

Window displays at Bergdorf Goodman do more than entice passers-by into this venerable New York department store. They sustain a tradition by blending advertising and street theatre into a very public form of installation art, understandable at a glance.

# the three-second rule

Text by Shonquis Moreno. Photography by Zehavi & Cordes

Entrances to Bergdorf Goodman's display windows are through a series of secret doors hidden in the rococo walls of the store's interior. The Fifth Avenue windows, for instance, open into the jewellery department. Being inside the windows, installing displays, combines exposure to and protection from the street. The Fifth Avenue windows look out at a pageant of fashionistas and tourists, while 57th Street has a view of the cross-town bus and 58th Street supports residential traffic – grannies with cotton-candy hair and crocodile handbags, guests of the Plaza Hotel. It is in a cluttered workshop on Bergdorf's eighth floor that the store's window displays are conceived. At various times a visitor might find the labyrinthine rooms of the Visual Department crammed with strips of Mylar, pink housing insulation, mattresses and metal flashing, and curling reams of wood veneer and bendy board poised to imitate a Frank Gehry façade. A series of cubbyholes stuffed with mannequins reveals standing, twisting, reclining, surprised and abstract figures. There are naked tree branches and man-made objects – hangers, dress forms, chair frames – so worn they evoke the character of natural materials like driftwood or seaglass. A couple of miles away in Queens, an entire warehouse provides storage for the remaining props.

Window display is a field that synthesizes skills of all kinds – some almost obsolete in the world beyond windows – yet is neglected as a design discipline. Bergdorf's windows are a reminder of this discrepancy. Last year's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum Triennial included a window designed by Bergdorf's window director, David Hoey. In an effort to solve a recurring problem – how to display 30 handbags – Hoey placed a mannequin at one side of a window and extended her arm, à la Salvador Dalí, 16 feet to the far wall, hanging a profusion of bags, like bracelets, down the length of her prolific limb.

Hoey's windows, in particular, are uniquely graphic, textural, humorous and avant-garde in style. In a window celebrating *Visionaire* magazine, Hoey again played with surrealism and distortion. By sheathing the window in a box, he created a forced perspective. Inside, a mannequin's legs telescoped impossibly upwards, Alice in Wonderland-style, so that her head disappeared through a trapdoor in the ceiling and reappeared beside her feet on the floor below. Hoey's is an arch humour, camp and tongue-in-cheek. He'll pair a quarter-million-dollar Venetian cut-glass mirror with 1970s mirrored light bulbs. 'We're drawn to extremes here. We like minimalism, and we like maximalism. We're not so crazy about medium-ism,' says Hoey. 'We want our minimal windows to be maximal in effect, through an economy of means.'

In a series of Hoey's windows dedicated to music, a toy piano cast the looming shadow of a grand piano against the rear wall, while the shadow of a mannequin suggested a piano



