Staring at hats

A hard life in fashion

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Bill Cunningham

FASHION CLIMBING
A New York life
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For fifty years, up until his death in 2016, Bill Cunningham stood on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street photographing people's clothes for the *New York Times*. "I always picked a woman for her appearance first and then asked her name. I felt my job was fashion, not discovering someone's background", he writes in this candid, posthumously published memoir – found among his possessions after he died – which documents his somewhat difficult childhood and career as a milliner, before he became a fashion columnist and pioneer of street-style photography.

The young Cunningham was obsessed with clothes. Born in 1929 into a puritanical, middle-class Irish Catholic family just outside Boston, he would think up costumes for the soap-opera characters he heard on the radio and stare at women's hats during Mass. When he was caught wearing his sister's organdie and satin dresses, his mother "beat the hell out of me, and threatened every bone in my uninhibited body if I wore girls' clothes again": "My dear parents gathered all their Bostonian reserve and decided the best cure was to hide me from any artistic or fashionable life". But at the age of twelve, with the money from his paper round, Cunningham bought supplies from the local Woolworths to make a hat ("a great big cabbage rose hung over the right eye, and all sorts of ribbons tied at the back of the neck. My mother nearly collapsed in shame when she saw it"); and as a teenager, he worked after school in the stockroom of the women's fashion departments in Jordan Marsh and Bonwit Teller. His girlfriends were chosen "because of their chic", he says. "If they didn't wear just what I thought was the right gown, that ended the romance."

After a semester at Harvard (it was "like being in prison") and a short time on a training scheme at the Bonwit Teller shop in New York (he was fired for using their millinery department to work on his own designs), Cunningham set up his business, William J., in 1949 selling hats from a room in a townhouse on East 52nd Street. His creations were "too original", though – a plaid duckbill hat wrapped in daisies, for example; another, made of red felt, featured life-sized apples – and he struggled to find customers, who only wanted cheaper versions of designs they had seen at the famous fashion houses. For a while he had "nothing to eat except a jar of Ovaltine, of which I rationed three spoonfuls a day". He put cardboard in the soles of his shoes to patch over the holes. Even so, he retained an irrepressible optimism. He fondly remembers a morning in the communal kitchen when he boiled water in his hat steamer and baked beans came popping out of the spout – one of his housemates, it seemed, had been "on a bender" and tried to cook in it.

Costume balls were a useful means of gaining publicity. At one held in the Waldorf Astoria, Cunningham wore a tailcoat, tights and a beak-shaped mask, completing the ensemble with two live chickens dusted with glitter, which he carried under his arms (they escaped in the lobby; "all hell broke loose"). The next day he killed one of them for food. By the mid-1950s, Cunningham's designs were better received. A collapsible pleated hat made from black nylon netting – "travel-perfect . . . for the girl with a job", says the advert reproduced here – sold well. So did his ski hats in the shape of animal faces (lions, elephants, poodles, cats, owls). The press praised an umbrella-sized straw beach hat with a floor-length celluloid fringe attached to the brim; "I can't stand the sun", Cunningham writes in *Fashion Climbing*, "and I thought it would make a wonderful portable beach cabana".

Bill Cunningham; from *Fashion Climbing*

A few years later, women stopped wearing hats. There is a sharp sadness about Cunningham's life pursuit suddenly being rendered irrelevant. He likens it to a divorce ("my childhood love affair didn't die, it just vanished"). He closed William J. in the early 1960s, and fell into writing about fashion, first for *Women's Wear Daily*, then for national newspapers.

Cunningham makes some shrewd observations in this book. At a Givenchy show in Paris, for example, he sits next to a German journalist, who is

> Five foot tall, bow-legged, with a face of wrinkled leather framed by bleached-blond hair and a tweed beret that didn't match or blend with her yellow-gold suit and sequin blouse. She was chewing a wad of gum while smacking her messily painted red lips. A pair of chandelier-length diamond earrings swayed back and forth as her short and dumpy many-ringed fingers spelled out the elegant fashion news. Her skirt was seven inches above her knees when sitting, and her white boots reached the kneecap. All I could think was that this lady was telling others what to wear.

