Designer Pages

POST-FASHION, HYBRIDITY, THE UNCONVENTIONAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE END OF FASHION

Rekha Rana Shailaj

Figure 1. Kurta dress in laminated cotton fabric, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

INTRODUCTION

> *Clothing concerns all of the human person, all of the body, all the relationships of man to body as well as the relationships of the body to society.*
>
> Roland Barthes[1]

Has fashion reached its end, its borderlines where it finishes? Can the phenomenon of fashion be quietened? In my view, the end of fashion is hard to accept. However, we can comprehend what is *beyond* the notion of fashion, as we know that people will continue to make sense of appearance and identity through clothing. What then describes the fate of fashion? Is it anti-fashion, non-fashion or post-fashion? These terms have been employed by many authors to explain what could be *beyond* fashion. Mary Lynn Damhorst proposes that "communicating through dress is increasingly complex."[2] I find it even more complex being surrounded by cultural differences which I encounter living beyond the national boundaries of my home country. The notion of *beyond* is critical for me, and I feel a rapport with the way in which Homi Bhabha elaborates this concept. He states that "the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement … ."[3]

According to Polhemus and Procter, "Anti-fashion refers to all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system or systems of fashion change."[4] They include all forms of traditional and folk dress of peoples who are removed from Western cultures. Fred Davis makes a distinction between *anti-fashion* and *non-fashion*. According to Davis, all dress forms such as folk, peasant and tribal should be categorised as *non-fashion* instead of *anti-fashion*; he asserts that "the oppositional stance of antifashion … distinguishes it at once from fashion *indifference*. There one is either oblivious to or, for one reason or another, thoroughly unconcerned with what the reigning or ascendant fashion is."[5]

This distinction between *anti-fashion* and *non-fashion* sounds convincing. However, as I study traditional clothing from my culture, I am alerted to the progressiveness embedded in these articles of clothing and how they have been transformed – initially, in a quest for better functionality, and now in response to the existing need for altered iterations of appearance. Hence, these traditional garments are continuously represented according to the dictates of non-Western fashion systems. At the same time, these garments are being referenced in Western fashion clothing, too.

Keywords: hybridity, post-fashion, ethnographic clothing, unconventional designing

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is an auto-ethnographic account of my design practice, where my personal story and theory are woven together. As Arthur P Bochner put it, "[t]he visible researcher self in the text"[6] underpins my research. Bochner has also described the need for "auto-ethnography as a critical response to disquieting concerns about silent authorship, the need for researcher reflexivity, or as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion-centred, political, and personal form of representation," as he argues against splitting the academic from the personal self.[7] Design practice is unpacked through the process and methodology of active critical making, and is produced by the cultural differences and hybrid encounters involved in constructing a fashioned self-appearance, which is in the continuous process of making and evolving through the act of negotiation. The methods deployed are qualitative, concentrating on the unpacking of textual analysis and the creation of a personal account of lived experiences. Active making is the key method of research, where reflections on and in the making process are analysed regularly.

The Third Space

Homi Bhabha's work on cultural politics in relation to being a 'migrant' in the contemporary metropolis has supported my understanding of how my design practice is associated with cultural differences. Bhabha asserts that "with the notion of cultural difference, I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness."[8] Working with the significance of cultural differences has underlined the translation and displacements of norms within my design practice. The garments I design are not completely signified in Western culture, nor in my Indian culture – they are in between, in the liminal space which Bhabha refers to as the "third space." For him, the "importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom."[9] This space is where I wish to operate, even though it is fraught with difficulties. It is in the third space that old ideas are disrupted and new ideas are provoked through the act of critical making.

Critical Making

The act of making might be active or passive. The level and depth of engagement with the making process usually determine the complexity of the act. As a maker, I am engaged in making and with making. The final result is incidental and is affected by the emotive and immersive making process. Both the making activity and the approaches to making can be unconventional – such as using paper modeling (changing the making materials) or sculpting (changing the making process) as tools to create fashion designs. Both are unconventional approaches to designing through making.

Figures 2 and 2b. Kurta in full-size 10, organza fabric, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photograph: Simon Swale.

Peter Dallow proposes that "Art is … about producing something new (unknown) within culture (what is established)." Elaborating on practice-based research, he suggests that "considered introspection offers the opportunity to try to understand the way an artist engages in an original way with their physical, cultural and psychic raw materials."[10] The purposeful act of making therefore relies on the connections made through these processes of making, which might be lost or not captured if they are not formalised through a system of meanings. Origami as an art of folding, the art of gift-wrapping in Japanese culture, wrapping a blanket to cover oneself – all these processes are connected insofar as they have folding and wrapping as core concepts.