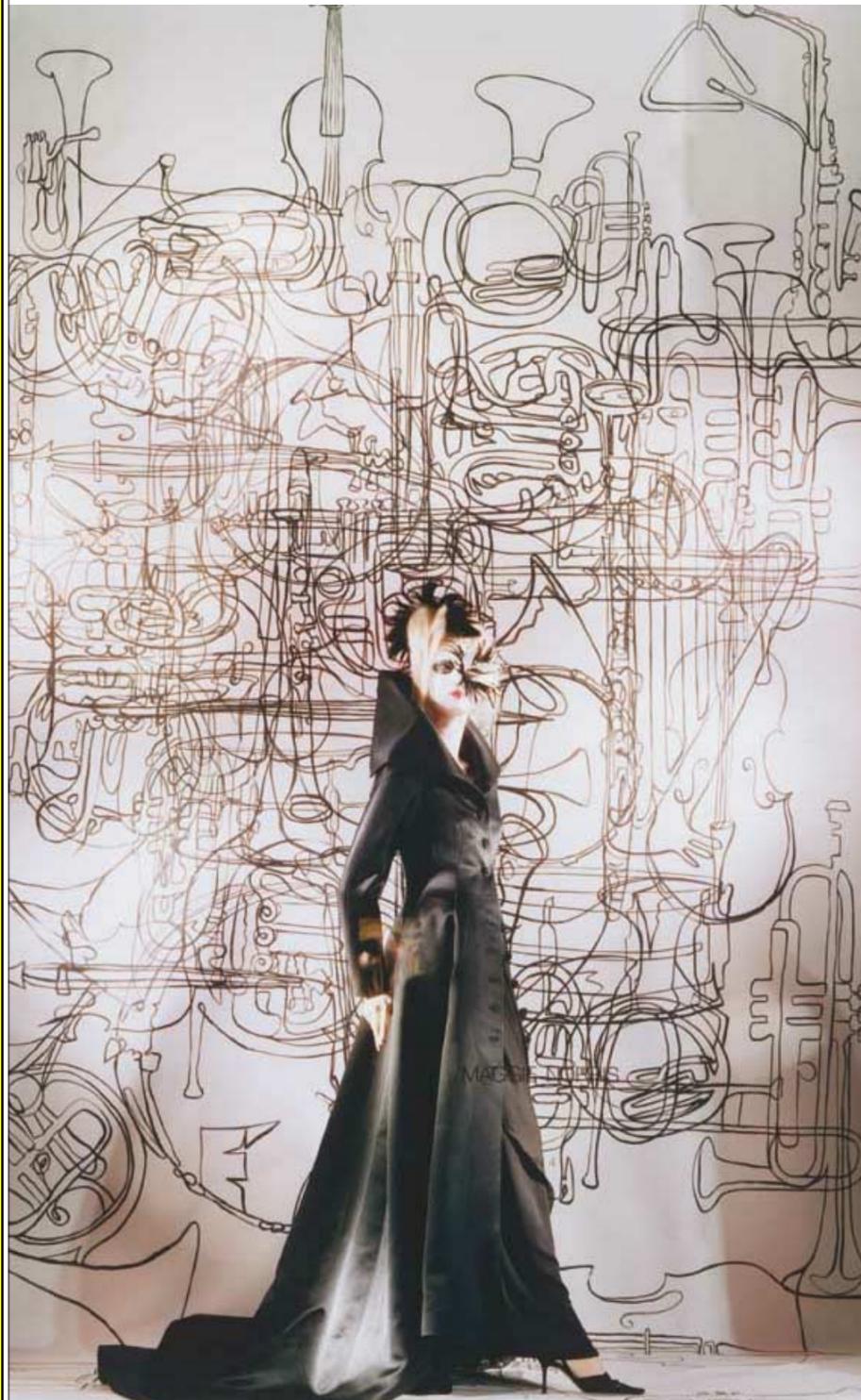
Looking into the windows of Bergdorf Goodman is like looking into a person's face. The Fifth Avenue display windows are designed to attract the attention of all within viewing distance: motorists rushing by or stuck in traffic, shoppers in a hurry, the daily lunch-hour crowd, and tourists with time and money to spare.

bench. He also loves to distort scale. Using vastly exaggerated construction blueprints for another project, he 'carpeted' the rear wall, on which two mannequins were seated perpendicular to the glass, thus creating a scene that read as an overhead perspective. Instead of building out the props of the room around the mannequins, he forced the viewer to use the blueprint symbols to fill in visual details – a door here, a window there.

