

Cool costume capers

CATHERINE LAMBERT

SUFFERING for her art is part of the pleasure for photo artist Meg Cowell.

Playing in an icy swimming pool with soaking wet dresses in the middle of a Melbourne winter is not everyone's idea of artistic pleasure, but Cowell will do anything to get her shot.

Her hauntingly evocative photographs show period costumes that are given movement by being placed in a pool of water and then shot from above.

"You couldn't get this result with stationery dresses," Cowell says.

"The organic force of the water allows the garment to move one way or another and I love the effect. I also love the romantic ideas about the clothing and the ritual of costume."

Cowell works part time at Masquerade Costume Hire in Kew which feeds her fascination with clothing and particularly the Victorian concept of women's transition clothing — mourning dress, wedding dresses.

"I like the idea that each garment has a mood and an emotion which can be representative of feelings and states," she says.

"There's something ghostly, too, about the images which I



These two dresses are part of Meg Cowell's latest exhibition *The Sea, The Shore*.

like. It's like a fashion catalogue for ghosts."

Each dress took Cowell two weeks to photograph. She lines her pool in black fabric and sews pieces of the garment to the sides of the pool. The torso is stuffed with foam to ensure it is stabilised.

Cowell's third show has had on the same theme and each time she expects to explore

other subjects for her next show but is constantly drawn back to costumes.

This one, *The Sea, The Shore*, is based on an article she read years ago about our bodies being defined by our clothes.

"In the Victorian era it was helpful for women emotionally to wear mourning dress because it was part of the

transition through grief," she says. "We're defined by clothes in the same way the sea is defined by the shore. It's your boundary in the way that your house is the boundary between private and public life."

The Sea, The Shore, Flinders Lane Gallery. Until December 19. Phones: 9654 3332.