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In Sheep’s Clothing: Reflections on the Trickery of Nature

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Dedication

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Abstract

In the realm of nature as well as in human society, things are often not what they seem. Animals, plants, and humans use endless tricks and stratagems to hide their vulnerable parts, camouflage their true strength, and survive despite hazards and predators at every turn. To exist in this world as a woman is to be a student of these protective devices, to learn and adopt the techniques and behaviors that best ensure her survival against the forces of patriarchy and institutionalized oppression. She must use whatever means she can to protect herself and secure her place in the world. She may also choose to hide her true power behind the soft, pleasing flourishes of decoration. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, women must adapt and evolve constantly to suit the demands of their environment, an imperative which is reflected in the complex negotiations of concealment, exhibition, and ornamentation of the body.

This body of work explores nature and its infinite complexity: its dangerous beauty, its potential to confuse and bewilder, its hidden secrets, and its multifaceted nature. In creating these works, I have attempted to evoke the deep connections between the human experiences of women and the endless adaptations of nature. The body of work spans a wide range of techniques, drawing from the infinite wealth of nature’s resources: welding, soldering, sculpting, stitching, painting, and building any way possible. Nature’s adaptability and cleverness are honored by using resources directly from nature, found items, recycled materials, and sustainable media in infinite combinations. From colorful, yet poisonous animals to carnivorous flowers, from camouflaged fur to iridescent feathers, from prismatic colors to reflections in a raindrop, this thesis invites viewers to explore and celebrate the ways in which women exhibit the spirit of nature and its endless ways of surviving in a harsh world.
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Introduction

Human beings have relied on the gifts of nature for survival since the dawn of our time on this planet. To find and prepare food, create shelter, to protect our bodies from the elements, and to fill our lives with color and narrative - all of these tasks essential to life are fueled and supplied by the natural world. Nature is also our greatest teacher, showing us, by the example of her other children, the flora, fauna, and fungi, what examples to follow and what dangers to avoid. By studying nature’s adaptations, relationships, triumphs and challenges, we have learned how to improve our own existence and enrich our experiences.

Nature is also the source from which we collect the materials for the sacred, ancient practice of adornment. Creating and wearing jewelry is as old a behavior as skinning animals for clothing or worshipping the sun and moon, and just as much an essential part of our collective emotional memory as human beings. In Tait’s (2011) *7000 Years of Jewelry*, the long unbroken narrative of human adornment practices is shown to be vast and varied. From Roman “eyes” of agate and amulets filled with *caul* (a membrane which encloses a fetus while in the womb) thought to protect sailors from drowning, to Spanish sacred charms given to high-born infants, not unlike the protective Arabic *hamsa* hand symbol, to intricate Chinese imperial headdresses meant to restrict mobility as much as to show superiority, jewelry occupies a critical place in our shared history. Notions of protection against evil, enchantment with special powers, and the manifestation of class distinctions are just as important as the aesthetic beauty of the jewelry we create and wear. Throughout the entire human narrative, the natural world serves as both a supplier of materials for these projects and an inspiration for their forms.
Of the sexes, it is undoubtedly women who have had the most profound and complex relationship with jewelry throughout human history. Although worn by both men and women, jewelry and codes of dress have played an important role in the subjugation of women even as it has beautified and delighted them. Many practices of adornment have had the effect of limiting a woman’s mobility (such as *chanzu* [纏足], the ancient Chinese practice of foot-binding), or reducing her range of motion (such as the European practice of wearing tight-laced corsets). More simply, the heavy ornamentation practiced by high-born women of many cultures around the world makes independent movement and activity difficult, turning women into decorative objects rather than sentient creatures capable of accomplishing their own ends. As Steiner (2001) states in Elliott and Helland’s (2002) *Women Artists in the Decorative Arts*:

> “Throughout aesthetic history, women and ornament have functioned as analogues. Women wear ornaments (more consistently than men), and have been considered, for better or for worse, ornaments to society and the home. Ornaments epitomize the aesthetic; their primary function is to be beautiful in themselves and so to add beauty to the larger whole in which they figure. Thus, the aesthetic symbolism of ornament involves a gesture of ‘pleasing’, an openness of appeal that is conventionally gendered feminine” (p. 3)

To take this argument to the level of professional craftsmanship, there exists also a hostility between the masculinized arts of architecture and design and the feminized decorative arts of sewing, embroidery, and craft. This divide began with the Industrial Revolution and blossomed in the 19th century as mass-production, machines and factories replaced guilds and cottage industries for handmade goods. Although gendered biases against female artists and
craftsmen had existed since the beginnings of recorded history, this aesthetic bifurcation enabled them to worsen (Elliott & Helland, 2002). The worship of the machine, and with it, the aesthetic primacy given to clean lines, blank surfaces, and purity of spaces, became the Modernist art movement, which set itself at odds with the so-called “feminine” adulation of nature in art, deemed frivolous, excessive, and even deceitful (p. 55). As Steiner (2001) puts it, “[t]o be ‘merely ornamental’ is purportedly to be useless or without practical effect, and yet the ornamental is also taken as a black magic of utility and power associated with deception and the meretricious” (p. 57). As women were no longer forbidden from owning property, from using their own maker’s marks on their pieces, or held back by other institutionalized forms of oppression to their art [though many others remained], it became the subtle prerogative of Modernist values to undermine the nature-inspired decorative arts and the women who practiced them (Prather-Moses, 1981). In today’s craft world, despite a great deal of overlap and cultural change which has allowed male and female artists to move more freely throughout these spaces, those old prejudices still lay like a fine layer of ash at the bottom of everything we do. It is the responsibility of this generation of female artists, myself included, to put these gendered differences back into balance and to restore nature to its rightful place of honor and veneration by the artist.

