

## SOFT UNIVERSE

Ruby van der Zanden

*Speak to me, speak to me  
With love in your words  
Make for me, make for me  
A soft universe  
Aurora*



Figure 1. Ruby van der Zanden, *Soft Universe*, conceptual swimwear collection, 2019.  
Models: Brittany Kingsland (left), Stella Vis (middle) and Emma Spencely (right).  
Photograph: Jess Thompson.

Listening to music is huge a part of mine, and many people's everyday life. This year, it became even more important and influential than ever before. Without realising it, I began the process for this collection on 22 December when my dad unexpectedly passed away. Suddenly, a huge part of myself and my best friend had been ripped away from me, leaving me with terrifying images and memories of that night.

Although for many days afterwards I was surrounded by family and friends, I turned to sound as my distraction, a way to cope and gain distance from what was happening around me. I couldn't relax or turn off my mind naturally, and so I used sound to do so.

Music was always something that connected my dad and me, and felt very special to us. But I never imagined the importance it would soon have. I came up with the idea for this collection while planning my dad's funeral. For me, being in charge of the photos and music that were to be played was a very big deal, and I had to choose carefully the songs that meant the most. After this, I spent the next month and a half mostly in my head – always going for walks, listening to music, using it to help me sleep or simply just for comfort when I was by myself, so that I could somehow feel less lonely.

I have always felt that music had the power to send me into my own world, but after dad's death I observed this feeling increase markedly and felt that the importance of this reality needed to be heard. I decided to show it in the best way I know, through design.



Figure 2. Ruby van der Zanden, *Brain Waves* outfit from the *Soft Universe* collection.  
Model: Emma Spencely. Photograph: Zak Booth.

I embarked on a journey and a study of the self, using self-reflection and writing to explore personal experience and then connected this with my design research. I decided to allow intuition, reflection, adaptation and meditation to drive my design process through the act of listening to music. I would let myself be vulnerable and enter my Soft Universe, bringing a conceptual fashion collection out of it. The more I grow as a designer, the more I have found my identity to be closely linked with my practice. I use the act of making to design. My practice is intuitive and meditative and sits alongside the psychological phenomenon of 'flow'.

Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as an "energised focus where identity disappears from consciousness and individual existence is temporarily suspended."<sup>11</sup> When I listen to music, I find myself feeling as if I am leaving this earth and floating away into my own Soft Universe. This state allows me to relax, meditate and intuitively assess situations as well as create my most abstract, conceptual work. When I am back in reality, I am hyper-aware of myself, my body, thoughts and surroundings. I end up with feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. Moving into other states of consciousness allows my mind to relax, be connected to my body and assess situations through my intuition.

As my design process developed, I continued to learn more and more about both the concept I was exploring and myself. The process began by creating a large playlist consisting of around 500 songs. The playlist was diverse and included a huge range of genres and artists. I find that listening to music is often a spiritual experience for me, as there are some artists and songs I feel very deeply connected to. What I have been listening to includes a lot of post-rock, dream pop and ambient music, in particular artists like Pink Floyd (whose music gives me the most connection and emotions around my dad) Hana, Grimes, Mogwai, Massive Attack and Aurora.



Figure 3. Ruby van der Zanden, *Brain Cosmos* swimsuit from the *Soft Universe* collection. Model: Stella Vis. Photograph: Jess Thompson.

The title for this collection came from a song called *Soft Universe* by Norwegian artist Aurora. She is probably the artist I feel the most connected to on a spiritual level. I resonate very deeply with her music, especially *Soft Universe*, which explores her own experience of dreaming and fantasy.

In her book *Everyday Music Listening*, Ruth Herbert explains that “music is effective in promoting shifts in consciousness”<sup>2</sup> and shows how these altered states of consciousness induced by listening to music and the listener’s relationship with a particular kind of music can influence this process. Herbert also says that “[a]bsorption and dissociation are manifestations of trancing” and that one can experience music-induced trancing and even transcendence of the self. As I was experiencing these shifts in consciousness by listening to music while trying to create textiles and silhouettes, I conducted further research into the precise states of consciousness that I was experiencing.

At this stage, I had been using the concept of flow and self-reflection to understand my thought process when designing intuitively while listening to music. I spent a lot of time in my room with headphones on to cancel ambient noise. Then dancing, draping, drawing and collaging. I dabbled with ideas of using a dance studio and other more public spaces for experimentation and giving myself room to move around. However, while in these spaces I felt that I was on show and either had to hide my authentic self or put on a show for others.

