

A SARTORIAL VIEW NATURE*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the research methodologies, conceptual ideas and inspiration for a series of wearable art pieces included in a recent solo exhibition titled A Sartorial Nature. The work is inspired by nature, especially the organization and perception of nature by humans, and explores a range of ideas including beauty, metaphor, abstraction, memory, and artifice. Consisting of unique stitched constructions, the work intersects art, design, and fashion exposing a relationship to the body through skin, scale, and structure. The body is intended as a living armature to enhance the nature theme. A Sartorial Nature offers the experience of nature as a familiar reference point without any of the inconveniences such as hay fever, ticks, bugs, dirt, or weather. Whether literal, metaphorical, or abstracted, nature is an integral and important aspect of everyday psyche. Ideally the work in this series will inspire people to think about their own relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Nature, Recycled, Textile, Fashion, Art.

BİR TERZİ DOĞASI

ÖZET

Bu makale yakın zamanda "Bir Terzi Doğası" başlığı ile gerçekleşen bireysel sergi kapsamındaki, giyilebilir sanat serisine ilişkin araştırma metinleri, kavramsal fikirler ve ilham kaynaklarını tartışmaktadır. Bu çalışma doğadan özellikle de doğanın insanlar tarafından algılanması ve organize edilmesinden ilham almaktadır ve aralarında güzellik, metafor, soyutlama, hafıza ve sanat eseri olan birçok kurguyu araştırmaktadır. Özgün dikişli konstrüksiyonlardan oluşan çalışma ten, oran ve strüktür üzerinden beden ile ilişkileri ortaya çıkarırken sanat tasarım ve moda alanlarını kesiştirmektedir. Beden, doğa temasını vurgulamak amacıyla yaşayan bir omurga olarak ele alınmıştır. Bir terzi doğası; doğadaki sakıncalı öğeleri dikkate almaksızın, doğayı tanıdık bir referans noktası olarak deneyimleme olanağını sunmaktadır. Doğa; edebi metaforik veya soyutlanmış boyutlarıyla günlük ruh halinin bütünleşik ve önemli bir parçasıdır. İdeal olarak bu sergideki çalışma insanların doğal dünya ile ilişkilerini sorgulamaları konusunda bir ilham kaynağı olacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Doğa, Geridönüşüm, Tekstil, Moda, Sanat.

In March 2010 I presented a solo exhibition, "Oh Naturale", at the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery, University of Nebraska Lincoln. "Oh Naturale" included a body of textile art work inspired by nature, especially the organization and perception of nature by humans. Incorporated into the exhibition were previously made pieces that fit the nature theme as well as several works created specifically for the exhibition. Explored ideas included issues of beauty, metaphor, abstraction, memory, and artifice. I was subsequently invited to reprise the nature series for a solo exhibition at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Institute of Textiles & Clothing, Fashion Gallery. Realizing that the majority of the Hong Kong Polytechnic students viewing the exhibition would be fashion focused, I challenged myself to create several wearable pieces in direct reaction to the non-functional works. The results, exhibited September 1-30, 2011 in the exhibition, "A Sartorial Nature", were a collection of nine garments responding to the nature theme. While I have worked as a practicing textile artist for twenty-five years, my new work hovers in the uncomfortable territory between fashion, craft and art. Although exhibited as "art," it is also functional. As conceptual objects they avoid the realm of costume, if costume is described as a mask or disguise. Because they are not meant to be worn in typical daily life, they also circumvent the idea of artistic dress that prevailed amongst the avant-garde in the early 20th century. Many artists of this time period, including Giacomo Balla and Sonia Delaunay, chose to focus on simple, clean futuristic shapes and structures that strove to reinvent fashion (Stern, 2004: 65).

Ironically images of nature were rarely present as artist/designers aligned themselves with prevailing modernist art movements. The work in A Sartorial Nature most closely fits in with the wearable art movement that burst into existence in the late 1960s, led by a group of artists interested in revitalizing traditional crafts. This group also planted the seeds for what we now call sustainable design, creating beautiful objects outside of mainstream fads and meant to last (Dale, 1986:13). Melissa Leventon provides a concise and excellent history of wearable art in Artwear. Fashion and Antifashion, published in conjunction with the pivotal exhibition of the same name on view in the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Legion of Honor, 14 May

* This study was presented as a paper at the "1st International Fashion and Textile Design Symposium" organized between the 8th and 10th October 2012 by the Department of Fashion and Textile Design, Faculty of Fine Arts, Akdeniz University.

