

Commemorating  
75 Years  
of PURFEX

mannequin

As I sit with the owner of Purfex, Glen Wilkin-Holland, under a shady tree, beside an open chapel in his garden retreat, it seems a world away from the strongly chemical-smelling, cavernous and bustling Avondale factory that served as the mannequin company's base for many years.

As we speak, I watch long-time employee Klaus Meiswinkel, a talented finisher, gently applying fine layers of Dutch gold to a winged female mannequin destined for an elevated position as part of the design for the exhibition that this essay accompanies. Tiny flakes of gold float on the air, alighting on the surrounding garden and even on Glen's delightful diminutive canine companion Mitzi. Every now and again, another employee strides past us (from his open-air rustic pavilion located under another cluster of trees) carrying half mannequins just removed from moulds, their 'just pressed' forms sporting thin, uneven extrusions caused by

the pressure of the injection moulding process. These were left to dry and air (cure) in a sun-filled area of the garden, awaiting finishing. As we talked, it struck me that Glen had taken the company full circle, from decades as a factory-based business focusing on mass-production, to the smaller-scale home-based one that formed the original model for the fledgling operation. In 1939, Austin Purdy, the founder of Purfex Display Models Ltd, started his business in a workshop under his parent's high-blocked home in Mt. Eden.

Austin Purdy began by repairing plaster shop mannequins popularly used by New Zealand retail fashion establishments during the 1920s and 1930s. As mannequins such as these were expensive to purchase and very fragile, Purdy's initiative likely found a ready clientele in an economically stressed retail market still suffering the effects of the depression and about to encounter wartime austerity measures.

It is not known when Purdy began to manufacture his own mannequins, but an advertisement placed in the *Auckland Star* in January 1945 for a "boy to learn display model manufacture, papier mâché and plaster modelling" suggests that it was around this date.

It is likely that Purfex's manufacturing of mannequins in the immediate post-war period was in response to the growth in apparel manufacturing and retailing



in New Zealand. From 1947, many local apparel retailers were eager to embrace the completely new fashionable styles influenced by Christian Dior's 'Corolle' line, known popularly as the 'new look'. New fashions demand new styles of mannequins. This is particularly so for 'new look' fashions with their narrow rounded shoulder-lines, nipped-in waists, and accentuated hiplines: a completely different silhouette from that of pre-war fashion.

A 1949 report on the "Conditions, influences and trends of merchandising and display in New Zealand" in the immediate post World War Two period by C. H. Andrews notes the interest expressed by retailers in special mannequins designed and made in New Zealand specifically for the display of New Look garments. Indeed, the archive of historic mannequins collected by Glen Wilkin-Holland over the past decades includes a 'new look' mannequin made by Purfex for Auckland department store Smith & Caughey.

By 1958, when Austin Purdy legally incorporated Purfex Display Models Ltd as a private company, the firm had diversified its production from the expected "display forms, dress makers models and all other types of models" to include, surprisingly, the manufacture of "fibre glass boats and reinforced plastic fabrications" and "furniture...in all its branches". It seems too that the company also manufactured, imported and wholesaled "fibrous substances of all kinds" while retailing "textile fabrics of all kinds...household and commercial fittings and

utensils and ornaments." A 1960s advertising flyer in the Purfex archive for decorative door mouldings and panels illustrates the continued pursuit of a diverse product range. However, as the decades progressed the balance of production shifted back to mannequins.

When a young "serially unemployed" Glen Wilkin-Holland was sent to Purfex by the Labour Department in 1977, Austin Purdy, who still headed the company, was willing to give him a chance. Over the next decade the ambitious Wilkin-Holland tried his hand at most aspects of the factory, an experience that he values as having provided him with "a really good grounding in how to make mannequins from scratch." Working his

way up from the sanding benches to factory manager, Wilkin-Holland had the opportunity to purchase the company when it fell into receivership in 1998. Along with his business and life partner Fraser Moreton, Wilkin-Holland embraced the opportunity to continue Austin Purdy's legacy of producing high quality locally made display mannequins for the New Zealand market.

