Fashion in sculpture

Yi-Meei Wang

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

FASHION IN SCULPTURE FORM

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PREFACE

The inspiration of indulging myself into the entire process of this thesis, in self-explanation, is nothing more than a desire. It is made up of two main elements: the desire of self-seeking and self-expression, and the determination of self-fulfillment. For an original love of arts, textiles and fashion, I am eager to confront an artistic way of making clothes.

The strategies within this study can be approached in two major categories, conceptual researches and technical experiments. The focus of conceptual researches is placed in integrating and examining the historical mode and some artists in relative field in order to build up a personal vocabulary. The technical and artistic experiments are set to create a new way of working that enables me to control every single variable toward the final dress production.

Over a period of six months, a series of works were presented in the thesis show, which demonstrated the complexity and particularity of this thesis. The scope of research includes the debate of fashion and art, in both the historical and individual concerns.
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To My Family
INTRODUCTION

Perhaps clothing as an art form is one in which we need the juxtapositions on an occasion to realize clothing's demonstrative, epigrammatic eloquence. We may need a solid confrontation and argument between concepts to remember that clothing carries ideas as if in every function, every expression and suppression of need, and garments that divulge their symbolism as distinctly as in every form of art.

Clothing is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium. Clothing can be analyzed therefore not simply for the messages it presents in fabric but intrinsically as an aesthetic form, a self conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualisations of the human body... a form of self perpetuating visual fiction, like figurative art itself.

Suppose clothing could be traced back through a succession of expressions, as flat as painting, taking its form from the delicate balance of colors, patterns, volume, and movements; as abstract as sculpture, taking
its form from simplified and abstracted anatomy so that the clothing and the human body become a whole, and if clothing is an expression of eternal and exact truths, inherent in the artistic matter and thus its manifestations of an absolute beauty, predestined, of divine origin... then let this model of two-dimensional and three-dimensional harmony be infused with a poetry of feeling and memory to sublimate the discord of past passion and desire in a recomposed neutrality of being.

Madeleine Vionnet, working in Paris in the '20s and '30s, sets the terms of the debate. Though to modern eyes her couturier gowns may look conventional - They are very elegant, at least - her approach to design was anything but. Vionnet designs for the body in motion, for a woman who exists in three-dimensional space and time. She abrogates notions of front and back, of breaking the body into discrete parts or planes. Conceiving of the garment as dynamic rather than static - as cleaving to the living woman under-neath Vionnet developed the bias cut and adopted lingerie techniques - pin tucking, faggoting, rolled, hems - which allowed her to eliminate interfacing and to keep the silhouette pliant and soft.¹

One can strongly relate to the body as sculpture in motion, and instinctively acquire an understanding of the

consequences in draping it with fabric. In knowing that the changing patterns created by color and shapes are an integral part with the visual message of a garment on a figure and that these configurations can alter or accentuate its underlying contours. This delicate balance of pattern, volume, texture, and movement is at the core of the interest in clothing as an art form.

One of the most important influence on this thesis project was the profound connection between modern painting and primitive ethnographic artifacts. In this series of works I try, through compound historical reference, to integrate the materials and processes, and with life-interacting functions, which evoke the absolute beauty.

This is what the work reflects: an aesthetic object, wholly contemporary, yet evoking primitive magic, creating an architectonic anthropomorphic look which is visual and truly a functional object. They are as rich conceptually as they are aesthetically. My goal with each piece was to create a self-expressed, yet contemporary clothing, that was also a statement about the transition of clothing and fashion, fashion and art. This series of works, Metamorphosis, Paramountcy, Synopsis, Enigma and Ode, expose completely the notions of fashion as an art, named Fashion in Sculpture Form.
PART I

FASHION AS AN ART
1

Human-beings - Clothing

As for the human body, Hegel had already suggested that it was in a relation of signification with clothing: as pure sentience, the body cannot signify; clothing guarantee the passage from sentience to meaning.