In the realm of nature as well as in human society, things are often not what they seem. Animals, plants, and humans use endless tricks and stratagems to hide their vulnerable parts, camouflage their true strength, and survive despite hazards and predators at every turn. To exist in this world as a woman is to be a student of these protective devices, to learn and adopt the techniques and behaviors that best ensure her survival against the forces of patriarchy and
institutionalized oppression. She must use whatever means she can to protect herself and secure her place in the world. She may also choose to hide her true power behind the soft, pleasing flourishes of decoration. Although she is kind and benevolent until provoked, when she or her loved ones are threatened, she will not hesitate to unleash her inner strength and employ her defenses. Behind every well-mannered woman’s face, this inner wildness is present, awaiting a dangerous situation when it will be needed. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, women must adapt and evolve constantly to suit the demands of their environment, an imperative which is reflected in the complex negotiations of concealment, exhibition, and ornamentation of the body.

This body of work explores nature and its infinite complexity: it’s dangerous beauty, its potential to confuse and bewilder, its hidden secrets, and its multifaceted nature. In creating these works, I have attempted to evoke the deep connections between the human experiences of women and the endless adaptations of nature. The body of work spans a wide range of techniques, drawing from the infinite wealth of nature’s resources: welding, soldering, sculpting, stitching, painting, and building any way possible. Nature’s adaptability and cleverness are honored by using resources directly from nature, found items, recycled materials, and sustainable media in infinite combinations. From colorful, yet poisonous animals to carnivorous flowers, from camouflaged fur to iridescent feathers, from prismatic colors to reflections in a raindrop, this thesis invites viewers to explore and celebrate the ways in which women exhibit the spirit of nature and its endless ways of surviving in a harsh world.
I: Context

Personal background

As a child growing up in the city of Jahra, Kuwait, I loved to play in the sand and explore the world outside my home. Despite the fact that they made me sneeze, I collected flowers to display in my room, picked up stones and shells from the beach, and even tried to resuscitate frozen fish my mother brought home for dinner. My pet chicken, Tutu, received a lifetime of affection and a proper Muslim burial upon his death, much to the consternation of my family. I wanted to connect with life in all its forms, from the young blossoms to the ancient stones made soft by millennia of beating waves. Nature was a sanctuary and a playground for me, a place where my ideas could run wild, unfettered by anyone else’s opinions or rules.

When I began practicing metalwork and jewelry as an undergraduate student, I was frequently frustrated by the limitations placed on me by my superiors as a female in the art program. Despite my desire to learn and master all the techniques possible, myself and the other female students were forbidden from using the band saw, soldering iron, lathe, forge, drill, and other tools believed too “dangerous” for our delicate sensibilities. Either we were forced to rely on a male teacher or staff member to do the work for us, or the tools simply were not available in the workshops of the school. Being relegated to the cutting and filing of metal only, I felt like my mind was in a gilded cage - I was lucky and happy to be in the program, but it was so far from letting me freely express my ideas, challenge myself, and improve my skills. I knew I would have to leave the country to expand beyond these limitations - but not everyone has the same opportunities and resources as I have. I knew that when I returned to Kuwait to teach metal and jewelry, I wanted to change these sexist policies and make more opportunities for others like me.
Discussion of Sources and Research

It seemed a natural match, a symbiotic relationship even, that my struggles as a female and my profound love of nature should be synthesized to form the core of my thesis work. I began to explore the work of other female artists who used nature as a locus for their pieces - the offerings my research presented were as many and varied as the species of nature itself.

My research activities included many hours of reading and flipping through lookbooks of other jewelers’ work. Because I wanted to study how women have used jewelry throughout history, I needed to conduct a survey of jewelry throughout all major civilizations and over a wide range of eras. Books such as Tait’s 7000 Years of Jewelry (2011) were extremely instrumental in compiling a well-rounded historical understanding of the relationship between women, jewelry, and survival. By reading and researching, I was able to construct a kaleidoscope of stories, images, and artifacts which supported my thesis ideas with historical evidence.

I studied nature directly by acquiring materials directly from nature at research excursions to local park areas such as Mendon Ponds Park in Mendon, NY. Here, I observed nature and the patterns of growth of plants and fungi, the behaviors of animals, and the interactions between the land and the wildlife. I also took dead branches and thornbush stalks to make castings for my pieces. I also visited an exhibit on amphibians at the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC) to study the adaptations, coloration, and defense mechanisms (poison, camouflage, etc.) of frogs and their relatives. Further explorations at the RMSC allowed me to learn about the practices of adornment of the Haudenosaunee people, the Native American
tribes local to this region. Their materials, taken directly from nature herself, inspired me to order materials such as the leather and porcupine quills for my piece Don’t Be So Prickly.

On a technical note, I continued to improve my techniques and expand my repertoire using a number of methods. Meredith, an undergraduate student in the metal and jewelry program, taught me how to build a mold for the casting process which I had not been allowed to develop in Kuwait. I would not have been able to construct the piece Transformation, which features castings of real thorn branches, without her help. I also studied technique books such as Longhi and Eid’s Creative Metal Forming (2013), which combined with many hours of self-teaching, allowed me to hone my skills in forging, blackening silver with liver of sulfur, heat patina, and soldering. Finally, I employed some unofficial but highly effective research methods, such as studying John Ahr’s Online Jewelry Academy video channel. Ahr’s videos, particularly his tutorial on making copper fold formed pieces (2014), inspired my Paper Leaf series and has had a serious impact on my technical growth as a designer. Throughout this period of library research, online explorations, and in-person research excursions, I have cultivated a body of resources and inspiration sufficient to nourish the creation of this collection.

Influences

In order to craft my thesis elaboration earlier this year, I studied the work of big names such as Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe, but also examined more modern creators such as Heather Thompson, Sharon Church, Rachel Thiewes, and Jane Ladan. Their work led me to even more inspiration and resources which helped this collection take on its full, mature character.

