Wearable Art

Elizabeth Garver
A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Wearable Art
by
Elizabeth R. Garver

Date: May 15, 1982
APPROVALS

Advisor:  Donald Bujnowski
Date:     5/19/87

Associate Advisor:  Mark L. Lenderman
Date:     May 19, 1987

Graduate Academic Council Representative:  Fred Meyer
Date:     5/19/87

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts:  Dr. Robert H. Johnston Ph. D.
Date:     5/20/87

I, Elizabeth R. Garver, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Elizabeth R. Garver
8363 Lower East Hill Road
Colden, New York 14033

Date:     Elizabeth R. Garver
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................. 1  
Historical References ........ 3  
Fabric .......................... 6  
Use of Color ................... 8  
Discussion of Work ............. 9  
Conclusion .................... 14  
Bibliography ................... 15  
Appendix ....................... 16
Introduction

Art communicates idea through the integration of materials with intellectual and intuitive feelings. Clothing has long been used as a form of communication, as a means of expressing a personal identity, an aesthetic. Garments, by enveloping the figure with texture, color, and pattern, create individual environments. They become natural extensions of the body and mind. Most art, while visually communicative, does not permit a physical interaction between object and viewer. As a functional object, wearable art invites people to become actively involved with the work, to share in the experience of the artist's creation. A unique, and unusual experience, this interaction adds a dimension of communication unavailable in many other creative media. Wearable art is said to be "like walking into a painting and having it come to life around you." ¹

Wearing unique, one-of-a-kind clothing becomes a special event, evoking a sense of tranquility that speaks of handmade craft. Because I enjoy this clothing, constructing wearables for women seemed a natural progression for my interest in fabric and design. Wearables provide a recognizable structure that everyone relates to. The creation of wearables as art offers me a link to the feelings and responses of others. This work intends to speak

of joy and energy that can characterize the unique sensibilities of each wearer. I am interested in developing a dialogue between garment and participant that can broaden and energize their combined visual relationship.
Historical References

Within my desire to create wearables, I found myself searching for connections between fashion and art. A distinction between wearable art and fashion is that fashion applies to a prevailing conventional style that is favored at any one time; wearable art is an individual statement reflecting a personal vision. This personal vision may be influenced by the "conventions of the day," but does not necessarily rely upon them for acceptance or understanding.

While fashion history over the last one hundred years has provided a visual reference for this project, the clothing designs of the early 1900's were the most inspirational. This period in history (1910-1930) saw many revolutionary changes, liberating the body from layers of heavy fabric and bindings. These new, lighter styles emphasized the shape of the figure, complementing the female form. They offered a more comfortable alternative to the previously bulky fashions indicative of the Victorian era.

The works of Mariano Fortuny, a European artist and clothing designer, were influential in the development of my own ideas about wearable art. Working independently of mainstream fashion during the early 1900's, Fortuny's work reflected the classic Greek styles in clothing. His garments were made of silk and velvet, simply cut, and falling loosely to the ground. These were sometimes gathered at the waist
by a belt, or at the bust, in the manner of an Empire
dress. "Scarves that easily adapted themselves to every
kind of shape gave Fortuny new ideas, and in his hands
were transformed into jackets, tunics, or wraps of printed
silk." He worked from these simple ideas and structures,
developing countless variations on a theme. His unique
and highly individualistic fabrics and designs depended
on a merge between his mechanical ingenuity and artistic
sensibilities. The whole process, from raw materials to
the final product, depended on Fortuny. He developed his
own method of stencil printing, dye compounds, and machin-
ery to pleat silk fabric to his specifications. It is
said of Fortuny that

... he invented fashion outside of
fashion. Fashion that does not change,
fashion as an art. Timeless clothes in
which their beauty lies in elegant simpli-
city, perfect cut, quality of material
and sensuality of color. All these ele-
ments, perfectly integrated, made a Fortuny
garment a work of art.  

Madeline Vionnet, another European clothing designer
from the early 1900's, provided additional influence for
my work. Her creations reflected proportion, balance, and
harmony between the dress and the rhythm of the body under-
neath. Vionnet was known for her skillful use of the
fabric cut on the bias. The bias cut enhances the drape,

\[2\] Guillermo De Osma, Mariano Fortuny: His Life and
Work (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.,

\[3\] Ibid., p. 119.
flow, and fall of the fabric. These dresses speak of great simplicity, disguising their intricate workmanship.