Being alone in my room allowed me to literally dance like no one was watching and move the way I needed to, experiencing and feeling everything as it came to me. Letting myself have this time was very therapeutic and allowed me to get used to the process of designing aided by music; it also enabled me to assess it and myself for my research. Doing this allowed me to make real headway with the project. I began to feel more comfortable and confident within myself and with letting my emotions run as they needed to. Only after taking this time to be alone with my mind and my music was I able to return to the studio and work from there.

*You can cry, drinking your eyes.*

*Do you miss the sadness when it's gone?*

*And you let the river run wild,*

*and you let the river run wild.<sup>3</sup>*

Once I returned to the studio, I began doing more reading into the shifts of my consciousness, exploring how this was happening and the states that I could feel myself entering. This in turn led to a more informed design process. I came to learn more about specific brain waves and the way that different waves lead the consciousness into altered states. I decided to focus on the three main waves that resonated most with my own experiences and the journey of leaving reality: beta, alpha and theta. Once I had a deeper understanding of these brain states, I was able to fully immerse myself in my practice and ultimately design my final textile outcomes. I am a very textile-based designer, and finalising my textiles before my silhouettes has become a defining part of my practice, as this is where most of my conceptual thinking occurs.

Beta is the brain wave that produces a state closest to reality. It usually kicks in when one is most excited. A person is on high alert and has full control of their surroundings. It is a gentle state often called “fast idle” or “musing,” when we still have a full grasp of reality and our minds can rapidly process creative thought. My experience of this state issued in my *Brain Flowers* print. This is the outfit that represents the beginning of my journey into my consciousness. This print explores feelings of frustration, rapidly moving memories and images in my day-to-day life while listening to music, but still being mostly present in the external world. This state was the easiest to enter; yet interestingly the textile associated with it was the last one to be resolved. I think that because this state leaves us more alert than the other two I entered, I had more ideas that were fleeting and ever-changing. Although I didn’t settle on this print until very late in the design process, in the end it felt right in my gut. The flowers refer to my feeling that this state is closest to nature and the real world, but also shows the blooming of ideas and creativity.



Figure 4. Ruby van der Zanden, *Brain Flowers*, digital print.

The second brain state is alpha. Alpha brain waves are the most present during quietly flowing thoughts, meditation and daydreaming. This is the state in which I spent the most time. One is able to be present and fully in touch with one's intuition, yet creativity is also at its most heightened potential; we are able to see the most vivid images while in the alpha state. Entering the alpha state is often used as a tool in treating anxiety and depression, as the mind is often clear of negative and unwanted thoughts, allowing more creative and positive thoughts to take their place. The alpha state is represented in my collection through my *Brain Cosmos* textile. This print embodies the most accurate representation of my *Soft Universe*; the waves, mountains, valleys, suns and moons of my mind are vivid and bright.

The third state is theta. Theta is the state of deepest relaxation – the point where you're not quite asleep, but not quite awake. This was the hardest state for me to enter; but the most rewarding. Theta is the state into which a person is put while under hypnosis. It accesses the part of our mind that lies between the conscious and the subconscious. It enables us to retain memories and emotions – they are always creative, characterised by feelings of inspiration and often deeply spiritual. Theta is the most healing state, "the first stage of the phase when we dream."<sup>4</sup> Being in theta was extremely powerful for me. After experiencing it, I realised that my whole design process and the act of making was actually the thing that had helped me through the last five months after losing my dad more than anything else. I have a long way to go, but I have found just how healing the act of making can be and it is now a defining part of my practice and philosophy. My experience and research into the theta state informed my final digital print, *Brain Waves*.

I chose to represent these brain states through swimwear: When I am in these altered states of consciousness, it feels extremely real to me and my visions are so vivid that I can see them and feel them on my skin. The images start to appear on my arms and legs and chest – energy manifests on my body. I wanted to create garments that had the feeling of tattoos on the body – there is often a strong link between tattoos and one's memories and emotions. I have tattoos on my legs that are a part of me and I feel very connected to them, just like my *Soft Universe*. As this energy grows in my mind, it covers the skin and begins to take over as I am fully immersed and no longer a part of reality.

