


STRUCTURE IS EVERYTHING

A person is shown from the back, holding a large, textured, yellow and orange object that resembles a sculpture or a piece of fabric. The object is composed of many small, overlapping, ruffled pieces of material. The person is wearing a dark purple top and a light-colored, textured shawl or wrap. The background is dark and out of focus.

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”THE BEST ART AND WRITING IS ALMOST LIKE AN ASSIGNMENT; IT IS SO VIBRANT THAT YOU FEEL COMPELLED TO MAKE SOMETHING IN RESPONSE. SUDDENLY IT IS CLEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO. FOR A BRIEF MOMENT IT SEEMS WONDERFULLY EASY TO LIVE AND LOVE AND CREATE BREATHTAKING THINGS.”

Quote from the website
Learning To Love You More,
an interactive art project and web site,
founded by artists Miranda July and
Harrel Fletcher.

ABSTRACT/

This work started with a shape and a technique. Finding a method in developing volumes with the material in focus has been a theme throughout the project. The boundary between material and form has been investigated, just as the transition from sketch into ready garment. The result is a colourful and expressive collection of garments for women. The composition of the collection has been put together much as when making a collage, adding one interesting piece to another. The final collection ranges from one-off crafted pieces to more commercial or reproducible garments.

A BEGINNING/

In the beginning there is confusion. A million thoughts, a thousand references and too many wills. This project has revolved around trying to find a strategy to handle that confusion, to be brave enough to define my own methods. In many ways my work is a search for those rare moments of absolute clarity, when everything seems ridiculously easy and you know exactly what the next step will be.

It all started with a shape and a technique; fabric stretched over wooden sticks. My background is in textiles rather than fashion. Working with textile surfaces, prints and colours is uncomplicated for me, whereas I have always found the three-dimensional shapes intimidating. During this work I have tried to develop an approach to creating volume that suits my methods. My way of sketching, dyeing and printing is often based on randomness. I work intensely, quickly and roughly, trying not to control the outcome. Finding a way of keeping this form in creating three-dimensional shapes has been an important part of this project. Throughout the work I have asked myself if there is a boundary between material/technique and shape/volume. An ongoing issue in this project has been to examine to what extent the latter can rely on the former.

INITIAL REFERENCES/

At the start a few references were collected, artists and designers, references that have persisted throughout the project. Some of them have functioned as direct sources for visual research, while others have followed me more unconsciously.



Left: Comme des Garçons
S/S 10 women's wear collection.

The seemingly random construction of these garments interested me, as did the mix of colours and patterns.

Below: Elliot Hundley

Example: Hyacinth 2006.

The detailed work in Hundley's collages fascinated me. Viewed from a distance the composition of colours is the most striking characteristic, but when looking closely a narrative appears. Hundley uses

photographs, small everyday objects and personal stories in his work. The contrast in watching his work closely and from a distance, the details, was something I wanted to use in my own work. A catwalk collection is often seen from a distance, and the silhouettes must be intriguing watched that way. But to me it is essential that there is more to discover when zooming in, details that take form when looked at closely. Those details could be parts of a print or structure.



(http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/elliott_hundley.htm)



Above: Julie Mehretu

Excerpt (riot) 2003

I was intrigued by the combination of thin, sharp lines and light watercolour, the combination of geometrical shapes and the more blurred areas. This was a contrast I wanted to convey to my garments.

Below: Gerhard Richter

Ice (2) 1989, Abstract picture 1997

The layers, the composition of colours and Richter's way of painting with rough strokes attracted me. Richter's paintings had the randomness and the slightly chaotic feeling I was searching for.



During these past three years I have struggled to find a method that suits me. In previous projects I have spent too much time on the sketching stage of the process, and found the transition from paper sketches to the three-dimensional silhouettes difficult. Trying to define my methods was a challenge during the initial stages of the process, as was being true to them throughout the project. When searching my previous work, I realised that it all comes down to the material and the work my hands do: to the actual making.

Draping with a flat and clean piece of calico had been as intimidating for me as starting sketching on a brand new, clean sheet of white paper. The calico and the paper sheet are both media without any specific characteristics, they are created to be perceived as neutral and, hence, do not evoke any strong emotions. That is not where my process begins. I cannot start off from neutral. My beginnings need materials that give rise to sensations and ideas.