In Metcalf and Van’s Showcase 500 Rings: New Directions in Art Jewelry (2012), I discovered a 2011 piece by Damia Smith called Defense Mechanism (Fig. 1), which employs
barbed wire and crocheted metal to ward off unwanted touching of the wearer. This piece captured my attention because it takes a traditionally feminine art form (crochet) and weaponizes it against intruders into the wearer’s personal space. In a similar vein, I admired the work of Jesse Mathes, who I discovered within the pages of 500 Necklaces Contemporary Interpretations of a Timeless Form. (2010) by Paw Prints Press. Mathes’ pieces, such as Rebato (Fig. 2) and Elizabethan Collar manifest the woman’s hunger for personal space and for the preservation of her peace of mind. Inspired by the supportasses of Renaissance England, the starched collars of aristocrats and wealthy merchants were originally designed to show off a person’s wealth since they had to be washed and prepared daily, were intricate to make, and were expensive to purchase. However, like many other aristocratic garments, these pieces also served as limitations on a person’s mobility and their ability to be self-sufficient. Additionally, the physical isolation and loneliness experienced by women of that social class, while at the same time having the demands of society imposed constantly on their bodies, were crippling to women’s spirits. Mathes perfectly captures this conflicting feeling of hostility and helplessness in her work. A similar sentiment is expressed in Holland Houdek’s Untitled (Fig. 3) and Rickson Sharkey’s Spikes (Fig. 4), which I found within Ramljak’s On Body and Soul: Contemporary Armor to Amulets (2014). Houdek uses
reeds to project the personal space of the wearer, while Sharkey uses human hair and resin, all materials from nature, mounted on an exoskeleton in a cross between armor and augmented biology.

Ramljak’s (2014) curated collection of works also featured a number of pieces designed to give the wearer the powers or characteristics of animals, either to protect them from harm or to equip them better for conflict with enemies or predators. Of course, this concept resonated very well with my thesis focus. One such piece is Danielle Nicole Hills’ Predator Rings (Fig. 5) and Tara J. Brannigan’s Waking the Wolf, which both provide wickedly beautiful prosthetic claws for the wearer. Other pieces, such as Rebecca Burton’s Devil’s Yoke and Lin Stantionis’ Red Lotus feature poisonous-looking plants and silicone tentacles which seem to be growing out of the wearer’s body. While it is tempting (and instinctive) for a person to shroud and clothe themselves in these protective devices, Ramljak (2014) makes an important point about the burden of these sharp, poisonous, or cumbersome pieces (and more importantly, the psychological and emotional barriers they represent): “At which point does protection become a prison?” (pg. 12). The further I dove into the depths of this research topic, the
more profoundly I understood this truth: we must not fall prey to the illusion of safety at the cost of our own humanity.

Finally, there were some fascinating historical figures and phenomena which inspired my work in this collection. One such incident was the so-called “hatpin peril” of the early twentieth century, when women’s hatpins became the source of a hot debate about female power and the right of women to defend themselves against attackers. This period of public outcry began when a woman using public transportation was sexually assaulted by a strange man (as was so often the case for women traveling alone). Instead of allowing the assault to continue, she withdrew her hatpin, a large, decorative and sharp metal pin used to secure fashionable ladies’ elaborate hats to their hairstyles, and promptly stabbed him. The resulting “hatpin peril” occurred when men, fearing retaliation from women for their sexual misconduct, began to paint the hatpins as a public safety hazard (rather than the attackers themselves) and called for their abolition. Female hysteria and lack of sound judgment was also called upon to justify the removal of the hatpin from a woman’s wardrobe. Fortunately, the attempt to disarm and discredit women was unsuccessful, and is still explored today in tongue-in-cheek pieces like Marilyn Da Silva’s *The Devil’s Garden* (Fig. 6).
I also found the story of feminist arts advocate May Morris inspiring and enlightening. Morris was a late nineteenth/early twentieth-century craftswoman who exemplified the overarching conflict between gender, privilege and the arts. Although Morris was extremely talented, she had to work even harder to be recognized for her work because she was a woman. Fighting against centuries of sexist laws and cultural biases, Morris’ constant dedication to her work and her tireless vocalizing for female visibility helped to turn the tide of sexism in the art world. The male-dominated world of architecture and design, riding on the coattails of the Industrial Revolution and the belief in the superiority of machines over people, scorned the decorative arts such as Morris’ embroidery as feminine and therefore useless (Elliott & Helland, 2002). Morris fought against these prejudices, making spaces for female artists such as the Woman Artist’s Guild which she founded, and making sure that women’s voices were heard in the art world. She encouraged her fellow female artists to take pride in supporting themselves financially through their work, and to ignore the resistance and discrimination coming from the men of the art community:

“Work done at the demand of fashion or caprice and that done inevitably, that is, for its own sake, are as widely dissimilar as can be: the first being discarded in a month or so as ridiculous and out of date, and the other remaining with us in all its dignity of beauty and fitness, to be guarded as long as may be against the unavoidable wear and tear of time.” (p. 41).
II: Evolution

Materials

I began the creation of this collection of pieces in the realm of materials with which I was the most comfortable as an undergraduate: working with metal. Metal was a comfort zone for me, a medium in which I felt skilled and competent, and which fit the traditional expectations of my field. The first pieces I created for this thesis, Thorn in Your Side and Transformation, are both constructed completely of metal. However, after some urging from professor Caballero-Perez, who reminded me that I was in a Fine Arts program and not just a Metals program, I began to push myself outside of that comfort zone and explore new materials.

My first exploration of materials outside of metal and stone was with the piece Winter Solstice, which incorporated faux plastic stones, welding wire, glass spikes, spray adhesive, and white heavy-duty paper with sparkles. My goal with this piece was to create the illusion of natural materials while using items that could potentially be sourced in a sustainable, recycled fashion. All of the items from this piece could have been obtained from discarded or recycled items around campus. Also, the butterfly camouflage on which the piece’s shape is based resonates with the idea that the materials are man-made items disguised as ones from nature.