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– 30 October, 2005. Not surprisingly, concerns about the environment and inspiration from the beauty of nature are prevalent themes in art to wear (Leventon, 2005: 92). Nature themes have often paralleled other conceptual ideas in my own work, the exhibitions *Oh Naturale* and *A Sartorial Nature* focus primarily on the natural world and create a contextual environment for observing and interpreting the work. The juxtaposition of nature and artifice feature prominently in *The Forest* (2006), a large installation occupying a space approximately four meters square. *The Forest* was originally made for the Museum of Contemporary Craft (formerly Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery) in Portland, Oregon, USA, in 2006 as part of a narrative about shoes. It consists of ten pairs of legs, each 274 cm high, wearing oversized shoes made from industrial felt covered in fabric and machine stitched. Digitally printed fabric images of the natural forest floor in Joaquin Miller park, near my Oakland, California home, form the skins on each pair of shoes. Each leg is a tubular net created from small hand cut triangles of recycled fabric sewn to a dissolvable polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) backing. *The Forest* expresses human readiness to create faux surfaces to stand in for nature. Plastic plants do not need water; AstroTurf is forever green; artificial Christmas trees do not shed. Natural artifice also offers the next best thing to the erections of technology as in the case of cell phone towers disguised to look like trees. These examples imply an intrinsic belief in the beauty of nature and yet visual artifice is a familiar and growingly acceptable surrogate. The fanciful and humorous appearance of *The Forest* contrasts to the reality of dismembered limbs and a fragmented society devoid of human contact. Each pair of legs looks animated, as if a group of anonymous strangers were standing around in a crowd. The piece reflects on the idea of population and urbanization as a substitute for nature. Originally exhibited with a soundtrack of birds, insects, and other soothing forest sounds, *The Forest* offers the experience of nature without any of the inconveniences such as changes in climate, insects, unwanted animals or dirt; thus amusingly playing on the paradoxical belief that nature can be controlled (Avila, 2010:44).

The garment, *Falling Leaves* (2011) (see fig. 1), is a response to *The Forest* both conceptually and materially. Visually it appears that the leaves from the shoe trees have attached themselves to a wearable structure, in a sense falling onto the body rather than off of the tree. The dress is created from fabric scraps sewn to a cotton twill understructure, the floating elements were developed by stitching on a dissolvable PVA substrate. The fabric scraps are twice recycled- they are the leftover pieces cut originally for *The Forest* from hand dyed and recycled fabrics. Even the garment understructure is made from a drop cloth previously used to protect the printing tables. I have a strong interest and commitment to recycle and repurpose materials whenever possible. Many of the initial pieces I created for *A Sartorial Nature* were developed spontaneously in response to material explorations; I was basically trying to use up scraps and fabric remnants I had salvaged from the garbage bin. Some were from my own waste while other materials were discarded by the Shady Grove factory, a now defunct Northern California fashion company (My studio is conveniently located in their old building). I worked on creating a symbiotic relationship between many of my material experimentations and my nature series. Since the physical life form, i.e. the body, was conspicuously absent in my previous work, and my exhibition was destined for a Fashion Gallery, it seemed logical and self challenging to create new work that placed significant importance on the body. The body thus functions as a living armature to enhance the nature theme. *The Garden Wall* (2009) (fig. 2) was created as a site specific piece for the *Oh Naturale* exhibition, and tailored to fit the dimensions of the gallery side wall, 9.3 meters long and 2.8 meters high. In its original installation it was built into the wall creating an illusion of endless depth and ambiguity. The piece consists of three layers, a base layer of digitally printed silk and two net layers of laser cut fabric leaves stitched onto a net grid.

When installed in The Fashion Gallery at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the space required a different configuration; the piece was hung as two curtains farther away from the wall mounted base layer. This allowed movement through the piece inadvertently placing the body within the structure and a part of the installation. Conceptually the piece looks at the relationship of urban mythology to nature, specifically considering the idea of the Garden of Eden as an environment containing objects that humans covet and crave albeit that are not always attainable. Embroidered words on the face of the piece include signifiers of desire such as “happiness,” “wealth,” “adventure” and “love”. In addition to these intentional words, I’ve included language from my email inbox. Usually referred to as spam, these are the unsolicited emails that usually request some type of financial transaction. I maintain a collection of spam. I’m quite intrigued by these random messages because they all promise us an easy solution to the trials and tribulations of everyday life. I’ve embroidered the subject lines from several of these spam messages as they promise a sexually enhanced life, how to get a degree without studying, a low paying mortgage, or the opportunity to buy any drug we want without a prescription! The machine embroidered text floats on top of the net in a floppy manner that questions the seriousness of the statements. Another type of email spam that features prominently on the piece is the narrative scam that frequently arrives with the subject line all in capital letters. Often referred to as Nigerian scams, these are emails supposedly from somebody who has a lot of money in a foreign country and needs help getting the money out safely. Their email claims to have chosen you as the entrusted recipient of millions of dollars, all they require is a small percentage of the