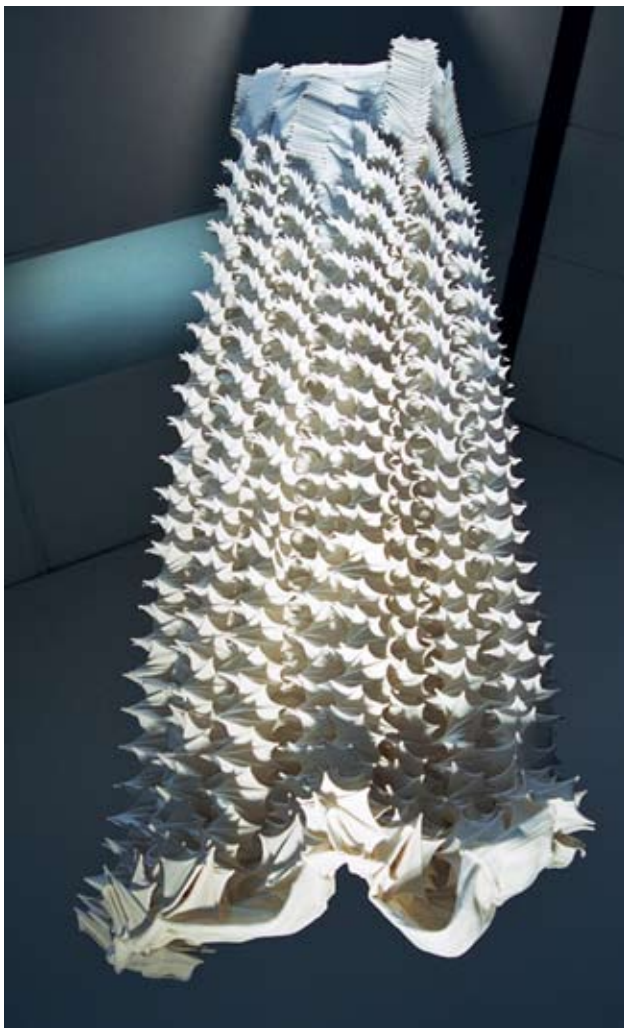
The material comes first, every time. The beginning is always, without exceptions, finding or creating an interesting material. I am driven by the sensation of the material in my hands, above all. The development of a volume starts with asking myself what shape that material will take. In order to keep the energy in my work it is essential to just keep making things; structures, garments, details. I have to trust my judgement and the decisions my hands instinctively make. The actual making and realisation of ideas in the proper material is what leads to new ideas. This is what my work must be based on.

My way of working has been rather intense and impulsive, trying hard to focus on one thing before moving on to the next. Continuing working, without stepping back, and trying not to think too far ahead has been central during the process. One piece at a time has been shaped in my hands, considering each and every item important on their own. Strangely, stepping away from trying to be in control of the result, and of the bigger picture, have made me feel more confident and certain along the way.

SKETCHING/

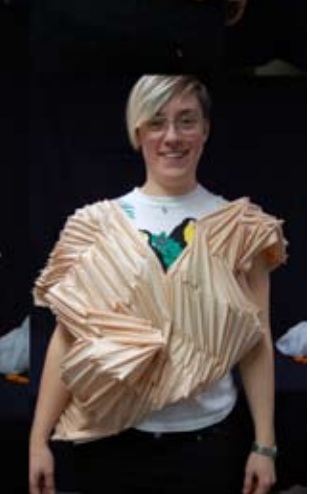
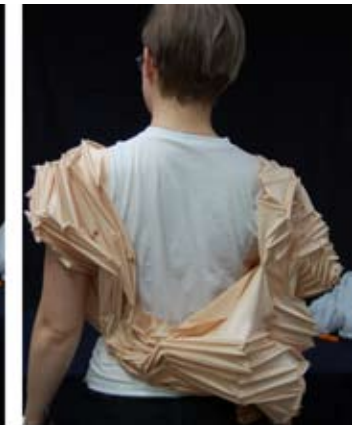
As stated above, there have been difficulties in the transition from paper sketches to the three-dimensional in previous projects. Therefore, I tried avoiding sketching on paper and instead worked directly in an interesting material this time. Sometimes that work led to making a toile, sometimes to a ready garment, sometimes to a failed experiment, depending on the result. In other words, a strict trial and error-approach was applied on every part of the work.