After successfully creating a piece without my traditional materials of choice, I felt emboldened to go further from the conventional path in seeking materials for my other pieces. I created Don’t Be So Prickly, which employs 14K 14-gauge gold wire, faux leather, and real porcupine quills from Africa. For this piece, I wanted to tap into the hunter-gatherer ancestry of my predecessors, the powerful women who kept their tribes alive and safe and used the gifts of the land and the beasts around them to clothe and protect themselves. I used epoxy and extra
layers of leather to protect the wearer’s neck from the sharp ends of the quills. This piece took several attempts at securing the quills, requiring me to be creative and resourceful just like the early humans I was emulating. It was almost as if the spirits of the animals I was using were fighting me for control of the piece. I had to master them in order to perfect its design.

Next, I explored the plant kingdom, incorporating wool, real and faux poke berries and ivy leaves, and thornbush branches in the piece *Symbiosis*. I originally set out to create this piece entirely from real, not artificial materials, but the real berries were too heavy and threatened to drag the piece down. Like a gardener learning how to best train her crops to grow according to her will, I had to adjust the ratio of real and faux items to get the piece to move and drape in an organic fashion. Another version of this piece could be created over time with the use of training real vines, as long as it were properly supported. Handmade paper from the plant world also features in the composition of *Hatpin*, created from the seeds and fibrous bark of the mango tree.

Finally, I visited the ocean biosphere, using capiz shells, liquid plastic, welding wire, fairy lights, and faux fur in *Out of my Shell* and cowrie shells in *Priceless*. These pieces reflect the long history of island and coastal peoples incorporating shells and sea life into their practices of adornment. I would have liked to gather the materials for these pieces myself, but their rarity and faraway location prevented me from doing so. Still, I know that on the island of Capiz and wherever in the Indian Ocean the cowrie shells were sourced, that someone’s (perhaps a woman) livelihood depends on scouring the ocean for these beautiful creatures. Using nature’s gifts in an inventive way to support oneself and to create art from the bounty of nature resonates in sympathy with my thesis topic.
Process

It has taken about 18 months (three semesters minus school breaks) to complete this collection of pieces. Working both at the studio on campus and in my home, I have tended to begin and end one piece at a time, returning and making revisions later on after I had time to consider improvements or had the need to repair a broken piece. However, in recent months I have found myself feeling a loss of interest in some of the old pieces, as if I were “running out of steam” on a long voyage. I have taken to working on multiple pieces at once to relieve the feeling of boredom and to allow myself a little more freedom in the studio.

I began the process of deciding the concepts for the pieces by doing research into different adaptations and trickeries of nature. I watched many videos from National Geographic, looked at BBC nature videos, and read articles on camouflage, poison, and tricky behaviors in plants and animals throughout different environments. I also researched poisonous berries and their history of human usage, which is where I was inspired to use poke berries for *Symbiosis*. Most of my pieces did not begin as sketches, but rather as 3D paper models which I then crafted out of their actual materials. After completing the assembly of a piece, if it presented problems with durability, I would return to it and reinforce the adhesive, wire infrastructure, or closures to make sure the piece was strong enough to be worn and transported. Especially since my thesis focuses on the power and strength of females and our craft, I did not want my pieces to be seen as delicate or fragile.
The exhibition of the work took place on March 30 at the Bevier Gallery on the RIT campus. I was given a semi-private area about 12 feet square in which to exhibit my pieces. I hung the pieces so that they were suspended by transparent wire, or placed on minimalist stands, with the photographs hung like posters in the background. I also embellished the spaces around the pieces with touches of nature: flowers, leaves, etc. that matched the pieces scattered about the space to give the illusion of organic growth. Originally, I was planning on having the piece “Repel” presented on the wall, but due to the lack of room, I placed the quilt on the floor temporarily. This turned out to be a happy accident, mirroring my evolving process of creating the work. I realized a carpet is a good representation of women. A carpet on the floor offers warmth and security just as women do. One comment I received that the photographs spoiled the purity of the display, and that having the pieces independently hung in space would be more desirable.

However, I feel strongly that the centrality of the female body to the exhibition be preserved. All of my pieces are a testament to the strength of women, and to erase them from the celebration and sharing of this work would be counter to my purpose as an artist. Feedback from visitors to
the exhibition confirmed my belief that the photographs were helpful in humanizing and contextualizing the pieces, which are meant to be viewed as extensions of the female form, however striking they may be as independent sculptural arrangements.
III: The Body of Work

Each piece in this collection is designed to be a testament to the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and adaptability of women as they draw from nature’s bounty to ensure their survival. The pieces are identified either as wearable art or as sculptural pieces, for display or for practical use. Some pieces are sturdy enough for everyday wear, while others are more formal and experimental. Yet despite their varied materials and functions, they exist as part of a cohesive whole, a celebration of women’s creative power. The goal of this collection is to showcase the ways in which women and nature are forever intertwined, and to inspire viewers to reconsider their own creative potential, as well as to re-evaluate the way they see and treat the women in their lives. Topics such as personal space, sexual assault and rape culture, female strength/fragility, objectification, trafficking, and women’s unrecognized domestic labor are all explored within the collection, with the pieces serving as focal points for individual reflection and meditation. My wish is for viewers to come out of the exhibition with a renewed respect for women and the contributions that we have made to society. I want people to remember that, like mother nature, without women there would be no humanity, and that, like nature, women deserve our veneration and gratitude.

“The real ornament of woman is her character, her purity.”

-Mahatma Gandhi

Fig. 9: Caryatids from Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry
1. Transformation

*Copper, bronze*

*Inspiration:* This piece was inspired by an assignment in which I needed to construct a table. I found the project somewhat limiting, so I wanted to create a table which had many other uses as well, and I wanted to infuse it with a feminist discourse on women’s labor and their perceived usefulness in society.