Clothing, in the broadest sense, is experienced by all people of all cultures. It comes between the individual’s body and the outside world whether as minimal as a strip of fabric, as enveloping as head-to-toe covering or as ephemeral as painted adornment. Clothing is the material and conceptual substance that defines and thereby distinguishes the public and cultural from the private and naked. The difference between representations of clothing and a clothed figure is a significance.²

Clothing figures are generally viewed as complete. A representation of clothing in isolation from the figure invites the viewer to follow convention and mentally try on the work. It is in this intimacy, this invitation to participate with the works and make them complete, that

clothing is such a powerful vehicle for artist. Clothes, unlike the human body, can be contemplated and engaged with while never completely objectified. This outer layer can often reveal and communicate more than the body itself.

There is the formal concern with the shape of garments and the implied space occupied by the body. An external concern is for the history of dress and for its political implications and social functions: clothing can identify sex roles, status, ritual or means of protection. Clothing is also being used as a metaphor for experience and the externalisation of a spiritual condition: it can embrace a personal history and psychology.
The Function of Clothing

Like culture, clothing is primarily a means of expression, which reflects a social reality in which the individual communicates social needs, aspects and specific roles.

Changes in fashion almost exclusively with changes in visual art. The function of clothing is to contribute to the making of a self-conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualizations of the human body. This self image is modeled on the image found in art, including painting, sculpture, photography and film: “Dressing is an act usually undertaken with reference to pictures - mental pictures, which are personally edited versions of actual ones. The style in which the image of the clothed figure is rendered - in whatever representational art is most comfortably consumed and absorbed as realistic at a given time - governs the way we create and perceive our own clothed selves. Such images in art are acceptable as
models because they are offered not as models at all but as renderings of the truth.”
3

Clothing – Fashion – Art

In theory, if we argue for the diminished or abolished distinctions between high art and popular culture, then art and movies, art and advertising, art and every other visual phenomenon in an increasingly visually-attentive world become partners at parity. Image-thieves and image-sources can be differentiated, but their uses can be viewed without hierarchy or traditional distinctions. In practice, contemporary art has, more than ever since the 1950s sought an almost seamless reconciliation with the practices of our popular culture and in accommodation with other means of perceiving than those of the traditional fine arts.

Fashion plays a role in this process as well, for not only did the familiar Hans Namuth photographs appear in Life Magazine and the film was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, but in the same year Vogue published Cecil Beaton’s fashion photographs in an article called “The New Soft Look” photographed in front of the Pollock paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery.
In fact, the association between art and fashion is a long one and is only growing more intense. The depiction of elaborate clothes, rich embroideries, subtle colors, and shimmering, sumptuous fabrics has been an irresistible challenge and a joy for painters since the days of anonymous medieval manuscript illuminators. Of course, painters have occasionally gone beyond merely recording what was worn in front of them. Gustav Klimt, in his portraits of women, “designed” dresses that are more prominent than his subjects’ faces.

Art and fashion connection is more complex than mere thievery and inspiration. Because of the transitory nature of clothing styles and the speed with which fashion absorbs whatever is new, fashion often reflects or even predicts a common mood or desire, a yearning for change, a nostalgia for a more glorious past, a need for a new and improved future.

Subsequently fashion designers as disparate as Halston, Issey Miyake, Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, and Jean Paul Gaultier would use the Pollock splatter as a textile design that would surely represent the feeling of the modern and the sensibility of art.

On the other hand, when the focus of modern art shifted from realism to abstraction around 1910, with the birth of Cubism, the illustration of clothing fell away as
a commonplace subject. And there is a long history of artist becoming directly involved with fabrics. Matisse, finding himself dissatisfied with the current fashions in women's hats, created an old-style feathered bonnet for one of his most famous series, the 1919 "Plumed Hat" pencil drawings and the related painting White Plumes. And the artists of Bauhaus, the Wiener Werkstatte, and Russian Constructivism, all working during the early decades of this century, saw clothing and textile design as part of their utopian projects to create a new society with a new esthetic order. Geometric forms, as symbols of preeminent human rationality, figured as a main element in many of their designers.