FIRST FORM/



Julie Mehretu's painting *Excerpt (riot)* (see page 5), became the starting point for developing a first form that related to the body. Trying to interpret the thin and sharp lines into a volume, I remembered a photo I had come across a couple of years ago. It was a photo of a garment made by designer and artist Rowan Mersh. When analysing the photo I realised that Mersh had used toothpicks and very elastic jersey to create the structure. I started experimenting with different kinds of wooden sticks and jersey and discovered a fascinating way of creating a random structure. The structure shaped easily into volumes, as the material already held directions and had three-dimensional dispositions.

(www.rowanmersh.com)



NEW REFERENCES/

The idea of carrying around objects, like in the first form made of toothpicks, lead to research on ways of dressing in other cultures. I stumbled upon these photos of people using their own body as a means of transporting large quantities of goods. There was a correlation between the shape and these images, and there was something interesting in both silhouette and colours. The way the head was utilised was striking. To develop ideas on headwear as part of the silhouettes seemed crucial.



Kalman 2005:Human store

Defining a mood was crucial for developing the silhouettes. I often lack specific inspirational pictures. The natural way of communicating tone for me is by making my own images. This time was no exception, so a collage to define the mood for the project was made. At this point I had almost forgotten the initial references, but despite that I did end up using part of Richter's and Mehretu's work in the collage. The mood was somewhat chaotic and unstructured. The intention was to keep those characteristics throughout the project. The collage as a medium was also a conscious choice. In order to keep the chaotic and unstructured tone in the collection, I sensed that I had to work with building the collection much in the same way as when building a collage. That meant focusing on small pieces at a time, and trusting the fact that many disparate items combined together can create an interesting wholeness.

From the collage a colour chart was also developed.



Mood collage



Colour chart

To a large extent, the sketching revolved around searching for shapes similar to the first created form. This meant looking further into the work of Rowan Marsh and to explore the possibilities of the technique with jersey stretched over objects of various kinds. Many ways of applying the technique was tried out, until a result with satisfying expression and durability was accomplished. My experiments started with a piece of fabric, of which I made a structure. To keep developing the ideas and to keep my interest up I tried to immediately adapt the structure into a wearable shape. Working with headwear became a good way of trying out these ideas in a volume that related to the body. The size was small enough to be rather quick to work with, and no construction of a garment was needed.

Interpretations of this first structure, in other kinds of materials and techniques, were also part of the development. One of the more important interpretations became that of pleats. The pleats were investigated and developed further, from thick stitched ones to fragile pleats made by heat treatment of fabric put in pleating templates, or knitted wave-pattern.

Once a structure was developed and tried in small scale, the draping and shaping of a garment could begin. This process took place on the dummy, draping with the real, structured material. This way of working was radically different from draping with a flat piece of cloth. My structured fabrics seemed to stimulate to building volumes, since they already had directions and a three-dimensional shape. Many of the techniques used were rather slow and involved a great part of handicraft. To feel the material slowly grow in my hands was of importance. The time spent working on the detailed structures meant time disposable for reflection and development of new ideas.

Some garments without structure were also developed, as a calmer and more traditionally garment-like complement. The sketching for these garments was made in a fabric with qualities similar to the intended material. These garments were developed in a more conventional way: draping on the dummy, making a pattern, stitching a toile and altering the pattern after fitting the toile on a person.



Experiments with objects and jersey/knitted fabric. Top shows development of skirt, see p. 32.
Center left: experiment with CD:s, for headwear p. 31. Center right: yellow structure with toothpicks, hat see p. 32.
Skin-coloured structure with ear pins, cardigan see p. 31.



Development of dress, see p. 33. Bottom right sketch for skirt, later made into hat p. 28.



Experiments with pleats, developed into skirt p. 26.



Pleated organza, later developed into dress p. 27 and top p. 29.



Knitted structures, developed into cardigan p. 30 and top p. 28.



Examples of toiles for draped garments.