In response to the styles developed by Fortuny and Vionnet, I began to create wearables that focused on simple elegance and fluid motion, while enhancing the relationship of form and figure.
Fabric

It is important not only to balance historical reference with personal interests, but to remain responsive to materials and process. Focused on women's fashion, I was interested in exploring variations of jacket styles, utilizing silk and hand-woven cotton fabrics. These styles encouraged rhythm, balance, and form as integrated with the figure. Because clothing communicates through movement as well as with structure, these were two ways in which to search for new ideas.

My concerns for structure were directly related to the materials used in this work. Silk pongee, silk noil, and hand-woven cotton were all incorporated into the garments, as dictated by the constructs of each new idea. These materials suggest a quality of elegance and uniqueness that exemplify my interests in women's fashion.

Silk is an infinitely adaptable fabric. Its ease of manipulation and draping capabilities consistently suggested new structural possibilities. When dyed, it develops an intensity of color that can subtly change in response to light and movement. Its smooth, reflective surface offers a complementary contrast to the more textural, matt surface of my woven fabrics.

The woven fabrics, while different from the silks, also provided new possibilities for designs. Initially, my approach to weaving the fabrics included having reasons for
all the aesthetic decisions I was making. I soon realized that the process of creating wearables from this fabric was as important as any singular fabric design. I began responding more intuitively to colors and materials, using the resulting fabrics as a stimulus for the finished garments.

My yardages explored different textural effects and color schemes using satin and twill weaves. Each piece projected unique combinations of color and structural relationships. Utilizing the vast capabilities of a sixteen-harness loom, I was able to produce a variety of patterns within each fabric. The visual directions created by these patterns suggested forms, collar constructions, and waistlines. In this way, I was able to develop my interests for two-dimensional design, relating it to the sculptural structure of a three-dimensional garment.
Use of Color

The use of color played another important role in establishing both compositional and emotional sensitivities within the work. The selection of specific color relationships was usually intuitive and experimental, although certain color schemes were intended to enhance both subtle and aggressive themes. Soft pastel colors were used to add a feeling of gracefulness and elegance, complementing the fluid line of silks. In contrast, bright, demanding colors were incorporated into the woven fabrics, supporting the more structural, aggressive shapes and forms. While colors do enhance each garment's "personality," they can also compete for the viewer's attention, manipulating the direction of each visual exploration. Color schemes were sometimes developed that could be "keyed" (or brought to life) by the addition of one or more complementary colors. The introduction of small amounts of contrasting color established a positive tension between all colors, energizing their combined effect in each piece.

Color was also used as a decorative embellishment to the form. By manipulating colors against one another, I was able to complement formal structures, while contributing totally to the decoration of each garment.
Discussion of Work

In response to form and materials, two distinct series of women's jackets emerged. One series incorporated silk with appliques of miniature garment patterns. These styles encouraged a loose, flowing appearance that could adapt to a variety of figures. Their uniqueness of form is dictated by the individual wearer. The other series was constructed primarily from hand-woven fabrics, accented with variations of silk in the collar, necklines, and shoulders. These jackets have very definite forms that rely less upon the shape of the figure and more on the style of the construction. Consequently, they are less adaptable to a wide variety of figures.

Working from sketches, I constructed prototypes from inexpensive fabric. This stage helped me to visualize the three-dimensional drawings. Using a dress form as a mold for these designs, I made revisions to correct physical and visual problems. Once completed, the prototypes were used to construct the final piece.

An initial approach to the work included having a conceptual base for all the garments designed. I soon realized that the finished work was as much an experience about the process of putting together various materials and techniques as it was about singular design ideas.

My first attempts at constructions involved working with intricately hand-woven fabrics. The hours of work
required to weave these fabrics caused a great reluctance to cut them apart, as I feared a mistake which would set the process back weeks. This led me to proceed cautiously, assuming very few visual risks. As a result, these first garments were unchallenging, slowing the process of intellectual growth for the work.

As an alternative to the precious, labor-intensive woven fabric, I began working with silk pongee and silk noil, two readily available commercial fabrics. This change in materials offered freedom to concentrate more on ideas and less on the logistics of creating original fabrics, restoring confidence and excitement to the project.