*Construction:* I began the process of making this piece by manipulating sheets of copper until they took on the appearance of rose petals. Next I cast real rose stems/thornbush stems in bronze.
Because of the length limitations on casting the bronze (you can only make very short pieces), I had to make the stems in halves and then solder them together, which was very difficult and required extensive filing afterwards. For the paperlike leaves, I used 14-gauge copper. These pieces were created using forging and a cross-beam hammer was employed to create uniform lines. Finally, I soldered the roses to the stems and the leaves. I also employed some wood to steady and support the metal components of the piece. Next, I created a tripod base for the piece to stand on. I treated the entire piece with heat patina and placed a final rose in the center of the tabletop.

Process: Originally, my design for this table involved four petals. I over-traumatized one of my petals by repeated hammering and heating, so I was obliged to make the piece a triangular sculpture instead. I covered the mistake by covering the center of the tabletop with an additional rose.
2. **Don’t Be So Prickly**

*Porcupine quills, leather, gold*

*Inspiration:* I was inspired to make this piece by a few different aspects of nature. First, the porcupine, who is peaceful by nature but can expel her quills if she feels threatened. The porcupine wears her quills as a silent warning that other animals should not bother her and leave her alone. Sometimes I wish I had such an external symbol of my ability to defend myself, so that I did not have to engage in conflict with people. I wish people knew my strength without me
having to display it and hurt them - I wish they would just leave me to live my life unencumbered.

Also, the I chose the crocodile-like texture of the leather because I admire the crocodile. Her thick skin protects her from predators, extremes of weather, hot and cold temperatures, and environmental hazards. I wish that my skin was as thick as hers (literally and figuratively) and that I could move through the world unscathed by physical or other kinds of abuse.

*Construction:* To make this piece, I started out with a secondhand shirt and some repurposed leather pieces. I cut out many triangular shapes to create the layered look of real scales or armor. I used hot glue and stitching to affix these to the shirt. Next, I added the collar piece. The collar is made of repurposed leather, gold, and porcupine quills - it even has some of my own blood on it. This piece can be removed and worn separately if desired. The collar piece comes with snaps so that it can be easily removed, and has a leather backing to protect the wearer from the sharp inner ends of the quills.

*Process:* The process of making this piece was a little challenging and required some adjustments along the way. First, upon initially assembling the piece, I was irritated by the fact that the collar had a rough edge showing at the top where the neck meets the head of the wearer. I thought it looked very ugly. I ended up throwing out my initial collar piece and removing the quills. I made a new collar which involved bending back the leather to create a smooth edge on the top for a more polished look. I also began by only building a half-collar to show in the front of the wearer’s body, but I ended up filling in the full circle because I wanted it to have a more
full, functional, and polished look. I did not want the piece to be merely decorative, but to also be potentially useful as protection for the wearer.
3. Out of my Shell

Capiz shells, wire, LED lights, faux fur, silver, copper, pearl veneer, liquid plastic

Inspiration: I discovered capiz shells after my professor recommended that I branch out and explore different materials in my thesis work. I was shopping online for nature-based components for my pieces and was instantly attracted to the capiz shells’ delicate, translucent appearance. I knew instantly that I wanted to create a piece that showcased the shells’ ability to conduct light as well as form a protective barrier around a person. However, the finished piece
did not have the edge I desired to be a constant thread in all my thesis work, so I added a set of clawlike rings to provide a more threatening aesthetic.

*Construction:* To assemble this piece, I hot glued the shells to a wire frame, backed the frame, and added some LED lights in between the layers. The claws were shaped in silver wire and soldered together, then covered with a pearl veneer and liquid plastic to add shine and to protect the finish.

*Process:* I had to try multiple strategies with this piece to ensure its structural integrity and stability on the wearer. The capiz shells are so fragile that it is easy for them to break under their own weight. First, I simply glued them together, but it quickly became obvious that this technique would not be sustainable in the long term. I then constructed a wire skeleton to go under/behind the shells and keep them attached to a frame instead of simply being stuck to each other. I painted the wire white to hide it from view, but this did not give the appearance I wanted. I then tried attaching a fur backing to block this unappealing element, which also had the pleasant effect of protecting the wearer’s neck from the shells’ sharp edges. I also added small battery-powered LED lights for a twinkling, celestial effect.
4. **Priceless**

*Cowrie shells, organza, gold, clear nail polish*

*Inspiration:* Ironically, I originally chose the cowrie shell as a medium for this piece because of its similarity in shape to the Venus flytrap, my favorite plant and a great inspiration for my work. I did not know until doing some more research that the cowrie shell has such a rich history and that it was so important for the history of trade and of African cultures. What began as a purely aesthetic piece became a deeper exploration into the notion of meaning, price, and value of a person, especially a woman, and the reflections of women’s navigating those ideas through their own ornamentation with jewelry.

*Construction:* Initially, I started this piece with a backing of white organza on which to mount the shells. I added 10K gold spikes, affixed with epoxy and hot glue, to add visual interest and an element of danger as well as increased value. Some of the cowrie shells came with a blue tint,
which I liked because it gives the impression that the wearer’s surroundings are being watched by a supernatural eye. These shells were painted with clear nail polish to increase their shine. I used an incredible 1,000 pieces of cowrie shells in the making of this piece.

**Process:** Originally, I was only intending to make a short neckpiece in this project. I ended up making the piece much longer and adding gloves to add versatility and continuity to the piece. This piece went very smoothly with minimal revisions required.
5. *Thorn in your Side*

*Silver, gold*

*Inspiration:* This piece was inspired by cacti and succulents, which protect themselves from predators who would drink their precious water by growing spikes. Porcupine quills had also been on my mind when I designed this piece, including their attitude of passivity until provoked - a trait I often notice in women when handling conflict.

*Construction:* I began this piece by using the roller machine to imprint a lacy pattern onto a sheet of silver. This created an effect not unlike snakeskin, which I found very satisfying and organic.
Next, I used a stake to hammer and twist the metal into the shape of a winding cuff. I then used a drill to create holes for the spikes, which are 18K gold and silver. These spikes, I filed to be pointy but not lethal, and soldered into place so that they point slightly outward, not harming the wearer.