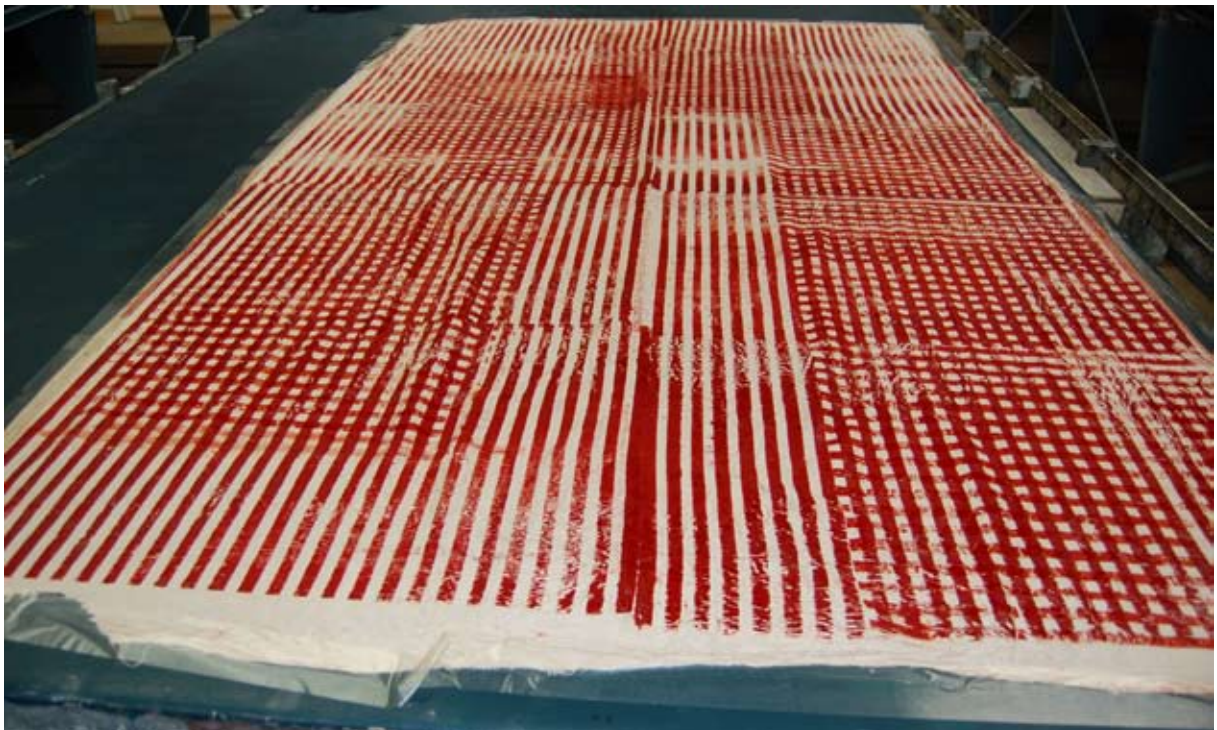
Sketching by way of printing and painting on fabric was also an important part. Prints were created by painting and printing on free hand directly on the real material, first as experiments in a smaller scale and then scaled up into full size. No repeated prints or measuring were used. In using this method the aim was to get close to the expression in Richter's paintings. A more figurative collage-print was developed mainly for transfer printing, but parts of it was also used in screenprinting. Whilst printing, I considered the fabric a canvas rather than cloth that would be made into a garment. The kind of printing dyes I used was dependent on the composition of the material and the wanted expression. For synthetic fibres and for prints where a thick, opaque colour was desired, pigment print colours were used. On items where the natural fall of the material was important reactive or acid dyes were used.

Randomness was a central factor in printing. When using reactive and acid dyes, the colours can look very different when just printed compared with when they have been fixated and washed. I let the colours have their own way this time, and in some cases the colours were radically transformed in the end. However, the variations were within my colour-limits. In the most apparent case, with the checked silk fabric, I actually liked the finished, transformed result better.





Above: Print for transfer printing.



Checked silk fabric, before wash. Finished result, see skirt p. 28.