A series of three silk jackets was constructed that focused on the decorative elements of surface embellishment. Childhood memories of clothes hanging on a line, and paper-doll cut-outs provided an impetus for visual content. The surface of the jacket was designed as a supportive background onto which miniature (toy) shirts were appliqued. These shirts were cut from a variety of colored silk and attached by hand and by machine. The shirt appliques were manipulated structurally from flat surfaces to stuffed three-dimensional forms and layered free-hanging elements. These decorative additions were used as a pattern, creating areas for the eye to enter and explore, not only the garment's imagery, but the forms expressed by the jacket's adaptation to the body.
In search of an alternative method for surface manipulation, I found the sewing machine to be an important tool for this body of work. With its variety of stitches and colored threads, its mark-making capabilities offered a method of "drawing" on the surface, adding decoration and defining edges and shapes. While stitching enhanced the designs inherent in each jacket, it also added a subtle, complementary texture to the smooth surface of the silk fabrics.

Handmade paper provided a means for my initial experiments with miniature clothing. These experiments incorporated paper shirts and dresses and their use as a decorative pattern within a larger structure. In this way, papermaking was used to formulate connections between past thoughts and present interests. The ease and immediacy of papermaking helped to resolve many ideas, first explored in paper, then translated to silk. Henri Matisse's paper cut-outs were also a source of inspiration. His constructions demonstrated simple, ordered usage of color and shape.

The freedom and spontanaity developed in my papermaking became reflected through constructions in fabric. These silk wearables are garments about garments, exploring the notion of clothing as a decorative embellishment of the body.

With three silk jackets completed, each a variation on surface embellishment with miniature clothing, I felt a
need to return to constructing wearables from my hand-woven fabrics. Again, three pieces were eventually completed, using this material, two jackets and a vest.

This series of garments was designed out of a response to the patterns and colors characteristic of each fabric. The visually dominant patterns created by the color and texture in the fabric were reflected in the aggressive structure of each piece. Angular and curvilinear shapes were incorporated within the designs, accenting necklines, wastelines, and shoulder forms.

The repetitious patterns inherent in woven fabric suggested the addition of complementary repetitive shapes such as stripes and pleats. These elements created focal points from which to explore and relate all the parts of the garment to an overall harmony of texture, color, and form.

Garments are generally symmetrical in design, partially in response to the symmetry of the body. Interested in challenging this format, I designed several asymmetrical components into each piece in this series. One jacket is one-third pleated and two-thirds woven fabric, with a collar that progresses in size as it circles the neck. Another incorporates stripes of silk in irregular vertical bands, as a complement to the colors and pattern in the woven fabric. These asymmetrical qualities are not only a complementary contrast to the symmetrical structure of the woven designs, but provide a less predictable appearance
to the garments, challenging the viewer's expectation of symmetrical design. I found the asymmetrical components of each piece added variety and interest, suggesting an artistic sculptural context separate from functional ability.
Conclusion

Designing wearable art has offered a challenging merger of aesthetic concerns and craftsmanship. The thesis provided an opportunity to concentrate and expand on ideas and processes previously unexplored. This freedom led me to many yet unanswered questions about structure, fabric design, and functional objectives, which I hope to examine in the future. New directions for the work include my investigating garments as non-functional, sculptural objects, rather than utilitarian ones, questioning the parameters of art and fashion.

The thesis was a springboard to new areas and interests. It is by no means finished, but will be used to re-examine ideas and expand on them. Through failures and discoveries made during the daily work process, my sensitivities toward wearable art and fashion design have grown. In reflection, a major accomplishment gained from this work is my learned ability to transform two-dimensional ideas into three-dimensional realities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


EXHIBITION CATALOG

APPENDIX

Description of Photographs:


2. Back View.

3. Detail.


5. Back View.

6. Detail.


9. Detail.

10. Silk Shirt - Dyed Silk Pongee, French Dyes, Gutta Resist, Machine Applique, Front View.


12. Detail.


15. Detail.


17. Back View

18. Detail
Appendix, continued

19. Jacket - Hand-Woven Cotton, 16-Harness Warp and Weft Face Satin with Twill,
Dyed Silk Pongee, Front View.


21. Detail.