And when he decorates one of his shops in a style of pseudo-French grandeur, he notices that the customers will now pay double for his hats; most women in New York in the 1950s, he writes, "use fashion for impressing friends, climbing the social ladder, and everything but sheer enjoyment".

Often, though, his prose is florid ("I took to New York life like a star shooting through the heavens"), or over-emotional (he insists on "setting the record straight" about falling out with his editor at *Women's Wear*). It is disappointing, too, that the many fascinating black-and-white photographs have no captions; perhaps the idea is that we should focus on the clothes and the hats rather than names, dates and places. At other times, however, less would have been more. About halfway through *Fashion Climbing*, Cunningham writes that it's "wrong to let the public see the inside of any industry, for immediately all the make-believe is gone"; his own company, we might reflect, is no exception.

Sheep, snake and bears

An essay collection that evades cliché

IMOGEN WEST-KNIGHTS

Ashleigh Young

CAN YOU TOLERATE THIS?
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"Having bad eyes", writes Ashleigh Young – a poet and editor at Victoria University Press in New Zealand – "is a fact that wants so badly to be a metaphor for something else." Her debut collection of essays *Can You Tolerate This?* consistently rejects such easy symbolism, and always evades cliché, not least in the way it emphasizes the challenges of writing non-fiction. In "Big Red", for example, Young sets out to write about her brother through the memory of a jacket he once owned, but she finds it prohibitively difficult: "I felt it would write itself. All I needed to do was grab hold of one end and pull the rest up behind it, like electrical wire out of the ground". Young wants us to see the workings inside the machine, as if her book were a wind-up music box whose visible design enhances one's enjoyment of the tune.

Lots of the early pieces deal with Young's adolescence. In "The Te Kuiti Underground", she depicts her younger self walking up the hill near her home and imagining that Paul McCartney is holding her hand; she is a typical teenager with "a limited sense of the ridiculous but a strong sense of the melodramatic". But alongside the self-deprecation is a tenderness for this young person caught up in the theatre of pretending to be an adult. One early essay, "Witches", looks at a moment in Young's childhood when she first felt shame about nakedness. As she ages, bodily anxieties press in around the edges of her life; she writes frankly about having a "stark loathing" of her physical form, and about her struggle with an eating disorder.

The small town Young grew up in, Te Kuiti, is "the Shearing Capital of the World", but it was also "lonely and hostile" for a girl who had "a need to see something more than what was in front of me". Isolation becomes a theme here; and the book's supporting cast is richly populated with eccentric outsiders, among them a mysterious artist from London who changed his name to Emit Snake-Beings. Elsewhere we meet bearded ladies from Victorian freakshows, including Julia Pastrana, "The Marvellous Hybrid of Bear Woman", who appears in a photograph in a flower-covered dress and with a full face of hair, gazing "nonchalantly to one side, like a bored cowboy"; and the megalomaniacal but lonely figure of Bikram Choudhury, the Indian founder of his own yoga discipline who now teaches in Los Angeles, wearing "a black Speedo and a headset like a popstar". She writes of all these people with affection and respect. "Postie", one of the collection's high points, focuses on Ferdinand Cheval, a nineteenth-century postman who spent thirty-three years collecting stones along his postal route in Hauterives in order to build a palace out of them, for no reason other than a deep compulsion to do it. The completed building was "a fusion of references to plant, animal, and human worlds, and to his own fantasies"; according to Young it "was not and would not be beautiful", but it was a monument to commitment. "How wonderful it is if we just keep going", she writes.

An interest in transformation underpins all the pieces of *Can You Tolerate This?* In "The Te Kuiti Underground", Young characterizes the celebrities she used to imagine at her side as a teenager as people "who could make an ordinary place, an ordinary moment, more intense, more like a film, something driven toward meaningful conclusion". But meaningful conclusions and cinematic moments are not what Young gives us; and the greatest appeal of *Can You Tolerate This?* is this refusal to make things neat. "All symbols are imaginary, explanation is unreal", she writes; "a person can only attempt to describe."