At some stages of the process, reflection and consideration of the whole was required. At these points, I still tried to avoid sketching on paper or defining too much. The drafts for a line-up were made in Photoshop, with the completed garments and toiles as the base. Working this way I hoped to avoid fooling the eye into seeing something that was not and would not be there. I considered the sketched line-up as possible, rough suggestions for a whole, and not as a definite goal. The approach towards building the collection was that of creating a collage. Hence, an important thing when looking at the line-up was to be observant to repetitions of any kind. To obviously duplicate pieces would interfere with the intended unstructured composition. Another critical factor to look at on the whole was colour. It was important that colour was spread evenly in splashes all over the collection. When using the whole colour-palette the composition of the colours become extremely important. It was not until half way through the making of the collection that I made the first real life overview. I then realised that I had to rethink some of my colour choices. With the intended chaotic expression in mind, I decided that adding more rather than taking away would be the right strategy. Thus, more bright colours were added to achieve a balance.





Overview of parts of line-up, adding of more bright colours compared to line-up on previous page. See for example the neon coral, in the photo combined with the green pleated top.

SKETCH OR FINISHED GARMENT/

Many of the techniques I used required working in the real material at once, and so the boundary between sketch and finished garment became unclear. In some ways it was liberating to work with all items as if they were to become a part of the final collection. I was able to focus on one piece more intensely and during longer time, compared to how I had been working before. At the same time some problems were harder to solve with this method. When the sketch became a one-off piece the control over fit and finish diminished, as no first toile could be made and adjusted. Technical questions regarding ways of stitching had to be worked out along the way, with the risk of inaccurate solutions. The pieces coming out of this process are one-off pieces and can not be reproduced. The process gives you both more and less control than when working more traditionally in a ready to wear-way. More control in the sense that you can see the garment taking shape in the actual material, step by step. Less control because fitting the garment on a person and adjusting it during the process is more difficult. This made me fear ending up with pieces with a bad fit, or without movement taken into consideration. It also became important to me that the one-off pieces had a good finish, that they were neatly stitched.

GARMENTS AND ONE-OFF ITEMS/

As described in the chapter A Method, I have mainly used two different ways of developing garments; one for materials with structure, and one for plain fabrics. The techniques have resulted in garments ranging from the very wearable to the more spectacular.

As a result of the techniques used the one-off pieces turned out as shapes put on the body, rather than garments with references to other garments. Of course they related to other garments through the way they were placed on the body, taking the shape of a skirt, a dress or a top. But they lacked details like pockets, collars or buttonings, things that we associate with certain types of garments. To add some of these details in additional garments was essential in completing the collection.

The garments with structure came first. To find a shape for the other part of the collection I, again, looked at the paintings of Julie Mehretu and the features I liked in them. I had been appealed by the combination of hard thin lines and watercolour. The lines resembled the structures I had created, so what I needed to complete the combination was something softer, something correlating to the watercolour. In this case, it turned out to be draped garments. These garments would, as earlier explained, be made in a more traditional way; draped on the dummy, made into a pattern and then a toile, before completing. Drapes and layers were also what had attracted me in the photos shown on page 9.

To me, the one-off pieces and the more traditional garments complemented each other. I wanted the collection to be relevant in more than one context, and to show a collection with a broader range of wearability would be one way of achieving that.

CHOICE OF MATERIALS/

Many of the qualities used were selected because of their more technical characteristics, and not because of their feel or look. A very elastic kind of jersey was required to make the items with wooden sticks put on the inside. I found the right quality among sports textiles, a synthetic blend jersey with 20% elasthane. To make the pleated items a polyester quality was needed, as no other composition could be fixed in shape through heating. For making the skirt with the stitched pleated structure a thick material was required to give the skirt strength and volume. That led me to search for materials among upholstery textiles.

I would not have chosen many of the materials used under other circumstances. Synthetic materials normally repel rather than attract me. To work with qualities previously unknown to me was a good exercise. It broadened my perspective in searching for the right materials, and I soon discovered more and more qualities that were interesting, but in a rather ugly or repellent way. However, to mix those with what is normally considered beautiful, quality materials, good materials, seemed to be of great importance. My reasons here were probably the same as for feeling the need for giving the one-off garments a good finish: a fear of being considered incompetent or inadequate. To be able to choose the strange, wrong things, I felt I first had to prove that I knew what was right and beautiful. But of course, this was also related to wanting people to regard the collection, or items from it, as something wearable and admirable.

RESULT/

The composition of the collection was made much in the same way as when making a collage. One interesting piece was added to another, trusting that the wholeness would make sense, regarding the manner with which the individual items were made as the unifying bond. The aim was a dynamic and a bit chaotic expression, painted with rough strokes.