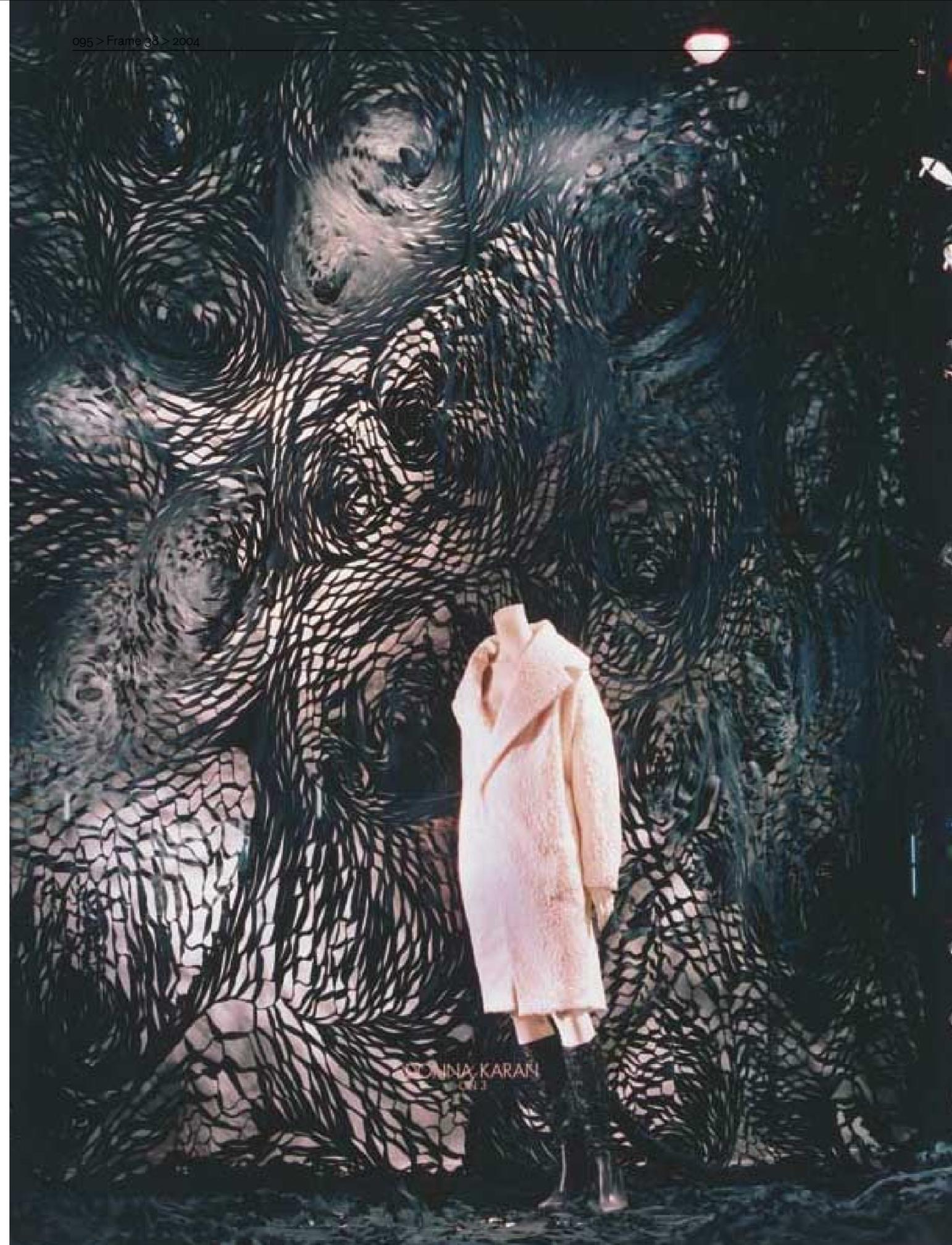
Not surprisingly, Hoey lists Lewis Carroll, Alfred Hitchcock and Rube Goldberg among his influences. He delights in themes and variations on themes, riffing on a single idea to make multiple windows form a series on a single subject or work together as a diptych or triptych. He likes to show action frozen in time or to transform sound into something visual. The design is synaesthetic, criss-crossing between graphic and tactile. Hoey and his team have built walls from white gift boxes and pillowy pink rectangles of housing insulation. They have crafted '70s-style wall hangings out of hundreds of women's wigs. One window required three staff members to spend a week grilling countless slices of bread for a sculpture of toast. Another display, featuring stretchy latex pulled across a cello, showed the bare outlines of the instrument pushing against the fabric and into the window. (Music is nothing if not felt.) Bergdorf windows tend to make the familiar unfamiliar, and vice versa.

Having studied music, art and design, Hoey worked in music before coming to windows at Neiman Marcus in Dallas. After moving to Manhattan in 1994, he became a freelance producer of events, displays and fashion shows. 'I knew I wanted to do windows when I saw a photograph of a 1949 Bonwit Teller window that showed an impeccably dressed mannequin with two heads,' says Hoey. 'Gene Moore, the 20th century's greatest window dresser, wanted to show a woman who loved hats so much that she grew an extra head.' New York City is one of the few places in the United States imbued with a human-scale, street-level, shoulder-to-shoulder experience of place. During the late 1930s, New York windows entered a golden era in which surrealist display came into vogue. Emerging briefly in the '70s was a trend – led by Candy Pratts at Bloomingdales, Robert Courier at Henri Bendel and Victor Hugo at Halston Street Level – that saw windows described as 'street theatre': tableaux filled with dark narratives, black moods, murky symbolism and even controversial, quasi-sadomasochistic scenes.