Process: In my first attempt, I attempted to solder the spikes onto the body of the piece without drilling the holes first. This caused the spikes to fall out as the solder from one melted while I was making another. This caused me to eventually move to drilling to secure the spikes first. Also, I originally wanted the spikes to form a straight line, but realized that a mix of directions would provide a more visually interesting and organic final product.
6. Winter Solstice

*Paper, plastic beads, glass, metal wire, thread*

*Inspiration:* I was inspired to create this piece by a couple of elements from nature. I noticed some Black-Eyed Susans in my neighborhood that were very beautiful. Also, in my independent research I was learning about butterflies and their behaviors, and I was particularly struck by the clustering process that butterflies sometimes engage in to protect themselves from predators and to mate. The presence of a large number of butterflies in a condensed space ensures that the species as a whole will survive, even if some of the individuals are picked off by predators. I
wanted to make a piece that shows the connectedness of women to nature, where the woman acts as a safe harbor for the butterflies or flowers to be protected in their time of need. I wanted the piece to feel like an organic growth from the wearer’s body, winding and weaving around her as if by forces of nature.

Construction: To begin constructing this piece, I started by heading to the craft store and perusing the selection of heavy-duty paper. I chose paper because I wanted the piece to have many details and a high volume, but to still be lightweight. I found some scrapbooking paper with sparkles which, to me, seemed to have the same iridescence as butterfly wings often do. I chose some plastic beads to represent the Black-Eyed Susans and to provide visual contrast with the white. I also used florist wire to create an underlying armature to allow me to manipulate the shape of the piece and fit it to the model’s body. I used hot glue to affix the flower/butterflies to the wire armature. This piece also included a set of shoes, wherein I used store-bought shoes and stitched the flowers onto the surface, earrings, and a bracelet. The earrings were premade silver bases, to which I affixed more flower/butterflies. The bracelet uses a metal frame painted white, with flowers affixed to it in the same fashion. I used long pieces of wire to suspend additional flower/butterflies to create a visual effect of motion and fluttering when the model/wearer walks.

Process: This piece was very exciting but a bit of a headache. I originally had a tail attached to the back of the piece, but I found that this created an awkward effect when the model walked, so I removed it. The piece also began as a symmetrical design, but I decided later to make it asymmetrical so that it would seem more organic and natural. Further, I needed to devise some
better closures to keep the piece on the model and to make it fit multiple sizes. Originally I just had some fabric which could be tied, but I later used lingerie clasps because they can be adjusted to different sizes. It was very difficult for me to create stitching that was invisible on the finished project. I did not want to rely too much on hot glue because it is not as professional and because it does not hold for as long, but I had a very difficult time stitching through the glue as it requires so much more force.

This semester, I added some icicle-like glass spikes to the piece to represent the season of winter and to carry through my theme of warning and protection. I was able to construct these spikes fairly easily with the help of a friend in the Glass department - I had some experience with glass and my friend helped me through the process of manipulating the glass into the desired shape. Unfortunately, my piece suffered some damage in transport to the RIT Project Runway exhibition. In the moment, I used staples to save the piece, but later I had to re-sew some of the stitching to return it to full integrity.
7. *Symbiosis*

*Wool, spray paint, real and artificial pokeberries, real leaves*

*Inspiration:* This piece was inspired by the many species of beautiful, colorful berries which are aesthetically pleasing to look at but highly poisonous to eat. Each year, these kinds of berries claim the lives of hikers and backpackers who are curious to try them and must pay the price of not knowing their local plant lore. I like the idea that the berries are a food source for birds and wildlife, but are deadly to humans. In this way, although beautiful, the berries and the plant which fruits them protects the wearer from ignorant, selfish curiosity, while the wearer provides a means for the plant to get closer to the sun, and for birds to land on her and feed, thus dispersing the seeds further from the parent plant. It is truly a symbiotic relationship.
Construction: To begin this design, I started with some plain wool fibers, which I painted brown, yellow, and green to mimic the palette of clinging vines. I then added both real and artificial berries to the web of wool roving - using only real berries, unfortunately, would make the piece too heavy and would distort the shape of the web. I used hot glue and stitching to connect the wool to itself and the berries to the wool. I started out with a graph-like base structure, and added more twisted vines throughout the process. Wool was my material of choice for this piece because it is malleable and can be manipulated to fit many body types and sizes, as well as giving an organic shape.

Process: Initially, I began with a very tight, linear pattern for the wool pieces, which did not satisfy me as it was too rigid and square and not organic enough. However, I ended up damaging the wool pieces a little by using the hot glue - when I went to reshape the piece, removing the glue took with it parts of the wool and left a mess. This is why I began to use stitching instead. I also initially tried to make the berries out of gold and silver, but they weighed the piece down too much and it lost its shape. Next I tried the real berries, but these were similarly heavy and dragged the piece down in an unpleasant way. I finally settled on a mix of real and store-bought foam-painted berries intended for a Christmas craft project, which provided an authentic look without distorting the piece’s shape or pulling it to the ground. Finally, to strengthen and further decorate the piece, I was initially going to use paper leaves, which I painted with watercolors, and plastic wire. I enjoyed the way that the leaves turned out, but I felt that they did not have the degree of realism I wanted, so I employed real vines instead. These are, of course, impractical for a piece designed for daily wear, but they are perfectly fine for an exhibition as a piece of
sculptural jewelry. Because the vines are not glued to the piece (they were simply threaded through the webbing and are removable), I could easily make an artificial version of the piece which could be worn without maintaining.
8. Repel

*Cotton fabric, cotton batting, brass spikes, fabric ink, metal etching plate*

*Inspiration:* This piece was inspired by the Venus Flytrap plant (*dionaea muscipula*), which takes its nutrients from insects it consumes. The Flytrap gets its energy from the sun just like most other plants, but uses the insects for food because it often lives in low-quality soil. With their beautiful, feminine appearance and deadly behavior, Flytraps have been a symbol for female strength and power in many facets of popular culture. This piece has the warm, domestic
quality of a quilt handmade by a loving female relation, but also possesses the ability to protect the wearer like armor or hinder enemies with its spiky exterior. The piece can be used as a blanket, wall hanging, or carpet, carrying different meanings with each use. As a wall hanging, it insulates and adorns the home as a talisman of protection. As a floor covering, it provides comfort and warmth to those familiar with it, but may prove a painful trap for those not paying attention to their surroundings. In a maternal way, it protects those who are part of the family, and repels forces or individuals who do not belong.