While Purfex faced stiff competition from cheap Chinese imports that flooded into New Zealand (along with the clothes they showed off) after the relaxing of import controls from 1984, the company now run by Glen has braved these and other economic travails to find its own niche in New Zealand's increasingly idiosyncratic fashion market.

Part of this success has been the creative way in which Wilkin-Holland has





utilized the collection of historic mannequin moulds that were included in the sale of the company in 1998, a collection he has actively increased in the years since. With a strong sense of history and a good measure of creative quirkiness, Glen has successfully mixed mannequin pieces, for example a 1950s head on a contemporary body, to create new forms that perfectly capture the zeitgeist and meet the needs of the modern retail environment.

One of the oldest mannequins in the Purfex stable is a head - JEN004 - which Glen has named Diane, after his mother. With only a few gaps, Purfex has made JEN004 continuously since the 1950s.

The legacy of Austin Purdy continues in the offering of mannequin restoration and conversion. Although the cost of mannequins has decreased over the years, most retail stores cannot afford to change the style of their dress forms as frequently as they might like. A Purfex makeover might involve decapitation, replacing the old head with a wooden cap or a 'retro' head. A recent commission from the Canterbury Museum provided Glen and his staff the opportunity to work with some even rarer historical models that had been damaged in the 2011 earthquake.

During the course of our conversation the sun has shifted and the gold flakes settled, transforming the glimmering mannequin (which Klaus has left drying) into a dazzling beauty, and a busy Mitzi into a sleepy puppy. After a cup of tea and a sneak peak at a gorgeous illustrated book on the Bergdorf Goodman store fronts (a treat from Glen's recent trip to New York to view the Christmas windows) there's nothing more to do than bid farewell to this little industrial idyll, a cottage industry with a rich history and a bright future.

ANGELA LASSIG

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## Mannequin – Katharina Kercher

The exhibition *Mannequin*, along with an art trail of ten mannequin window displays re-interpreted by ten artists and fashion designers dispersed throughout a shopping district, pays homage to the art of mimicking reality.

Through childhood dolls and toy soldiers it appears that we have always been fascinated with versions of the human figure. Though 'fake people' have come in several guises through history, none have had such a direct fantasy correlation to, not only commerce, but the illusion of our own fantasies than the store mannequin. As Ralph Pucci, an innovator in the mannequin industry, stated "mannequins are, as always, a reflection of the ideal, not how we are but how we'd like to be."

Though the concept of mannequins as art is debatable, the craftsmanship behind modern mannequins is not. The creation of a mannequin is much like the creation of any fine sculpture, yet the mannequin has never been intended as art for its own sake; fashion houses and department stores require a work of art that remains invisible yet compliments the product. Museums require a form that will support and preserve their collection, such as the Jo Torr gown, and some contemporary artists like Ioane Ioane require that a mannequin plays a role in the art. Purfex, Able to supply all these demands, has also been able to support various school window display competitions and fashion awards. Because Purfex has supported the arts, this is a chance for the arts to say thank you to Purfex.

The exhibition *Mannequin* by Katharina Kercher, a Titirangi based photographer with a longstanding interest in mannequins, examines the production process into the curious world of mannequin manufacture. The exhibition also explores the interface between art and commercialism.

Outside the gallery, stop and stare with a new perspective at mannequins in local shop windows reinterpreted by: contemporary artists Ioane Ioane, Jo Torr, Tracy Tawhiao, Niki Hastings-McFall, Diane Rimmer, fashion label Strangely Normal, Doris du Pont of the Fashion Museum in collaboration with Stefan Sinclair of Two Hands Tattoo, the Purfex team, and the fashion departments from NZ Fashion Tech and Whitecliffe College of Art.

KENNY WILLIS  
Lopdell House Gallery





# *Furfex Display Models Ltd.*

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## **MEN'S WALK SHORT FORM**

This form in fadeless flesh coloured Polyethylene has been modelled especially to fit tailored shorts. The model shows shorts to their best advantage, garments look as appealing from the rear as from the front; it is just right in length to give full emphasis to the garment.

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