In 1997 Hoey joined Linda Fargo, Vice President of Visual Merchandising at Bergdorf. Fargo, who recently published *Dreams Through the Glass* (Assouline, 2003), a book on her display design of the last six years, is renowned for her exquisite, thickly detailed Christmas windows. In contrast, Hoey is at his finest when taking a more Spartan approach. 'My windows have a baroque romanticism,' says Fargo. 'David's have a shocking, humorous, graphic



Many display props are made in-house by a fleet of extraordinary freelancers. For a series of windows about music in spring 2003, artist Aaron Wexler drew a symphony of instruments (above). Half a year earlier, hand-cut black felt evoked a storm in a Donna Karan display (opposite).





sensibility that's very inventive.' (In parallel with their design styles, Fargo describes her apartment as a 'closet' cluttered with objects, while Hoey calls his 'an empty container'.) In Hoey's windows, Bergdorf looks back to mid-century window display, here updated to express both today and the anticipation of a cultural tomorrow.

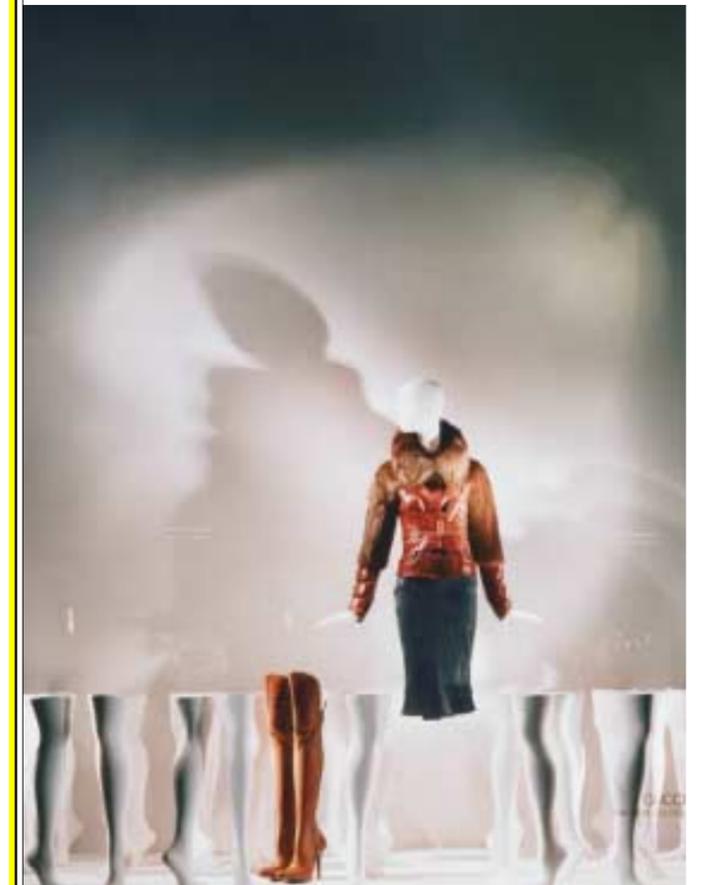
Bergdorf has the tallest windows in the city, and Hoey's team is responsible for filling 35 of them on a regular basis. Some are jewellery-display-size 'shadowbox' windows, and others are glazed spaces as large as 4 metre high and 6 metre long. Variations on a single design concept can mean that up to 400 discrete ideas go up yearly.

