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Garments as living sculpture

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Garments as Living Sculpture
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I Introduction

In my thesis of work, I was inspired by the changing seasons as reflected in nature. I chose the four seasons as a theme because I have always been intrigued by the different colors and textures that are reflected by nature in the different seasons. An interest in garments helped me decide how to apply this interest to my thesis. I have chosen to create garments which are both aesthetically and functionally sensitive to our human needs. By producing a variety of techniques and styles, I hope to appeal to clothing wearers everywhere.

On October 13, 1989, I was flying over Syracuse on my way to Massachusetts. As the airplane descended, I could see the shadow of the plane on the forest below. The colors of the leaves on the trees were so intense and so beautiful, I thought there must be some way to capture the feeling of the changing seasons in my garments. I tried to visualize different colors and motifs to coincide with my feelings during each of the seasons as we know them here on the East Coast.
II  Ikat

Ikat is a method for coloring and ornamenting fabrics with the help of resist dyeing. This means that the pattern (design) is not applied directly (e.g. by painting or printing) and also not by weaving (e.g. with threads of different colors and/or binding systems) but by protecting parts of the yarn with resists (reserves) during the dyeing process. After the dyeing, the resists are removed and the pattern appears undyed on a colored ground. This process may be repeated, and it may be applied to white or colored yarn.¹

A. Development

For my first piece, I designed a jacket to be worn during Autumn and to represent that season. The technique of utilizing specific imagery in ikat was one that held special interest for me, so this seemed like an appropriate place to begin. First several leaf shapes were plotted out on graph paper to see if the idea was feasible, then the sampler was begun. I was not satisfied with the colors of the leaves at first, but felt encouraged that the idea would indeed be successful. Because of some unforeseen problems, this project took a lot longer than originally anticipated, and I was behind schedule from the beginning. But because I had already set my goals on the four seasons as a theme, it would not be possible to go with anything less than four finished pieces and still be consistent with the theme. Rather than dwell on the scheduling problems, it became clear that I would just have to keep going and do my best.

B. Process

The warp was wound in ½" sections, and these sections were then stretched out taut on a table using boards with nailed driven into them at ½" increments. The design was then placed underneath the warp, and each section was then wrapped tightly with a blue plastic tape called Kosuri tape which shrinks when immersed in the boiling dyebath
and produces a resist. When the sampler was created, the individual colors each required a separate tie and dye process, for a total of four dyebaths.

For the final piece, it was evident that it would be much easier to paint the colors for the leaves to insure better distribution and control. The colored leaf portions were then wrapped and the background was dyed. After dyeing, the leaf shapes were unwrapped. It was evident that some touch-up would be required on the shapes because they had been unwrapped too soon and the dampness of the background caused the colors to bleed.

The body of the jacket was woven in one section with two shuttles in slit tapestry for the front opening. Plain weave was used to compliment the ikat process. This also facilitated a faster weaving process, since the tying and untying took so many hours. When the end of the warp was reached on the loom, it became increasingly difficult to create a good shed for the passing of the shuttles. This was caused by a lack of sufficient thrums allowance. The allowance had been overestimated at the beginning, and underestimated at the end. If the warp had been reversed, this would not have occurred. Another warp had to be wound separately and tied on to each individual existing warp end to lengthen it. This needed to be done without altering the tension on the already woven portion by inserting leash sticks before the reed and securing them to the castle side supports.

The leaf motif was repeated only on the right sleeve to give the feeling of leaves being blown about by the wind. Both sleeves were woven simultaneously on two individual warps side by side to insure that they would be identical, pick for pick. The shape of the sleeve was achieved by a tapestry technique of decreasing warp threads by cutting
and tying them off to make the piece narrower as it was woven.

After coming off the loom, the hemlines and neckline were staystitched and the excess warp was cut away. The garment was assembled and finished with a complimentary dark green binding on all the seams and around the neck and hemlines. Covered shoulder pads were used to enhance the shape of the garment.