The result is a colourful and expressive collection of garments. There is no clear beginning and no end to this collection, just as there are no definite combinations. New items could be added, and the existing garments could be moved around to create a new collage.

Shoes in various colours, but in the same style as in the photos, will be added. More pieces might also be added during the coming week.





Dress in printed jersey, lined with quilted silk. Structure of various sized wooden stocks put into tubulars.

Straight silk trousers with pleats and pockets at front, trousers are to be shortened.



Pleated dress in two colours of organza. Under-dress in dupion silk, with lining.

Straight trousers in fine silk with two pleats at waist.



Headwear in printed jersey and wooden stocks.

Asymmetrical top in a striped two-layered knitted fabric, knitted on the industrial machines.

Draped skirt with printed checked pattern. Lining.

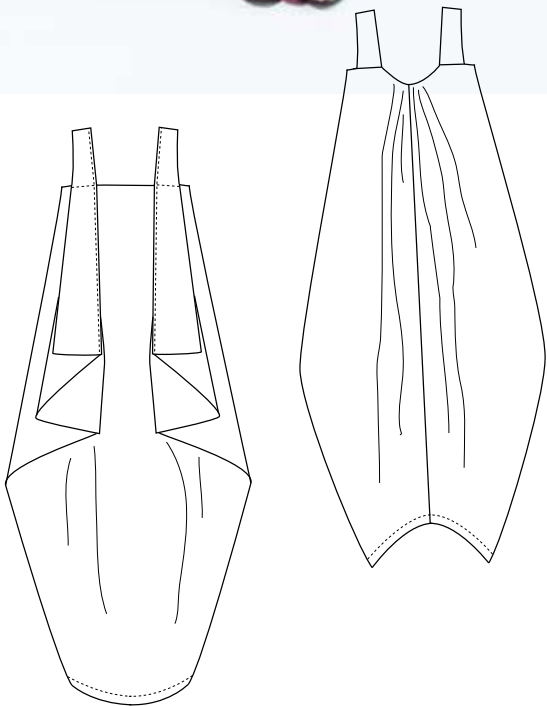


Headwear in jersey and CD:s. Spray dyed.

Cardigan in fine knitted viscose-blend, with structure of stitched in ear pins.

Draped double-layered tank top in chiffon, painted at front neck.

Draped trouser in viscose.



Headpiece made of printed jersey and wooden sticks.

Pleated cape made of printed cotton.

Draped dress in viscose twill.



Headwear in jersey and toothpicks put into tubulars.

Draped asymmetrical top in linnen/viscose blend. Printed and painted with reactive dyes.

Jersey skirt with large wooden sticks at front and back sides.



Headwear in jersey and wooden sticks. Covered in latex.

Top in semi-transparent jersey with transfer print and paint.

Necklace made of wooden sticks.

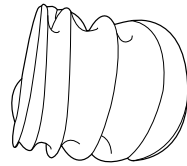
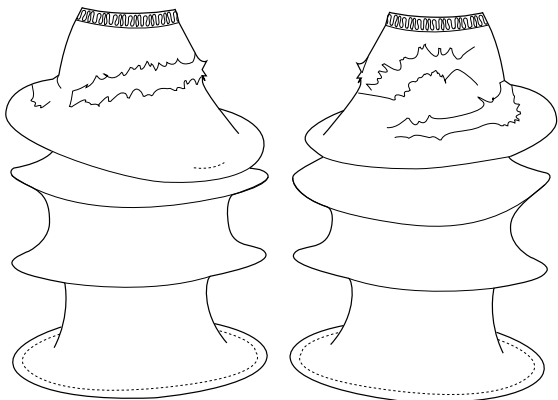
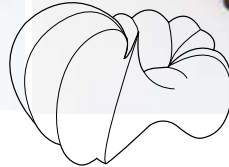
Skirt in pleated heavy upholstery fabric. Lined.



Knitted cardigan in wool with a wave-knitted structure, knitted on industrial machine.

Draped double-layered tank top in silk chiffon.

Draped trouser in viscose with a lot of volume at front.



Necklace made of jersey and vinyl records.

Top in jersey with stitched tubukars and wooden sticks.

