Kraven is not only interested in what it takes to make a coat but in what it takes to make a strike. A black and white photograph of a 1931 ILGWU strike in Toronto that she sourced from the archives shows only a handful of the 500 women workers who were out on the picket line for 10 weeks, clustered around a placard and turned towards the camera. Their coats are immaculately pressed, their leather heels shine. But their smiling faces, pillbox hats, and the occasional ungloved hand that clutches a wallet into an elbow crook, or dresses an arm over a friend, belies the miserable conditions of their labour: leaving their jobs at 10 o’clock in the morning on February 25th, they traded relentless piece work in sweatshop conditions for the frigid winter streets, where they were assaulted by their male colleagues, harassed by “detectives” hired by their employers and intimidated and arrested by police. The photograph only hints at this rending, bodyscary experience. When it does register, it does so through the women’s clothing. The crisp garments the workers wear are the product of their labour, a reminder of the pieces of wood, felt and interfacing abandoned mid-shift at dusty workstations, and piled high on hooks and hangers across the filthy and cramped shop floor.

The logic of striking is quintic and poetic in the face of increased pressure to standardize work and maximize its efficiency. The striking worker makes herself spectacularly unproductive. Kraven’s installation operates on the same premise. Useless, oversized pieces are rolled and buckled, ruched and cinched around absent bodies. These are decoratively garnished, heavy and rich. There is an undeniable playfulness to Kraven’s clothing rack: a queer approach to dressing where to fashion a garment embodies the pleasure of dressing a self.

But the labour of self-fashioning can also be hating and painful. Despite the tenacity of the workers, the Toronto dressmakers’ strike was unsuccessful, plagued by a lack of public support during the Great Depression, and mounting tensions with their male counterparts. The women, many of whom had migrated to Canada and could not find other forms of employment, returned to work without union representation, or recognition of their rights as equal workers. To revisit this moment is to be reminded that, long before “fast fashion” displaced manufacturing centres to the Global South, before the rise of the gig economy and the application of every service, women’s labour was always unregulated. But it is also to be reminded of the ingenuity of these workers and their embodied engagements with the world, their ability to respond to conditions of overwork, precarity, and poor compensation with more labour requires an exceptional capacity to imagine the world otherwise: to admit that there is still unfinished work to be completed. Kraven’s oversized garment rack towers over us, reminding us of this unrealized history.

Karen Kraven is a Toronto-based artist who works in photography, sculpture and installation. Using fabrics to reference skin, Kraven investigates ways of distorting and displacing images of the body. Kraven’s recent solo exhibitions include: 20W Gallery (New York), Parclair Laundry/Darkening, Centre Clark (Montreal), the Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland, OR), Helenus, over education. 1979-1991: She participated in artist residences at The Borof Centre, BICP (Brooklyn) and Desana (Rio de Janeiro). Her work is in private collections and the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, TD Bank, RBC and Banque Nationale.

Gabrielle Moser is a writer, editor and independent curator based in Toronto. Her writing appears in venues including Artforum.com, Art in America, C Magazine, Canadian Art, Fluta, Journal of Visual Culture, Photography & Culture, Perielia, Phoebe and in the books Photography and the Optical Uninstantaneous (Sharon Blystone and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., Duke University Press, 2017). Moser has held fellowships and residencies at the Paul Mellon Centre for the Study of British Art, Kresen Kernow Centre, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of British Columbia and was a full-time Visiting Scholar in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University in 2017.