C. Response

This piece was very exciting for me because it was the first and it got the whole thesis rolling. I experienced a lot of frustration during the process, but the end result made it all worthwhile. The jacket is very comfortable to wear, as I hoped it would be, and fashionable as well. I am especially pleased with the clarity of the leaf images. Once the touch-up was accomplished, they appeared just as I had seen them in my mind's eye when I drew my first sketch. This was a successful beginning of my thesis.
III Seminole Piecing

When the hand-cranked sewing machine came to the Florida Everglades in the 1880s, the Seminole Indians began using it to embellish their clothing with colorful and ingenious patchwork bands. These designs were so small that it would have been impractical to piece them by hand. Instead, the Seminoles used a technique called strip piecing, machine-stitching strips of fabric into sets, then cutting the sets into segments and reassembling them to form bands.

The Seminoles weren't the first people to use strip piecing, but the Seminole women developed the idea in such a distinctive way that the technique rightfully bears their name today.

There are six basic band styles:
1. Segments cut at $90^\circ$ and reassembled side by side, with alternate segments reversed.
2. Segments cut at $90^\circ$ and reassembled offset.
3. Segments cut at an angle other than $90^\circ$ and reassembled side by side, with alternate segments reversed.
4. Segments cut at an angle other than $90^\circ$ and reassembled offset.
5. Combination bands in which segments from more than one strip set are used.
6. Combination bands creating medallions.

Also, traditionally, the Seminoles used strong colors - mostly reds, yellows, and blues, and rarely used patterned fabrics in the strips.

A. Development

For the Winter garment, however, there was a need to design with texture rather than color because of all the various snow-covered surroundings.

My next challenge was to find as many commercial fabrics as necessary to convey a study in texture and to research Seminole piecing. I chose ten different fabrics and began creating a series of samples. I narrowed the fabric selection to seven fabrics because of technical difficulties in sewing together some of the fabrics. Some of the
selected fabrics were a pure white and some had a cream hue. I tried to incorporate these by alternating one next to the other in order to give an overall white appearance. I was amazed at the values that I could see in white, depending on how and what kind of light was reflected off the fabric.

B. Process

The seven fabrics chosen were cut into strips of varying widths, from ⅜" to 1½". The strips were stitched together using a ¼" seam allowance. These larger pieces were then cut to approximately 10" squares, reversed, and reassembled to create a larger piece of fabric. The pattern pieces were then cut out of the new fabric. Each pattern piece was heavily basted to batting, and the ⅜" seam allowance was eliminated in the batting. The surface and the batting were then assembled as one unit.

The lining material was then cut out and assembled, and stitched to the outer layer by the front and neckline. Again, dense basting was required to immobilize the lining so that the entire garment could be hand quilted along the outer stitching lines. The lining reflects the pieced look of the pattern on the surface without being pieced. The sleeves and bottom hem were blindstitched and decorative "frogs" were added as closures.

C. Response

This process of piecing fabric together was one I had never tried before and I really didn’t know if I would be able to convey all that I had hoped when the idea came to me. I do feel, however, that all I wanted to say was said, and I am very pleased with the results.
I am excited by the amount of textures created in all of the fabrics after they were combined. It appears as though there are more than seven fabrics represented in this piece because of their interaction with one another. This is the feeling I was trying to portray; that, as in Winter snow, there is more to it than meets the eye.
IV A Color Exploration

A. Development

Color is a very important part of Spring. After a long, cold Winter, the first blossoms and buds are a welcome sight, as well as the rain washing away the last of the snow. It was this last element that inspired “April Showers.”

“may Flowers” was designed with more traditional Spring colors - a colorful pastel warp with mostly white for the weft. This was meant to be worn during the day, as opposed to the more elegant, night time quality of the first piece. Woven in the same technique, “May Flowers” was meant to reflect the new growth of Spring.

B. Process

Spring was the most difficult of all the seasons for me. It is my favorite season, and for this reason I could not decide what kind of imagery, or if any, I would like to represent. I finally decided to try to portray a feeling instead of a concrete image and proceeded to develop two color studies, one in my favorite Spring colors and another in the more traditional colors for Spring. I hoped to stay away from the common, almost trite, definition by choosing colors which I would most like to wear in the Spring. I am pleased with the pieces, but they do not necessarily communicate “Spring” to everyone.