*Construction:* This piece took about six months to complete and required many steps. Some of the techniques were completely new to me, while others were more familiar. I created a plate for etching in my printmaking class in the fall of 2017 inspired by the Venus Flytrap. This involved drawing the pattern by hand on a metal plate, then etching the design with a needle and a special acid. I then used the metal plate to print the design on various colors of fabric. These pieces were then incorporated into a quilt which I constructed in my quilting class (also in the fall of 2017). I assembled the quilt layers and used a longarm quilting machine to sew an all-over organic freehand stitch to keep the pieces in place. Finally, I washed the quilt and added brass spikes mounted to screws on the underside of the quilt.

*Process:* This piece was a long-term project and was very challenging because of the newness of the techniques for me. One major issue I encountered was that I failed to set the ink on the printed areas before washing. This was a double error because 1) I should have ironed [and shrunk] the printed pieces to set the ink before they were incorporated into a giant quilt, and 2) I
should have set the ink before washing so that it would not bleed out and become discolored. My error meant that I had to re-print the designs over the discoloration, which was time-consuming and frustrating. I also struggled with the longarm quilting sewing machine, as I had never before used a sewing machine. I broke many needles in the process of stitching together the quilted layers. However, I am grateful for the experience and have definitely learned from my mistakes!
9. Daggers in Her Bonnet

*Handmade paper, peacock feathers, faux fur, mesh, welding wire, steel wire*

*Inspiration:* Throughout history, large, proud displays of jewelry and fashion have been a timeless way to advertise one’s wealth and status. Especially for women, who have historically been barred from owning property in many civilizations, jewelry was a socially acceptable way to concentrate wealth while also adorning the body. Much like strutting peacocks, both men and women show off their status through their adornment choices, hoping to impress others. But jewelry can sometimes have a hidden utility. Women, who also have been historically excluded
from the owning and operating of weapons, have often had to improvise their own means of defense against attackers (typically of the male variety). The famous ladies’ hatpin, a long, sharp metal object used to secure their enormous hats, became a self-defense strategy against “mashers” (sexual predators) on the emerging public transportation systems of the early twentieth century. The resulting “Hatpin Panic” led to increased awareness of violence against women, empowerment of women to travel alone, and even played a role in the success of the women’s Suffrage movement. This piece combines the proud plumage of the peacock with a flash of danger at the barely-concealed combination of adornment and weapon.

Construction: I began this piece with a wire armature, much like an umbrella in shape. This piece was then covered with uniform pieces of handmade paper in a repeating foliated pattern. The underside of the piece was trimmed with faux fur and all layers were adhered with glue. A mesh veil was affixed to the hat for an added layer of mystery and protection. I also created a giant, oversized hatpin from steel wire, sharpened at the end and painted a glittering gold. The hatpin is trimmed with real peacock feathers for a period flair and a touch of deliberate arrogance.

Process: This piece was a kind of victory lap after finishing most of my other thesis collection work. I thoroughly enjoyed reading about the history of hatpins and how women’s adornment history dovetails with women’s struggles for equality. I initially was planning to use cotton fabric for the underside of the hat, but I was not satisfied with the way it looked and thought the faux fur was much more elegant and period-appropriate. I also switched out the original feathers,
which were gold-colored and stiff, for authentic peacock ones. Finally, I ended up altering the trim on the hatpin itself from a store-bought flourish to a handmade paper one. I also repainted the pin with a more sturdy and natural-looking form of gold pigment after the initial attempt.
10. *Dionaea Muscipula*

*Handmade paper, faux eyelashes, welding wire, burlap, rose stems, natural wood*

*Inspiration:* Deep in the jungle, many creatures exist that are beyond our comprehension. Life blooms in unexpected ways, flourishing in this warm, wet climate with bursts of color and startling adaptations. The inhabitants of the jungle are a great chorus of life, with plants, animals, insects, and fungi all coexisting and commingling. This cloak, woven of plant fibers and frilled with the jaws of a thousand Venus Flytraps, could easily be the garment of a forest spirit or a dryad queen. It protects the wearer from pesky insects and sends a clear message that she who wears it is a powerful creature not to be challenged, but also deeply connected to the natural world around her.
**Construction:** This piece is crafted from many layers of burlap and handmade paper glued together over a wire armature. The flytraps are paper and burlap constructions decorated with “trigger hairs” made from painted false eyelashes for an added touch of realism. The burlap strings and garlands of flytraps cascade down the wearer’s back and the front of the garment wraps around the shoulders in an asymmetrical neckline. Wooden posts and rose stems are interchangeably spaced around the wearer’s face as a cage-like structure - whether to hide the wearer’s face and protect her from external threats, or to muzzle her and keep her from attacking others. It is up to the viewer to decide.

