of Kee's wildlife knits include cardigans emblazoned with koalas, kookaburras and, of course, pink flamingos.

Beginning in 1974, Kee and Jackson staged yearly fashion extravaganzas, Flamingo Follies, to showcase their wares to the media and public. Produced by Fran Moore, these runway shows were held at venues including Bondi Pavilion, Sydney Town Hall and the Strand Arcade itself. Images and footage from these spirited and, by all accounts, lengthy affairs help to bring the "scene" that swirled around the designers to glorious life.

Kee and Jackson called time on their creative partnership in 1981. Jackson, nomadic by nature, was increasingly interested in travelling inland and establishing contact with Indigenous communities. Significantly, she was schooled in the batik technique by women artists from the Utopia community, north-east of Alice Springs. In 1982 she established her Bush Couture label in Sydney, an expression of her love for the colours, textures and materials of the Red Centre, interest in the stories and techniques of Indigenous art, and passion for Asian and African traditions. Kee, meanwhile, moved to another location in the Strand Arcade and began to experiment with more complex knitting and screen-printing processes, eventually partnering with textile printer Rainbow Fabrics in Milan.

After the fun of Flamingo Park, the exhibition turns it up to 11 with a high-concept sequence of spaces, each set around a theme common to both artists' design vocabularies, from "Rainforest and Reef" to "Knit and Print", "Cultural Connections" to "Opals". Against impressive backdrops of ripple-fold curtains printed with their designs, the outfits, garments and textiles dreamed into being by these creative goddesses are arrayed in ever more elaborate tableaux, complete with nature-inspired props such as imitation rocks "stained" with guano, and leaves, twigs and branches painted in shades of white, ochre and grey.

The clothes aren't just fitted on mannequins; many are strung high with invisible wire, as though floating or about to fly away. Nearly every look includes a hat, scarf, headdress or combination thereof. The lighting is vivid and dramatic, augmenting colours to the point that any Instagram filter will be superfluous. A dreamy soundtrack swirls throughout, including covers of The Church's "Under the Milky Way" and the Warumpi Band's "My Island Home".

This is a mesmerising show, whose conception and execution more than match the exuberance of its subjects and their handiwork. Like an exploding piñata, there is colour wherever you look. Curator Glynis Jones and her in-house team, along with creative director Tony Assness, music compilers and composers Jonny Seymour and Nick Wales, and lighting designer Damien Cooper, have delivered a genuinely enveloping experience. And a generous one at that, with more than 150 outfits, textiles, photographs and artworks on show, thanks to Kee's and Jackson's donation of their archives to the museum.

Standouts include Kee's Black Opal and White Opal textile designs, both of which Karl Lagerfeld incorporated into his debut collection for Chanel in 1982. Kee created the prints by arranging torn fragments of an opal painting she had made against backgrounds of black and white. Meanwhile, Jackson's silk taffeta Waratah outfits from 1983-84 give form to the hot blush of the native flower that, perhaps more than any other, has fascinated both designers throughout their careers (Kee regards the waratah as her totem). Step Into Paradise's closing sections, which include Kee's and Jackson's dazzling responses to their longstanding obsession with opals, Australian label Romance Was Born's radical remixes of both designers' archives, and Kee's stadium-scale costumes designed for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, constitute one hell of a finale. It's retina-ruining stuff.

A minor quibble would be the lack of object labels or wall text. Instead, iPads located throughout are loaded with an exhibition guide, which visitors can also access on their phones or tablets. A brief printed guide is available upon entry. Eschewing text certainly allows for a more immersive experience. One can focus on colour, form, embellishment and so on, rather than being distracted by information. The lighting can be more theatrical, too, as no one needs to be able to read.

On the other hand, it is irritating to have to consult the guide to ascertain details about this or that gown or ensemble. And, given their design simpatico, it's not always easy to determine who made what. Regardless, the cumulative effect of taking in creation after creation is intoxicating.

Fashion is always consuming itself, and the pair's maximalist aesthetic of statement frocks and layered ensembles in colourways that would shame an eastern rosella has come full circle. Witness Gucci under Alessandro Michele, or indeed Kee's and Jackson's recent collaborations with Romance Was Born. Step Into Paradise reveals not only the artists' irrepressible energy but also their authenticity, born of a compelling and consistent vision. All these years later, Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson continue to walk the walk, dressed head to toe in their designs, looking every bit as fresh and contemporary as they ever did.

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