Yet perhaps the most intimate connection between art and fashion occurred during the heyday of Surrealism - Elsa Schiarelli was well equipped to introduce Surrealism into the fashion arena. The new fashions in dress were not based on functionalism or common sense any more than avant-garde art was "functional." The stylistic tendencies that dominated the early to mid-twentieth century can be summarized by the world "modernism," and, however hard it is to define, the very name indicates a deliberate break with the past. The experimentation with new forms became increasingly common in all the arts, including the art of fashion. Like the new painting, the new music, and the new
literature, fashion was undergoing an internal stylistic revolution.

The so-called cross-fertilization between fashion and art, however, has been mostly one-way. As the English fashion journalist Ernestine Carter points out:

The truth is it is virtually impossible for even those most anxious to be convinced to find that fashion [in dress] has ever exerted any influence on the art of this century. Rather fashion has reflected the transitory phases of twentieth-century art as swum into its fashionable ken... Fashion has in fact battened on art, especially in France... And at a further remove fashion has simply adapted itself to the influence of art on interior decoration.3

It is fashionable, even art-historically sound, to say that art and fashion seemed to be reconciled in the 1960s, with journalists such as Marylin Bender testifying to the synergy of fashion and art in that epochal decade. But those indomitable, vexatious energies seem to have come back into the 1990s with a like kismet: blurred boundaries and shared traits make art like fashion and fashion like art. We are witness again to mutating bonds among art, fashion, and culture in the 1990s.

PART II
FASHION IN SCULPTURE FORM
METAMORPHOSIS

Size: 56"(W) x 37"(L) x 1"(D).
Medium: wool, silk, wool thread, silk thread.
Technique: dyeing, felting, machine embroidery.

Metamorphosis is a fully resolved wearable, which may be considered "Art". A concept with imagery, form, and texture, and enwraps the body as a protective blanket, magical and wrapping itself around the human form.

Several steps were involved in completing the Metamorphosis. Often beginning a project by the conceptual visions with various drawings related to what I feel, during the initial process.

When the sketches formed, work began on the making of the coat. The first step, was to put the white wool roving in several dye pots in which I could produce variety colors, copper green, teal, brown, and gold. After dyeing, they had been carded and then felted together. Silk thread was used to sew the various lines together using a zigzag
stitch, which also outlined the brown rectangle shapes. An embroidery texture was added to each piece.

When this was complete a fabric that was carded, felted and embroidery would become the material that I was going to create using the flat approach to draping a coat.

In the beginning, I worked using the flat approach, which is used in pattern making. There is another technique when one uses a muslin draping approach before using the hand-made felt. One first takes a fabric and drapes it to create the various seams.

The flat pattern approach involves measuring the body, figuring the design of the form and the shape of the garment.

It was cut out of into muslin. When it was flat, this became my canvas. After cutting the muslin out and seeing it flat, it was sewed together. This experienced was exiting as I viewed it for the first time three-dimensionally.

Understanding the physical or three-dimensionally of some-thing feeds my imagination with aesthetic information; that in turn allows me to manipulate a form creatively.

There is a special magic about learning how to construct and reconstruct that opens up a new and more ambitious way of developing an idea. Encouraging various
directions in drawing, as an imaginative and enriching way one begins to understand the visual experiences and acquires the knowledge in which to build a language with which one can manipulate ideas.
Figure 1. Front of *Metamorphosis*
Figure 2. Side of *Metamorphosis*
5

PARAMOUNTCY

Size: 59"(W) X 35"(L)x 2"(D).
Medium: wool, silk, leather, wool thread.
Technique: dyeing, felting, machine embroidery.