money. There are many varieties of this scam, in the past two years I have collected over three hundred of these messages and five of them are included in *The Garden Wall*. One embroidered on the front, and four printed on the back. These emails are obviously a farce and yet they prey on a portion of human avarice that longs to believe in the possibility of instant wealth, a significant component of the blatant materialism of contemporary Western society (Avila, 2010: 43). The laser cut fabric leaf shapes on the piece were created from leaves I scanned in from my own garden. I took many pieces of discarded silk leftover from my hand printed fabric business of a decade earlier and dyed everything shades of green. The upcycled fabric was then cut into squares and basted into eight layer bundles to fit on the laser cutting machine. The leaves were cut and I was left with all the negative spaces remaining in the bundles. I used some of these leftovers in the piece *Garden Metaphors* (2010) however many fabric scraps remained. By exploring different manipulations of this material I discovered that when the cut fabric was dipped in white glue and dried the result looked just like seaweed! Since the work was headed for Hong Kong-- the Far East-- it seemed appropriate to create something with a strong western sensibility. *Cowboy del Mar* (2011) and *Cowgirl del Mar* (2011) (see fig. 3) are typical of the fringed western wear clothing in the style of Nudie Cohn, the most famous designer of western fashions in the United States. Since Hong Kong is also surrounded by ocean, fabric seaweed seemed like an ideal replacement for the leather fringe that personifies this western style (Nudie & Cabrall, 2004: 122, 93). The jacket and pants for *Cowboy del Mar* are made from pre-consumer cotton denim purchased as excess fabric. The fabric was upcycled through hand dyeing and machine stitching to add to the oceanic implications. Pearl covered snaps are typical findings on this style of jacket. *Cowgirl del Mar* consists of a sleeveless yoked shift made from recycled lyocell fabric, also hand dyed to relate to the sea with pearl covered snaps. An outer skirt of "seaweed" is worn over the short dress alluding to the western fringe but with greater artistic liberty. Nudie Cohn is especially known for his over the top excessively embellished garments so these pieces try to honor his exuberance. Several of the garments in *A Sartorial Nature* reference water, inspired by rivers, streams, and the ocean. The hand dyed and stitched fabrics mimic bubbles, moving currents, reflections, moss and similar elements attributed to natural bodies of water. *Rocks on Water* (2011) provides an immediate reference to water and the bubbles that occur as the water moves over rocks. The surface design was created using a non toxic soy wax resist on cotton lycra remnants. A stiff bristle brush was dipped into the eco-friendly hot wax and then blotted onto the fabric for the bubbly affect. The fabric was then immersed in an indigo dye bath and oxidized to create the blue color. Finally the wax was removed with hot, soapy water. The garment was self lined and a row of machine stitching was traced around each rock formation. The lining was then slit and stuffed with recycled shoulder pads to create the dimension. The effect is a lumpy, bumpy form on a figure hugging silhouette. Additionally the garment is meant to critique the perfect body image typically associated with fashion. In a sense it is an homage to Rei Kawakubo's garments from the *Commes de Garçon* Spring/Summer 1997 collection that featured padded irregular forms that deformed the human body freeing it from preconceived fashion shapes (Fukai, 2002: 658).

