

## HANNAH GARTSIDE

### *This body is experiencing pleasure*

Hannah Gartside knows the power of cloth. In a world of bodies swathed in garments, even obliged to them, the artist intuits how material is a site where personhood is defined and contested. For anyone who has ever felt lost in fabric, pressed by social strictures, their body or their bank balance, Gartside pulls the release valve; garments are no longer against the body, but freeing it. The care of material is equated with care in the universal.

In her considered way, Gartside has pieced together once-loved sequin materials, transforming second-hand dresses using the historically humble process of sewing. You should see Gartside in her studio, under the white light, how tenderly she manoeuvres this glinting material, how she speaks about textiles as conveying feeling; containing histories, scents and memories, shrouding us from birth to death. Now, she's created a series of textile collages indulging the exultations of cloth: pleasure, metamorphosis, and delight in the material.

*This body is experiencing pleasure began* with Gartside's short story titled *Francis the Moth: A* young woman, Frances, lives alone and is painfully lonely. One night at a train station she's overcome by witnessing a collective of moths, an eclipse, under a streetlight. Their wings appear like eyes; she thinks the moths are watching her, until the trance is broken by a staring man. She goes home to bed but wakes at 4am and cuts up the closest fabric to hand (you should hear Gartside talk about the pleasure of cutting material, the way she mimes parting cloth with scissors; it's like painters on mark-making).

Frances creates a cloak, cocooning herself in the liminal pupa stage, where moths literally fight against their surrounding walls to pump blood and strengthen their wings—it is a stunning metaphor of survival. Frances breaks through, but she is no longer a woman; she's a shimmering, dazzling moth who flies off to seek her coven. Of course, moths aren't moths at all; they were all once women, seeking something *else*.

I love stories of metamorphosis; they're fables, moral designs, parades of power and pleasure, dreams of the potential. We see this in the atmosphere of Gartside's glimmering abstract compositions, her "lover" sequin circle, and her threading of moth wings and eyes, created by

slicing material down its centre and opening it outwards. There's a truly decadent art deco, headpiece-styled artwork adorned with protruding sleeves: a regal nest of cocoons ready to birth more moth-women. The centrepiece marks metamorphosis in action: two pairs of lithe legs, signalled by the most delicately placed stockings, feed into a glitter-spotted skirt atop lingerie—yet instead of a torso, the wings and eyes of moths magnificently fan outwards. It's a magical scene—which is what Gartside always creates.

The artist has long-transformed materials, particularly in the last three years, through her kinetic textiles, where fabric twirls from floor to ceiling. Each pirouetting material pays tribute to the life of a historical woman, yet there is a bittersweetness about these promising scenes that can also be sensed in *Frances, the moth*. It's the shock of witnessing cloth, something irrevocably tied to selfhood and the body, as so liberated and unconstrained, pushing against daily life where in many senses womanhood still feels weighty.

Women artists have long sought freedom and pleasure in their images, carving spaces against regulated pleasures. In 2019 Gartside created a textile banner reading, "THIS BODY WILL EXPERIENCE PLEASURE." It was a reaction to both societal and self-imposed shame, for wanting things you're told not to want. It became an impetus for *Frances, the moth*, yet rather than waiting for pleasure as future possibility, the metamorphosis of Frances brings desire, and all its intimate and political guises, into the present. It takes courage—in these artworks leaving earthly life behind—to find and commit to pleasure. The French have a word for this: *jouissance*. It's a kind of desiring energy that exists in excess of the self, a libidinal force that goes beyond stringent identities and institutions, capable of personal and societal transformation.

This is where the dream meets reality: for Gartside it's not merely unleashing pleasure, but understanding what pleasure is, especially in a world overrun with capitalist desire that contrarily makes joy into a site of convention and boredom. In manifesting the very right to experience genuine pleasure, born of inverse feelings of shame, depression and feminist frustration, Gartside's art is quietly political. Yet it's a politics that doesn't moralise, but instead asks if you could choose your life freely, beyond all requirement, what would you actually choose? Any act toward freedom or pleasure is an act of re-joining the self and the world, finding ways for both to coexist.