How to describe the synchronous modern, when we live in an era in which the present seems so ineffable, transient in some forms and abstract in others? Is there a way of expressing in the ultimate thoughts of the century? Perhaps there is one metaphor that exists for both art and fashion and that may migrate and permute between the two forms.

The Paramountcy glows with this consideration because every stitch was touched with meaning. The fascination is the possibilities within a line and the endless possibilities of form and color. It can be laid out on a carpet or on a sheet, and it could be a wall piece. It kept growing, and the images kept getting larger and larger.
First, it is formed by the cut lines perfectly evoke the tremulousness of female figures. The image is always simple; otherwise, given the delicacy of this medium, it would be impossible to sew. The light-filled openings where the ocean blue felted-fabric's cut edges have ever so slightly pulled apart is given a semblance of substance by actual shadows that mimic modeling. The moment when the cut lines assemble themselves into an image is breath-catching. Moreover, it is a surprise as well, from cutting shapes into ocean blue felted-fabric and then pulling the shapes outward so that the edges can be sewed up with brown shadow felted piece.

They were inspired by Matisse's cut-and-pasted papers. This process has described the technique as a sculptural approach. Second, the mummies assert themselves incidentally. Not only do they stand out from the background, and the silhouettes of the mummies are also arranged as to lock the figures together. Mummies do not permit a simply associative interpretation because they evidently do not represent or resemble anything. In order to appreciate their beauty one must be able to enjoy their specific qualities as an abstracted expression.

Paramountcy freely distorts and transforms the body, specially, add the cone with different sizes that
is created from ocean blue felt. Their function should be to enhance and celebrate the female body. It is an exquisite sight. Returning to the concept, it raises four principles that are proportion, movement, balance and precision.
Figure 3. Front of *Paramountcy*
Figure 4. Back of *Paramountcy*
SYNOPSIS

Size: 29"(W) x 16"(L)x 2"(D).
Medium: wool, dye, boning, black thread.
Technique: dyeing, felting, machine embroidery.

As composer's conception that felting can use color for a composition, a completely unorthodox approach to manifest those feelings, emotions, and sensations of a realistic or abstract nature that were beyond the traditional content of the performing arts.

An explosive form, of unknown origin, seems to be forcing its way into the felting. Purple, blue, red, orange, ocean blue, gold ochre, green and yellow all the colors working together.

In the front piece of Synopsis, it splits the human figure into two groups. The right group, accentuated by a bright, energetic orange, evidently moves to the fore, and the yellow on some of the heads perhaps implies an affinity with the background
architecture. The group of large, black solemn figures at the left is moving out of the picture. Are they turning away from something? As matter of fact, they are intending to invite the design of the whole back piece. Human figures become to transform into black stripes, and the black stripes have been arranged in wave forms echoed with the beauty of body curve. However, there are boning inside the black stripes. This design is to recreate external curves and to emphasis the 'natural' body curve. At the same time, the purpose of the hollowing-out design is that the skin color contrasted with black stripes has such an effect that it appears to free itself from the background, to hover in the air and to jump at the eyes. This produces the 'synopsis' of the Synopsis.

Black outlining figures, black stripes, and the color of black, sound like a nonentity without any possibility for a new beginning, like a dead nothingness after the sun has set, like an eternal silence without future or hope. Musically speaking, it is like a completely conclusive pause after which any continuation would appear like the beginning of another world. It is the most soundless color to which any other, including the weakest one, would therefore resound more powerfully and more precisely.
Figure 5. Side of *Synopsis*
Figure 6. Drawing of *Synopsis*
ENIGMA

Size:  59"(W) x 5'(L) x 2"(D).
Medium:  wool, leather, wool thread, silk thread.
Technique:  dyeing, felting, machine embroidery.

According to one of my philosophy, the creative process should be a synthesis, i.e., feeling ("intuition") and mind ("calculation") should control each other.