A mixture of slubbed blues and violets were combined with some pastels to create a reflection of cool evening rain. A loose, lace-like plain weave was used to allow the Spring breezes to flow through and tickle the wearer.
The biggest problem with the first piece was the selvedges. Because so many colors were used and the weave was so loose, there were long floats at the selvedges that could not be avoided, except to cut each thread at each pick, leaving many ends to be woven back in, which became unsightly in such a loose weave.

Finally it was decided to hem the selvedges, in order to conceal the floats, which worked very well. For the white piece this was not necessary because the color palette was more limited in the weft, thereby creating a self-finishing selvedge.

C. Response

These pieces were started after completing the Fall jacket, but were the last of my thesis works to be completed. I do not feel that these were as successful as the other pieces, and they really do not fit in with the shapes of the other pieces, i.e., they do not have any definite shape as the others do.

However, I am still pleased with the end results. I feel that the conflict presented of whether or not they represent Spring is in itself representative of that season. Do we not often wonder, when April arrives, if it will be hot and sunny or will it snow one last time?
V  Handpainted Silk

A.  Development

"Under the Sea" is a reflection of the beauty of a coral reef, its fish, and warm sunny days. My obsession with the undersea world began when we acquired an aquarium for our apartment. I researched fish, specifically the most colorful and exotic and decided on using coral fish as my imagery to be painted on silk. I used French dyes because of their exquisite color, and silk charmeuse because of the drape and sheen.

After obtaining a kimono pattern, I chose a simple design called the jimbei and cut the silk to the specified dimensions. Because of the complexity of the fish imagery, it was suggested that I silk screen the fish shapes onto the silk and handpaint or airbrush the background. I wanted the finished product to have a stained-glass look in the shimmery fabric and the transparency of the colors when the light shines through.

B.  Process

The various fish forms were silk screened onto the body of the garment with Procion dyes. Silk screening is a process similar to stenciling where certain areas are blocked to prevent dye from flowing into them, thus creating imagery. After the invention of polyester silk was no longer used widely, but the process still retains the name. A length of polyester Dynex was stretched on a frame, and then treated with a light sensitive emulsion. The desired image was created in the form of a film positive and placed under the treated screen in a vacuum frame to temporarily adhere the film to the emulsion. The screen is then exposed with a mercury vapor lamp, the film is removed,
and the image is rinsed, leaving the areas that had been unexposed free to allow dye or pigment to pass through. The silk fabric was stretched and pinned to a table, and the screens were laid over the fabric at precalculated places. Dye was mixed with an alginate to thicken it, and was squeegeed through the screens onto the silk.

The piece of silk was stretched on a frame. The forms were then outlined in a gutta resist, and the rest of the scene was drawn freehand, also in gutta. French dyes were used to paint the colorations on all the pattern pieces. These dyes have intense colors and they blend well together, similar to watercolors. The background was done in an overall wash with several different colors giving an effect much like airbrush, but with better control. It was not necessary, then, to mask out all the shapes that had already been painted.

The garment was then steamed to set the dyes. I decided to use &frac16;" French seams to assemble the garment to prevent any future fraying of the silk. Then the entire piece was dry cleaned to remove the resist.

C. Response

I have always loved the oriental influence in fashions and it has been a dream of mine to create an original *kimono*. I was successful in realizing this dream.

painting on silk gives such an effect as I have never seen anywhere else. The results are quite stunning, especially on the silk charmeuse.
VI The Four Seasons

I view myself more as a craftsperson than a fine artist as my pieces are very functional. I believe that the craftsmanship that goes into a piece greatly enhances its aesthetic beauty.

All the techniques represented in my thesis have a great history from the country of their origin. I am continually influenced by historical references and intrigued by the way history repeats itself, especially in fashion.

Overall, I feel that my thesis was successful in that it was an exploration - a time for learning different processes and experimenting with things I had never tried before. In the future I plan to develop my love for garments and traditional craftsmanship and to further explore the history of techniques.
Endnotes


Bibliography