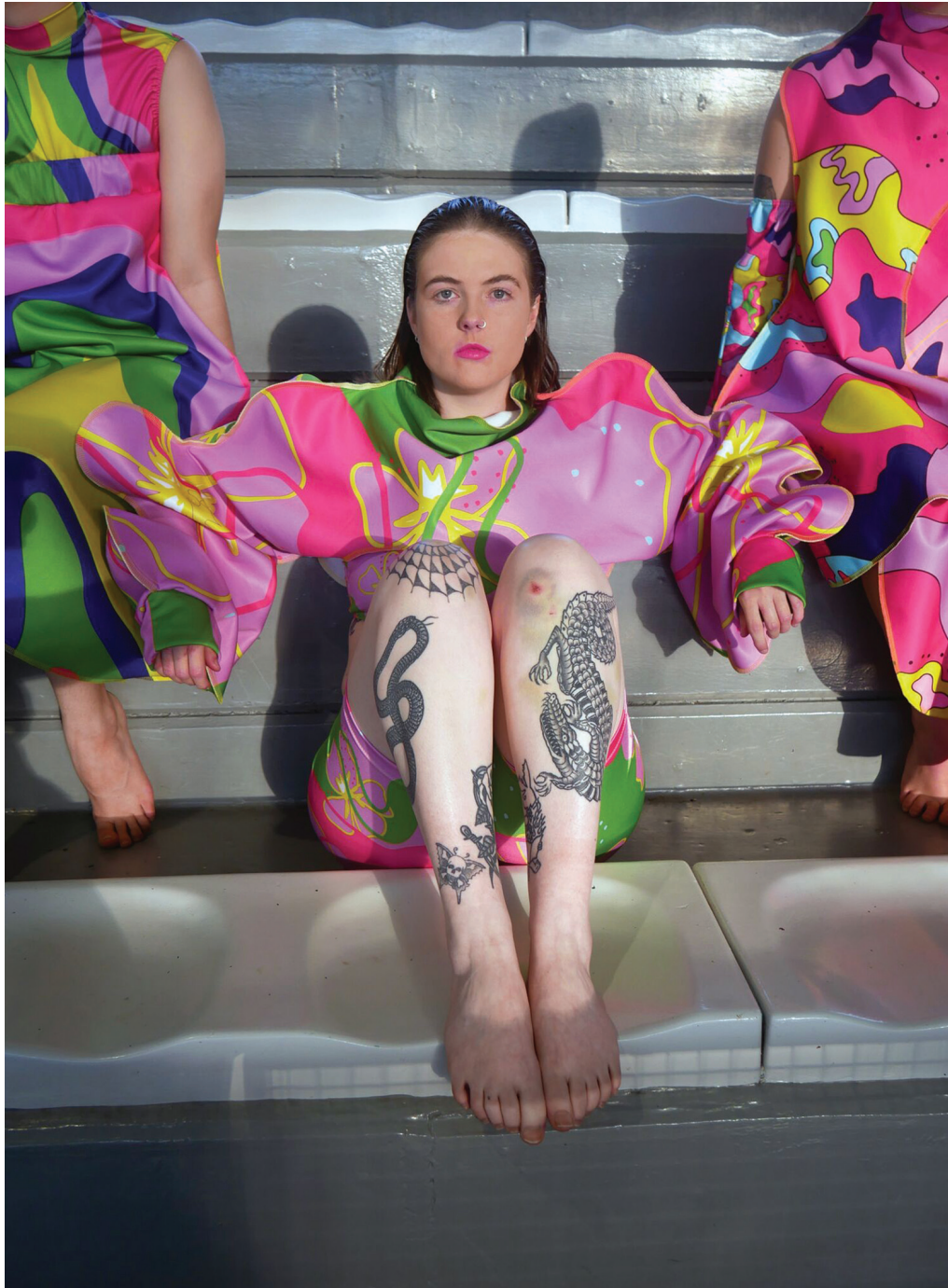


Figure 5. Ruby van der Zanden, garments from the *Soft Universe* collection.  
Models: Emma Spenceley (left), Brittany Kingsland (middle) and Stella Vis (right). Photograph: Jess Thompson.



Figure 6. Ruby van der Zanden, swimwear pieces from the *Soft Universe* collection, 2019.  
Models: Brittany Kingsland (left), Emma Spenceley (middle) and Stella Vis (right).  
Photograph: Jess Thompson.

These waving, moving, swirling, fluid shapes are what I always found myself drawing during the design process. As I leave reality, everything becomes liquified and I feel like I'm floating. I wanted to create garments that represented the idea of motion and fluidity, and I decided to do this in a way that held the most personal connections for me – through tight-fitting lycra pieces. I grew up a dancer, gymnast and ice skater: Movement and expressing myself through movement has always been a huge part of my life. So instead of creating garments that moved themselves, I wanted to make pieces that the body could move in and with. These lycra separates act as fully functioning swimwear: They allow the body to be immersed, whether in or out of the water; clinging to the skin and allowing one to feel the energy that created them. It was important for the swimwear pieces especially to embody the phenomenological element, as I was seeking to show through these garments what I was feeling and allow other to experience this, too.