In starting this project, a specific visual image is predetermined by making a series of sketches, which may take weeks to resolve, followed by experiments with procedures for translating the desired effect into fabric, such as layering colors' wool in a certain way to create a perfect felt.

By spending experiment with felting swatches, it is set to capture the right texture, right weight and graphic combination. In this project, the felt pieces are intended to be done in an intuitive, painterly way.
by laying color down and standing back and responding to do it, felting and adding, again and again, until variety textures are built up, such as pleating, bubble texture and weaving on layers of fleece; the felted rolags. In a many-colored layer, overlays showing placement of each color may be needed as well. As sketching takes place, everything must keep in mind, the horizon line, perspective and scale, light source and shadows, objects in foreground and background, and try to emphasize those spatial relationships.

By introducing the fan to the design of the sleeves, it enables the sleeves to open and close by a simple engineering that unfolds and thereafter collapses into itself. It becomes the direct expression of the body, involuntary of motion, and indivisible joining. The perfect sleeve should be a living sculpture, beautiful to behold. A discreet play of supple folds should ensure total comfort.

A variety of pleating in the waist area, manipulates two dimensions into three, training the eye to follow the color changes in surface and dept. This design enables Enigma to fit naturally over the breast and hip, reflecting an expertise akin to the art of sculpture.
Movement may represent a series of psychic events: it is an indication of life, with the function of freeing the psyche from accumulated stimuli and desires. *Enigma* works within a space that had re-devised, also add a certain depth sense humor, not merely putting fabrics together but producing an eloquent and three-dimensional structure.
Figure 7. Back of *Enigma*
Figure 8. Drawing of *Enigma*
Size: 16"(W) X 39"(L) x 17"(D).
Medium: wool, leather, wool thread, silk thread.
Technique: dyeing, felting, machine embroidery, collage.

The object is not interesting in itself. It's the environment that creates the object. The object is an actor: a good actor can have a part in ten different plays; an object can play a different role in ten different pictures. The object is not taken alone, and it evokes an ensemble of elements.4

That is the decisive point. The object is not interesting in itself. For example, the variety color felted fabrics can cut into several small ones if the visual effect is much better. Everything is changeable here if necessary.

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It becomes the basic structure of the *Ode*, by moving around the body with simultaneity and using constructional collage as a technique of achieving revised form, like learned from the ambiance of Cubism, but with focus on the color practice and construct-reconstruct theory. Simulating a molding shape, *Ode* was created by many geometric patterns, such as triangles, semi-circles and rectangles. Those geometric patterns can be manipulated into a variety of forms. This manipulation includes repetition, changes in scale, distortion, diverse choice of materials, and various methods of construction.

Colors and geometric forms each have a secret order and integrity: color is indivisible, a primary element; geometry expresses mathematics' inviolate rules. There are endless possibilities involved. As I previously mentioned that from the idea comes as design, through every stitch has been touched, to the *Ode* is created, I experience every moment with it; I found myself in it.

*Ode*, the constructional form that becomes a kind of body, and statue, the structure that extends the life of the real body, setting off a play in transitions between the real body and the three-dimensional sculpture.
Figure 9. Side of *Ode*
Figure 10. Drawing of *Ode*
CONCLUSION

This thesis is image, surface, medium of recognition. Existing out there, these pieces appear to duplicate the internals, disclosing me within its virtual space. But its range is elsewhere. Beyond the self I perceive another in-between, dilating in waves of harmony and dissonance, the tension of me for other. Inside is outside is inside.

All these are propositions and interactions for being in the world, like creation.

It seems I cannot distinguish anything as separate from myself so perhaps after all, I am the any-thing I create. I use this creativity/I relactantly. Consciousness itself implicates me, moving out from what feels central to form relations with place, time, image, others, everything.

There is nothing more needed to be addressed. I have just to form the conversations, and hopefully, I will be able to continue from this time onward.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