Skirt made of jersey and hula hoops.

While making the collection I have considered it a catwalk collection, above all. The more traditional garments could easily be worn on the street, dividing the collection in two categories. Both the more spectacular items and some of the more conventional garments have experimental features in shape or structure, but the traditional garments allow the body to move and live to a greater extent. They could also be washed and treated as regular garments.

Combining show-pieces and more wearable garments seemed important in order to be able to show the collection in more than one context, and to be relevant to a larger group of people. Placing the collection in a certain shop or venue is hard, but I would love to see the collection together, as a whole, in a shop or showroom. The one-off items could work as display items, setting a mood and character. They could also be used for more performative acts, like costume for stage (theatre, music or similar).

I could also see myself continuing developing the techniques, under different circumstances, and develop more commercial versions of the one-off pieces. I am attracted to the work of Issey Miyake, and how developing the material is much in focus there. Miyake manages to work with textiles and structures, also within a commercial context (see for example Frankel 2001:40-51). That might be the next big challenge for me.

REFLECTION/

I have come a long way during this project. One of my aims at the start was to find a method in building volumes that correlated to my way of sketching. Draping with manipulated materials, and working in the real material from the start, I believe I found what I was looking for. These materials decreased the gap between material and form, and made that step less challenging. Also, concentrating on one piece at a time made me free to develop each item individually. I simply trusted the composition of the collection to work well in the end, based on the factor that everything was made with my hands. Many of the techniques used were rather slow and involved a great part of handicraft. To feel the material slowly grow in my hands was of importance. The time spent working on the detailed structures has meant time disposable for reflection and development of new ideas. I learned that my mind works best when my hands are busy.

A fascinating finding was that my previous resistance towards draping with a plain piece of fabric disappeared after working with the structured shapes. Making the simpler, draped garments came naturally and unforced this time. I believe I had built a confidence working with the structured pieces, and hence trusted my hands and my abilities to make something good.

Much of the focus in this project has been on creating materials with structure, and hence the issue of placing my work within textiles or fashion has recurred throughout the process. The answer is that I approach fashion through textiles. I cannot leave either of them; they are both dependent on each other. The material is where I start; it is my beginning. The shape and garment come after, but are no less important. One of the initial questions asked was about the presumed boundaries between material/technique and shape/volume. During this project I found that they both help develop each other, the material gives rise to shapes, and a thought volume gives ideas on material. I no longer see the urgency in thinking of the two individually. I also regard my position, considering development of material equally important as development of construction, a much needed one within the fashion business. I would say that, to a large extent, traditions and habits decide the choice of material for many designers. A jacket is made of wool, a shirt of cotton, and so on. This can lead to narrow-mindedness. Also, if the process always starts with the shape of the garment, the possibilities of unknown or new materials and fabrics might not be explored.

The almost sculptural way of building forms, in the one-off pieces, led to new challenges. One issue in working with this technique is that of movement. Creating structures and draping with them directly on the dummy gave little possibility for fitting the garments on a real person before completing them. I found that Merish's work, which was important in the initial stage of the process, had a limited relation to the body. I regarded his work as textile sculpture rather than fashion. Elizabeth Wilson states that fashion is characterised by the intimate relation between garment and wearer, the garments functioning as a link between body and culture (Wilson 1989:7). Similarly, Loschek argues that clothing without body does not awake emotions (Loschek 2009:40). To me, the presence of the body is important, as I agree that the body is essential for a garment to become fashion. Hence, what I wanted to create was not textile sculptures that could be worn, but interesting volumes that related to the body's shape. Volumes that are enhanced by movement, shapes that do not force the wearer into stillness. This would prove to be a greater problem than first expected. What I tried to do was to restrict the body's movement as little as possible, when draping the shapes. I tried to make sure that arms and legs could move freely, by giving them space and spreading the weight of heavy structures evenly. Some shapes were removed due to their interference with the body's natural movement. One example is the skirt, see bottom right at page 13.

I believe I have accomplished what I was aiming for at the start of this project. Being able to define my own methods and accept them is what I consider my main achievement during the work with this collection. Now, towards the end of the project, I find it hard to decide when and where and if to stop. I feel that this is not the end, but rather the beginning. Considering the way this collection is built, the work could go on infinitely, just making the collage larger and larger.

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