**Process:** Initially, I created a mock-up of this piece using only paper and artist’s wire to experiment with shapes and forms that worked for me. After this step, I cut large circles from the handmade paper to create the flytrap shapes. I used the remaining paper to create the jagged, cascading back pieces, not wasting any material. I used spray adhesive to affix the burlap and paper, and snaked a welding wire armature under the entire structure to stabilize it. One item which challenged me in the making of this piece was to cover the unfinished, raw edges of the flytrap shapes, which looked ugly to me. I wanted the piece to have a rough, organic appearance, but not a sloppy one. Extra paper came in handy for covering these areas up. I was also unable to fully streamline the line of the garment - as much as I wanted it to flow more, I did not want to sacrifice the organic nature of the materials or the repeating jagged shapes of the back of the piece. The burlap was a bit of a challenge to work with since it is not very obedient and tends to keep whatever shape it wants. Finally, I struggled to give the piece the stature and height which I wanted. I ended up adding more to the back to give the impression of height and gravity.
11. *Oculus Rapax*

*copper, metallic paint, faux fur, silver chain*

*Inspiration:* They say that the eyes are the window to the soul - the eye is certainly a central symbol in art and adornment practices. Not only is the eye area one often adorned by makeup and, more recently, body jewelry or colored contact lenses, but the eye is the vehicle through which we perceive art. One aspect of society which often goes unexamined is the concept of the “male gaze”, or the tendency for media to craft products and messages to appeal to a male audience. This concept bleeds into women’s lives as well, in how we are taught to present and conduct ourselves to best appeal to men. This piece, which translates to “ravenous eye”,
symbolizes the idea that women also hunger for media, products, and messages designed with them in mind.

**Construction:** This piece was a continuation of my *Dionaea Muscipula* and *Repel* pieces and my fascination with the Venus Flytrap. I used a similar process of cutting copper to match the Venus Flytrap’s appearance, then I made a texture by using etching acid technique, finally used glue to affix faux fur to the underside so that it would be soft and comfortable to wear. I secured the strap with silver chain so that the piece stays affixed around the wearer’s head. This piece may be worn with the *Dionaea Muscipula* or as a separate item.

**Process:** This piece was a sort of “victory lap” after I had already finished my other pieces for the thesis collection. Although some of my peers focused on a few or even just one piece for their exhibitions, I was not content even with the ten pieces I had created and wanted to keep working in the studio as long as possible. I continued to play with the Venus Flytrap motif and realized that I had not yet explored any items worn on the head or around the eyes. I also think that I was drawn to the eye region at this time of reflection and self-evaluation, as I prepared to exhibit my work and visually critiqued my own pieces more closely than ever. I believe that the mask is a fascinating item which I would like to explore further in the future - the act of covering one’s face, anonymizing oneself, but also drawing attention to the face at the same time, resonates with my focus on feminine adornment as a process of simultaneous presentation, concealment, and empowerment.
Conclusion

Evaluation and Critique

My greatest challenge in creating this collection of pieces was the large amount of trial and error involved. Because many of my pieces were explorations of new materials with which I had not previously worked, it was necessary for me to make many mistakes and revisions to my pieces before they were satisfactory. I had to remake several of the pieces once or even twice before I was happy with the result. Just like my thesis concept, I had to become resourceful, adaptable, and clever in order to overcome the structural and material obstacles that presented themselves.

My advisors’ feedback was very helpful in gaining some perspective about my work and its effect on others - when one is so immersed in a project for so long, it is often difficult to pull back and see the collection as a whole. I particularly enjoyed their feedback on the materials I chose for my pieces: as one advisor said in my dissertation, “some of these materials are not precious, but you have made them precious”. I also was grateful for my advisor’s comment about my development and future work - “you will come back to metal, but you will be different.” I think this is very true as I consider my future projects, and how my explorations of different materials will inform my new work even if I go back to working mostly in metal.

I was also intrigued by an unspoken element which I saw coming through in much of the critique I received - the expectation by some people that I, as a Muslim woman from a Muslim country, feel specifically oppressed as a woman because of my background. I feel that there was an expectation that I would be more likely to criticize my own country and culture as a specific source of sexism. It might surprise some, but this was never my aim. I do not feel that I am
oppressed as a Muslim woman or an Arab woman specifically - in fact, I feel blessed and proud of my heritage. The oppression of women is a much more universal force which is just as powerful in the United States as it is anywhere else in the world. My pieces are not grounded in Arab or Muslim imagery, but rather are a reflection of the natural world, which, like women’s identities, is embedded in every culture and region of the planet.

I believe that the experience of creating this collection has improved my practice as an artist as well as permanently altered my philosophy and attitude towards my art. I am normally fairly driven and intense towards my work, cultivating a strong vision and pursuing it passionately. This collection made me pause and consider more patiently what results I wanted to achieve and what processes might best help me to achieve them, more than I ever have before. The experience of setbacks and failures with certain pieces was frustrating, but also pushed me to stop hurrying towards the finish line and to consider alternatives for each piece. This has made me a better artist because, in these liminal spaces of waiting, considering, and reflecting, I discovered a more playful, experimental side to myself that I believe is an asset to my art.

Finally, constructing the pieces in this collection had a sort of amuletic effect on me as well. I realized that the pieces I was creating often corresponded to traits which I desired for myself (thick skin, protective spikes, etc.). In meditating on these concepts and imbuing the physical artifacts themselves with my intentions, I could feel myself absorbing the qualities which I wanted to possess. I also believe that reflecting on these concepts and our society’s treatment of women has made me more self-aware and more observant of forces of oppression and adaptation in my world.
Future Plans

In the future, I hope to continue to explore themes of nature and evolution in my art. I would like to continue to experiment with new materials, including cultivating live plants for the purpose of using them in wearable pieces. I also want to continue to integrate my metal work more deeply with my use of new materials, so as not to forget my own roots and experience. I would like to take these desires and new ideas to a Ph.D. program in the fall so that I can complete my education and eventually return to Kuwait to teach art in higher education.

This thesis has truly opened my eyes to the connections between women’s fates (positive or negative) and the use of ornaments throughout human history. As Steiner (2001) explains within Elliott and Helland’s (2002) *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts*, “Throughout aesthetic history, women and ornament have functioned as analogues. Women wear ornaments (more consistently than men), and have been considered, for better or for worse, ornaments to society and the home” (p. 3, ibid, p. 57). Either treated as pleasing, but useless decorations or distrusted as artifacts of black magic or deception, women have always been at the center of the debate on whether beauty and ornamentation are good or evil. I hope that through this body of work, I have been able to communicate that beauty and decoration are not inherently good or evil, but are simply mechanisms by which living things adapt and survive in their various environments.
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