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Fashion Design Process

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Who are the practitioners who you feel have influenced your design processes – mentors, teachers, colleagues, designers and writers?

Most-loved designers include Vivienne Westwood, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana (D&G), Lee Alexander McQueen, Jean Paul Gaultier, Naoto Hirooka (h. Naoto), Yohji Yamamoto and Yasutaka Funakoshi (Alice Auaa); historical artists, Botticelli, Jan van Eyck, EC Burne Jones, JW Waterhouse and the Pre-Raphaelites; and architects and craftsmen, AWN Pugin, William Burges and William Morris. Essentially, my sources are associated with Medievalism, Neo-Gothicism, Aestheticism, Neo-Romanticism and Victorianism.

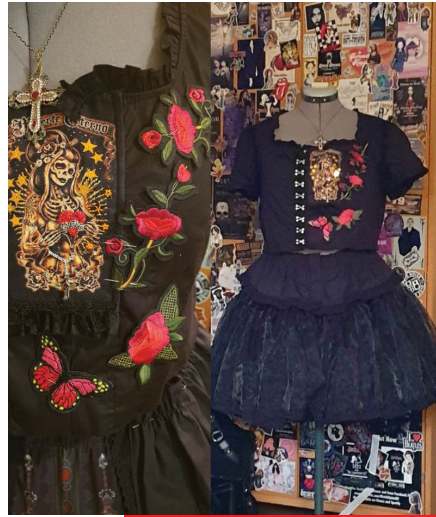
I tend to practice in isolation, but I grew up with communities of creatives, fashion and jewellery designers, hairdressers, stylists, visual merchandisers, musicians and performers, in Sydney and London, whom I met at college and through the alternative nightclub scene, and worked with at collaborative artist studios. They have all helped to motivate my artistic impulses. However, I would say that Angela Finn (RMIT) has been my greatest advisor and mentor since we were employed, for many years, in the fashion department at Auckland University of Technology and exhibited together at Auckland Museum.



What fuels your design ideas?

My design concepts have grown out of the punk aesthetics of the 1970s to '80s and continue to be influenced by the physical and metaphorical ripping up of objects and conventions. Inspiration is also derived from my lifelong obsession with history, art history, decorative arts, architecture, interior design crafts, costume and textiles history. As a result, I lean towards fashion that mashes historicist tendencies with the avant-garde.

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How do you describe the 'research' that you do as part of your design process?

While I was deeply immersed in creative activities in my childhood and youth, I turned my academic direction towards an emphasis on written research and developed a career as an art, design and cultural historian and curator. My creative work has thus become an extension of my critical, theoretical research, theses and publications.

My mother and grandmothers taught me traditional handcrafts, crocheting, knitting, embroidery, needlepoint tapestry, weaving, dollmaking and dressmaking. My interests could have led me to enrol in fashion design, but my artistic aptitude impelled me towards other courses connected with the fashion industry – specifically, showcard and ticket writing, and visual merchandising. Later in life, I completed an undergraduate degree in museum and curatorial studies, and art and design theory with honours; a Master of Philosophy in fashion subculture; and a Doctorate of Philosophy in visual and material culture (Hardy Bernal, 2011, 2019). My absorption of arts, crafts, textiles and fashion, and the histories of these practices, has contributed to an extensive and rich visual literacy, which feeds my endeavours to turn my historical research into three-dimensional expressions, represented by realised objects.

Research, for me, is also in the doing, the experimental aspects of the process, an evolution of doing and undoing and redoing. The actual journey.



What is the most meaningful stage of designing for you and what happens at that moment?

I have epiphanies and bursts of creative energy, like light-bulb moments, at random times, which can induce spontaneous flurries of activity and can lead to periods of hyperfocal concentration for days, weeks or months. While this activity, at first, often descends into a rabbit-hole of doom-scrolling and flitting through books for imagery, reading, reading, reading and taking down notes, and even shopping for all the essential materials, these fantastic ideas, more often than not, never eventuate as finished objects. The meaningful stage is a 'wow' moment, when it becomes clear that my vision will progress from an abstract concept towards a manifestation, and that what I am holding in my hands matches my imagination. It's in the knowledge that it will happen.

What 2D–3D methods or techniques do you use to explore ideas? How do these work together?

'Upcycling' has become a buzzword, especially with the revival of handcrafts and return to handmade garments as a result of the recent pandemic, lockdown boredom, periodic loss of access to shops and increased shipping rates. However, my methods of creating fashion have almost always involved a preoccupation with reworking, deconstructing and reconstructing garments and textile objects. For decades, I have been chopping up, cutting into, fraying, reshaping, fusing together and decorating items to make new statements.

For me, my designs begin with the pre-existing shapes, textures and silhouettes in front of me, and my concepts progress from how I imagine the physical objects may be remoulded. Therefore, while I have an abstract idea of what I want or intend to say, or symbolise, and how I hope my designs will be analysed, or read, my work is informed by the original forms and the feasibility of what may be achieved.

As my formal disciplinary background pertains to the visual arts, and I'm not trained as a patternmaker, I would frame my approach to fashion creation from an artist's perspective. My methods have often relied on pastiche and moulding shapes to fit. If I do need pattern pieces, I adapt and alter commercial paper patterns, mixing elements from different designs, or trace shapes from existing garments.

Although I can draw, I also don't often draw designs or work from design drawings. I usually work organically, allowing the forms to take shape, while drawing from an ethereal vision.

Inspiration shifts and evolves as I go. Afterwards, I stand back and critically analyse the overall result, including motifs and semiotic meanings, and how they juxtapose with and affect each other. I am often surprised, myself, by the messages they reveal.



How do you work with the different cultures that are part of your communities?

The backbone of my formal, academic research is cultural studies and thus I utilise anthropological methodologies such as ethnographic studies, comprised of surveys and interviews. My postgraduate studies are formulated around the voices of correspondents from the cultures I research. I also work from an insider/outsider perspective, immersing myself within the communities and cultural groups that I study by visiting in person and by digital communication. As my creative practice is an outlet of my ethnographic research, my garments are my interpretations and reinterpretations of the structure and meaning of the original cultural and subcultural fashion styles. However, they stem from a thoroughly informed position, and do not appropriate or misappropriate the fundamental iconographies of the originating cultures; my work references and celebrates those cultures, while making unique statements.

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