Another piece that mimics qualities of water is *Splash* (2011) (fig. 4). This garment is meant to capture the feeling of moving, splashing water. The netted modules are all created from machine stitched and dissolved PVA, stiffened with acrylic polymer. A series of these modules were constructed and then hand sewn to turquoise colored tulle embellished with free motion stitching and supported by a polyester fabric understructure. While *Splash* appears irregular because of the extreme dimensionality of the surface, it is still basically a fitted one shoulder cocktail dress. Almost all of the garments in *A Sartorial Nature* build off traditional shapes and forms. There is very little avant-garde construction or unusual structural forms in the garment patterns. The emphasis is on the surface, the textile materials and manipulations, and the conceptual idea. In this sense my work follows the path of Elsa Schiaparelli who is well known for her surrealist fashions. What is most distinctive of Schiaparelli is that she mostly used basic, even conservative garment designs but it was her decoration or embellishment that distinguished or subverted her fashions. This is evident in one of her most famous designs, the *Organza Dress with Painted Lobster* (1937) created in collaboration with Salvador Dali. The gown itself is a very simple garment structure but the provocative image of a cooked lobster removed from the sea and surrounded by parsley subverts the natural theme in a classic surreal fashion (Martin, 1987: 146). *Fishing Net* (2011) is probably the most wearable of the garments included in *A Sartorial Nature*. It is a simple, elegant gown consisting of two layers. The under dress is a dyed silk broadcloth while the overdress is a specially created fabric consisting of recycled silk remnants cut into tiny squares, sewn together on a PVA ground, dissolved and then overdyed. The stitched net is reminiscent of a fishing net cast out over a reflective sea in early morning. While the effect is a beautiful evening gown, it is essentially made from garbage and thus has the power to tell the story of discarded trash, including broken fishing nets, floating in the ocean as unwanted pollution (NOAA.gov). One of my artistic goals is to help enhance perception of contemporary culture. I am especially interested in drawing awareness to trash in all its complexities—both the physical discards from society and the metaphorical implications of unwanted and excess materials. This motivates me to develop new fabric structures from rejected materials. In 2010 I acquired an industrial computerized embroidery machine thanks to an Investing in Artists equipment grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation in California. I am using this new tool to develop new

fabric structures out of textile waste. This is an extension of previous work; manually using a free motion stitching machine to develop textile structures is extremely time consuming and it is difficult to create any kind of uniformity. The embroidery machine allows me to create a digitized pattern that can be the basis of the fabric structure as well as providing surface decoration. Additionally I have more flexibility for creating endless yardage or even engineered prints. Moss (2011) was created in an engineered manner. This is a basic princess seamed structure with godets in the hemline. The fabric consists of the tiniest textile remnants leftover from other projects. The fabric scraps were laid out according to the required pattern pieces and then basted into a PVA sandwich, After the structural embroidery stitching was completed the garment was sewed together before dissolving the substrate. Unfortunately, while this idea worked in theory, in actuality many holes were left in the fabric which required several manual repairs. Billowing Stream (2011) was approached in a simpler manner by blocking out a kimono form. Working with the rectangular kimono blocks meant it was a lot easier to control the material and then required less complexity to hand sew the blocks together. The rayon threads, also discards from the Shady Grove garment company, were removed from their cones and dyed varying shades of blues and greens in keeping with the water theme. The threads were then laid out between two layers of PVA and stitched together on the embroidery machine. This process was then repeated for the piece (see fig. 5). Garden Sack (2011) (see fig. 6). Garden Sack appears to grow onto the body form from a long train of embroidered greenery. Approximately ten meters of fabric was created from many discarded spools of green thread. Various shades and dye lot discrepancies add variation and visual interest to the green fabric. The thread was cut off the spool with a knife and laid out on the non-woven PVA material. Another layer of PVA was placed on top, once again forming a type of sandwich which was then hooped and placed under the embroidery machine. A temporary adhesive helped keep the threads in place while it was being sewn; the yardage was made in sections and then hand sewn together. Not surprisingly, this was the last garment created for the exhibition and it is the least garment-like, it is in fact merely a simple sack that slips on over the head pinning the arms inside. The physical structure of the garment -being trapped in a garden- is meant to enhance the conceptual idea that even beautiful surroundings can illicit feelings of entrapment or immobility. A Sartorial Nature offers the experience of nature as a familiar reference point without any of the inconveniences such as hay fever, ticks, bugs, dirt, or weather. Consisting of unique stitched constructions, the work intersects art, design, and fashion exposing a relationship to the body through skin, scale, and structure. Whether literal, metaphorical, or abstracted, nature is an integral and important aspect of everyday psyche. Including wearable garments in the exhibition connects the viewer in a tangible way to experience the work through the familiarity of size and object. Ideally the work in this series will inspire people to think about their own relationship with the natural world.

Note: Additional images of artwork can be found at www.suta.com.

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Fig. 1: Falling Leaves (A Sartorial Nature exhibition overview), The Forest in background.

Fig. 2: Detail, The Garden Wall. Photo: Larry Gawel

Fig. 3: Cowgirl del Mar & Cowboy del Mar, Photo: John Bagley, Models: Haley Gilhooly, Leelye Tesfamariam

Fig. 4: Splash, Photo: John Bagley, Model: Andrea Castillo Avila

Fig. 5: Shows process of laying out loose threads that will be sewn together to form a new fabric.

Fig. 6: Garden Sack (A Sartorial Nature exhibition overview), The Garden Wall on left.