The outerwear pieces were developed later: I played a lot with abstract, blob-like shapes that were very similar to the digital prints. These blobs felt like manifestations of energy and emotion, and I decided to use these shapes as the base for my outer garments. I played a lot with collage, both on the form and on paper. I experimented with cutting out shapes in fabric and seeing what they would do on the body, as well as taking photographs of things I had thrown around my room, cutting them out and using these shapes on paper to create unique silhouettes. I included outerwear in the collection to communicate how real this music-induced transcendence felt for me. It was as if the energy had not only manifested on my body, but was so strong that it was growing into a more physical, powerful entity that was beyond my own self. I wanted to create big 3D pieces, but at the same time to illustrate this flat, cartoony, fantasy feeling that I was experiencing. To create this flat look, all of my seams were sewn with the wrong sides together to eliminate bulk and feel less 'real.'



Figure 7. Action shot of swimsuits from the *Soft Universe* collection being worn in the pool. Models: Stella Vis (left), Emma Spenceley (middle) and Brittany Kingsland (right). Photograph: Jess Thompson.

The process of designing this collection has been extremely special, spiritual and healing for me. I have a deeper understanding of myself now, and feel that this project and the process of making has helped my grieving process more than anything else. I have learnt many valuable things that I will be taking into FDS6. There are areas within this project that I need to work on and polish in the future. One of these is my construction. I feel that although I have improved a lot, there were still some areas that didn't quite work out. One of these was putting darts in the crutch of the *Brain Cosmos* swimsuit; I didn't know at the time that they wouldn't be strong enough and have a tendency to pop open. Another thing I would do is toile in my final fabric, as it was much less stretchy than the material I tested my swimsuits in, leaving me with tension issues and some cover seaming coming undone. I know now what I need to do to improve on this

I believe that my collection could easily be pared back to become commercial. The swimsuits are already fully wearable, and the outerwear pieces could be turned into proper sports jackets and tracksuit pants. Or they could be worn 'as is' for special events like the Burning Man festival, which encourages experimental dressing.

I have been exploring other designers in my community of practice, and have found that my aesthetic and practice relates well to the Danish label Helmstedt. In her collections, designer Emilie Helmstedt focuses on fantasy and utopian ideals through the use of colourful prints.<sup>5</sup> Someone in the same mould is designer Rebecca Carrington, whom I connected with during iD Dunedin Fashion Week on many levels, but mainly around design. We have similar ways of looking inwards during our design process and bringing out what we feel through graphic, storytelling textiles.



In the end, I have come to I feel much more connected to myself, as well as with my dad. My self-confidence has grown immensely on this journey, and the biggest reward was learning not to create a collection to please others, but to please myself. This design outcome is the most authentic representation of myself.

## Freedom. Confidence. Joy.

**Ruby van der Zanden** says: "Freedom, confidence and joy are at the centre of my design ethos. My work is very process-based and often explores things that are currently happening in my life as I bring them to life through digital textiles and exploratory silhouettes. I aim to evoke joy and empower others through my collections."



*To my best friend. I love you and will always feel  
close to you through our music.*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwbjNovSWAs>

- 1 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), <https://books.google.co.nz/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KTQXAgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=flow+mihaly+csikszentmihalyi&ots=0swiEb0nrV&sig=mATue4QhIC4iBNcK5KkqBFeaZw#v=onepage&q=flow+mihaly+csikszentmihalyi&f=false> (accessed 30 May 2019).
- 2 Ruth Herbert, *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), <https://www.routledge.com/Everyday-Music-Listening-Absorption-Dissociation-and-Trancing-1st-Edition/Herbert/p/book/9781409421252> (accessed 30 May 2019).
- 3 AURORA, *The River*, 10 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7IE-GIoc34>.
- 4 "Theta-Healing@ Theta Brain State," *Theta-Healing*, <https://www.thetahealing.com/about-thetahealing/thetahealing-theta-state.html> (accessed 30 May 2019).
- 5 Brooke Bobb, "Emilie Helmstedt is Writing her own Danish Fairy Tale with Whimsical Clothes," *Vogueworld*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/vogueworld/article/emilie-helmstedt-copenhagen-fashion-designer> (accessed 30 May 2019).