The word 'we' is used a lot around the offices and for good reason. 'My Rolodex is the first thing I'd grab in a fire,' says Hoey who calls on a stable of freelancers – painters, a neon artist, sound producers, sculptors in various media, graphic designers, illustrators and stylists – many of whom have been trained as fine artists. Versatile and resourceful, they write on walls, for example, with everything from candle smoke to chocolate bars. They take a concept and elaborate ad infinitum. When undecided about the right approach to a problem, they play it by ear. Work inside the windows involves handling tools, scraping walls, painting out windows in preparation for the next display and, for example, hot-gluing thousands of leaves to a wall. Touch-up staff work late at night or early in the morning, before the store opens, squeezing into impossibly tight places to add a dot of white paint to a scratched floor, to tuck in wires, straighten frames, and do whatever it takes to create perfection. Others, like Johanna Burke, who studied photography and installation art and has been freelancing at Bergdorf for seven years, fabricate custom pieces. 'David starts with a free-floating idea and makes a series of scribbles decipherable only to a handful of trained individuals,' says Burke. 'He talks through the idea with the people in the studio and then, when installation begins, he wings it in an almost trained improvisation!' Tight deadlines force the team to use thumbnail sketches and verbal shorthand rather than formal drawings. The five-person, full-time staff keep 'idea drawers' containing scraps of paper, illustrations, favourite paint chips and pages torn from catalogues. Installation takes place on site with a self-imposed 18-hour deadline, similar in intensity to an architectural *charrette*. Shifts last as long

Emphasizing humanoid geometry are uncrowned bodies and disembodied legs, essential elements of Hoey's surrealist repertoire.

Next spread left: To celebrate New Year 1999, Hoey and Fargo created a time capsule in the form of an overstuffed window crammed with the detritus of an eon: comic books paired with a thousand-year history of art shared the space with gramophones, phonographs, digital clocks, mobile phones and CDs. 'The archivists looked immaculate,' says Hoey, 'but their work habits were slovenly.'

Next spread right: When Bergdorf opened its new shoe department in June 2002, Hoey papered the rear wall of the window with a blow-up of the actual blueprint of the new space. The overhead perspective is a Bergdorf signature.



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David Hoey

as it takes, and most freelancers can count on 12-hour days, at least. Pedestrians who stop to chat offer well-worn advice like 'A little to the left' or 'That picture's crooked'.

Hoey believes in the three E's of window display – Entice, Educate and Entertain – and in 'the three-second rule'. Like a billboard, the window should make its point at a single glance. Bergdorf's windows, however, also bear up under scrutiny. They are never explicit. They can be an intellectual puzzle, a tiny report on the state of popular culture that hits your stomach first and then your head. 'David's windows work on three scales of motion, which all windows must but which his do extra well,' says curator Donald Albrecht, who chose Hoey's windows for the Cooper-Hewitt Triennial. 'The motorist gets a great visual impression and the pedestrian who doesn't stop gets the same. Then, for those who have the time to actually stop and look, there's still lots to see that the others miss.'

'Looking into the windows is like looking into someone's face,' says Fargo. If the store is the flesh, the windows are evidence of its spirit, and Bergdorf is a person we'd all like to know, or be. Hoey uses, and is often inspired by, collections borrowed from individuals: antique dress forms, phones, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, hangers. 'Sometimes clothes are the inspiration. That should be the case 100 per cent of the time, but it doesn't always work that way,' says Hoey. 'Sometimes the mannequin wanders into the window, and she's not sure where she is.' On special occasions, windows promote book and magazine launches, museum exhibitions or auction-house sales. 'Window designers develop an eye that turns anything you look at into a potential prop,' says Hoey. 'We've tried to exploit the artistic capabilities of everything from a ton of dyed turkey feathers to a kilometre of telephone wire. We love doing big tangles and jumbles of ordinary objects. Once we stuffed a window with a hundred wooden chair frames. I've even calculated how many Post-It notes it would take to completely cover a wall.'

Hoey likes to say that display is equal parts theatre, advertising, installation art, fashion and storytelling. But it is also design. 'We couldn't imagine separating the experience of shopping at Bergdorf from looking at the windows. Our windows tell all,' says Hoey. 'A future anthropologist could learn a lot from analyzing what went into New York's display windows: what was happening in international design, fashion, high culture, popular culture.' A wellspring of information awaits fourth-millennium researchers clever enough to open the secret doors to window display at Bergdorf Goodman.

**Autumn 2000:** A series of Narciso Rodriguez windows required that three people spend a week grilling hundreds of slices of bread for a duotone sculpture made of toast. Next spread left: Hoey uses materials, such as housing insulation (in 1999), that are both graphic and tactile. Next spread right: Numbering Lewis Carroll and Rube Goldberg among his influences, Hoey designed Alice-in-Wonderland-like windows to promote *Visionaire* magazine in January 2003.





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