

DESCENDING GRACE

Andrea Short

Fashion should be a form of escapism, and not a form of imprisonment.¹

Alexander McQueen



Figure 1. Andrea Short, garment designs from her collection *Descending Grace*.

There are many types of life cycle. Taking inspiration from the notions of growth and maturation with respect to both human beings and the natural world, I explored the ways in which feelings and memories fuel my work process and the designs themselves within a conceptual fashion context. My outcomes are constantly being reborn and form the structure for future concepts. I am always developing myself and telling my own story along the way. This collection, *Descending Grace*, was designed to communicate powerful emotion and also to suggest similarities between the human and natural worlds.

Every year my designs come out of crisis. Strong emotions and fears fuel my outcomes. A strong concept in all my designs is using contrasts between polar opposites: dark and light, death and life, decay and repair, sadness and

strength. I often find myself wanting to evoke feelings within viewers, taking inspiration from horror movies, dark indulgences, nightmares and other disturbing subject matter. For my FASHION DESIGN STUDIO FIVE PROJECT (FDS5) collection, the brief was to question what fashion design is in the twenty-first century. This studio block was intended to create an extension of myself – and push myself to develop and refine conceptual, innovative and avant-garde designs.

While attempting to create a new concept for my collection, a childhood friend sadly passed away. My grief at Virginia's passing and the uncomfortable feelings I experienced in the aftermath of her death influenced my thoughts and concepts in designing the collection *Descending Grace*.



Figure 2. The properties of leaves can be seen as analogous to the human body. Photograph: Andrea Short.

I have always been inspired by the beauty of how things work, whether the human body or things within the natural and human environment. During Virginia's funeral I began photographing the things and people around me, to try and capture moments I could examine later. Things felt surreal during that time, and I was lost in a daze. While taking photographs of the trees and leaves around me, I began to see how delicate and fragile both plants and humans are, and I became aware of the life cycle of growth experienced by both humans and nature.

My work focuses on three visual characteristics seen in the leaves I photographed and the characteristics leaves share with human bodies: fragility, tossed about by environmental forces, and held together by mere threads. Within our bodies we all have veins and a nervous system which are vital to our survival; like us, leaves contain veins that help transport water and minerals, a function vital to the plant's life cycle. I wanted to combine aspects of both systems to convey the similarities hidden beneath the surface and borne out in the three key concepts.

Fragility: The use of transparent print paste communicates how fragile and how vulnerable both humans and natural phenomena are, how easily they can be damaged or destroyed when external forces impact on a particular person or plant.

Held together by threads: I wanted to suggest how delicate we can become when placed in harsh situations. How we still manage to hold on by the merest thread of determination.

Buffeted at the mercy of the environment: I wanted to suggest how these garments had been blown about in the wind and wanted to create a suggestion of movement.

Design for me is a personal response to the world. Good design must respond to the world. As young adult author Rainbow Rowell has said, art "is supposed to make you feel something."² Using inspiration and ideas that are personally valuable provides a focus and a strong theme for my collection. My work not only embodies a strong message, but communicates it to viewers and wearers. By presenting a collection designed around the distress evoked by my friend's passing, I was seeking to share and communicate my experience of loss and fragility; design without such emotional and intellectual commitment is empty to me.

She never looked nice, she looked like art, and art wasn't supposed to look nice; it was supposed to make you feel something

Rainbow Rowell³



Figure 3. Andrea Short, jacket with print lace effect detailing.

I have a strong interest in both large- and small-scale prints, whether created digitally or by hand. I found that many of the photographs I had taken contained eye-catching patterns and textures; I wanted to use these elements to provide a soft surface for an uncomfortable message underneath.

The idea of prints 'falling' down the garment to rest at the bottom gives a sense of decomposition, but also of beauty in the way that they will bring new life. The prints are placed so as to create the appearance that the leaves are moving, representing the chaos and confusion I felt over Virginia's death. I felt like I was caught in a wind storm, being held back by the sheer force of the wind and disorientated through the play of mixed emotions. On closer inspection, my leaf print can be seen as a collation of leaves drawn from nature and the veins of the human heart. This subtle feature evokes the connections between the human and natural worlds; in particular, the veins of the heart have their own connotations relating to emotion and feeling.



Figure 4. Andrea Short, detail of print and cut work on neoprene 'leaf' jacket.

In making this garment, I set out to create a delicate fabric made of machine-sewn threads woven together to visually represent the veins within both leaves and humans. Pieces of my outfits would be stitched together by threads – apparently falling apart, but still holding together. This effect can be seen in the jacket and cut-out dress (Figure 1). I found that the combination of leather and threads was problematic and I discovered a store-bought lace that fitted my colour palette well and swapped accordingly.

In my final year of study, my design practice is becoming a lot clearer. Something that definitely holds me back from pushing myself is a struggle with perfection; as a designer, I often have trouble finding a starting point because I want the perfect outcome, although I'm beginning to understand that it takes multiple iterations to help one's ideas grow.

My designs were originally developed as a runway collection. I see myself as part of a community of designers who primarily want to express ideas through their work. Although the print could be commercialised, I like to think of my designs as akin to the fashion ethos of designers such as Alexander McQueen, who is concerned with telling stories and suggesting meanings within his work. I want to engage with my designs in the same way as an artist engages



Figure 5. Andrea Short, leather top with lace-effect sleeve and neoprene skirt.

with their artwork. I admire designers whose work reveals something about themselves and the way in which they respond to the world. This approach makes me feel more connected and inspired to keep designing.

Andrea Short is in her third year of a bachelor of Fashion Design at Otago Polytechnic's School of Fashion Design.

- 1 Alexander McQueen, <http://www.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/newsmakers-alexander-mcqueen-3402279/>
- 2 Rainbow Rowell, *Eleanor & Park* (London: St Martin's Press, 2013), 165.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 165.