Jessica Garness and Amy Papaelias point out that "to be 'critical' is to analyze and evaluate, examine the existence of something, and note points of success, failure or shifts in perspective. 'Making' in contrast, indicates materialisation or production, a means to determine the essential things needed to form, build, and create through a process of construction."[11] When these two concepts are used together to inform one's method of working, *critical making* is conceived. Matt Ratto characterises critical making as "a mode of materially productive engagement that is intended to bridge the gap between creative physical and conceptual exploration."[12] According to Ratto, critical making is informed by the process of establishing connections between the theoretical and pragmatic modes of engagement with the world that are often held separate – critical thinking and physical 'making,' goal-based material work. Making as a method of research is qualified when criticality is attached to it. As part of my design practice, the process of making needs to be contextualised within the theoretical analysis of concepts that inform my work. The act of making could be purely physical, but its encounter with conceptual considerations opens it up for theoretical reflection.

Figure 3. A variation on the kurta design, 2015, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photograph: Simon Swale.

Figure 4. A variation on the kurta design, 2015, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photograph: Simon Swale.

AN EMERGING STORY

For me, 2015 was a year of chosen circumstances, with time off work and a decision to live in Bahrain with my family. This allowed me to travel to India seven times. It was a year of immersive fashion designing. The designing started with old newspapers and newsprint paper, which were made into large paper bags to hold paper patterns. Creativity was at a peak as my engagement with the making process was elaborated.

Soon the bags started to fill up with patterns, and the open hanging spaces with pristine white toiles. Making a shift dress is a pure physical activity; repositioning a shift dress as a *kurta* – a traditional piece of Indian clothing – and conceptualising it in the context of constructing an appearance and identity shifts the act of making onto another level of signification. The kurta becomes a monumental object as it leads to the conception of other forms of kurta and their identification. There are three key threads of investigation that have been undertaken for this paper. They can be characterised as "cultural investment in the kurta," "connections with the unconventional" and "the geometry of a rectangle."

Cultural Investment in the Kurta

The kurta became the key piece of clothing under consideration, essential to this body of research. The example in Figure 2b is a typical kurta, albeit made in unconventional fabrics. Here the kurta is fragile, uncomplicated and exposed. When I left India in 1996, I did not bring a single piece of kurta with me, nor did I make a committed effort to own one. Even though this piece of clothing (among others) epitomises Indian national identity and was an essential item in constructing my personal identity, this piece was left behind. This was done unconsciously. This


Figures 5 and 5b. Bubble dress, 2015, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photograph: Simon Swale.

unconsciousness changed to consciousness as the kurta was missing from my day-to-day life for an extended period of time. When the kurta reappeared, it was not in its pure form but was transformed by the acculturation process which I underwent.

This is evident in the version of the kurta shown in Figure 3, which has a softer shoulder line and built-in sleeves, as well as a traditional in-seam pocket, half of which sits in the front and the rest on the back of the garment. The bottom of the pocket is trimmed with a fringed fabric edge. This garment is made out of a bedcover bought in Jordan which I fell in love with; its weaved pattern brought back memories of bedcovers in my parental home. Here the kurta is worn as a dress without trousers (an unconventional way of wearing a kurta).

My friends and family would often ask me: "I love what you are wearing – is it a shirt, or is it a jacket?" Most of the designs I create fall outside a singular description of a garment, sitting between two forms, such as shirt–jacket, kurta–dress, top–jacket or kaftan–top. It is hard to classify such pieces as one particular type of garment – just as I would specify that I am Indian besides being Kiwi. All these designs have cultural implications and expressions. The kurta-dress in Figure 4 is a long version of the kurta, with borrowed in-seam pockets and long slits of a traditional look but with a shirt hemline, and loose sleeves with pleated tucks in the under-seam. This iteration is made from various materials, using cotton twill fabric and colour inspired by menswear. In my story, the kurta is the piece of clothing in which I invest my time again and again – with no clear direction, but with a compulsive cultural engagement.

The conception of the bubble dress in Figures 5 and 5b was rather laboured. The desperation I felt in not having a sewing machine in Bahrain at the start of 2015 pushed me to explore other ways of making. This particular dress was draped on the body and then hand-sewn together in the absence of a sewing machine.

Connections with the Unconventional

When I returned to New Zealand in 2016, the academic year began with teaching on a design project for third-year Bachelor of Design students. There was yet another connection to be made with unconventional ways of designing. My colleague introduced the project with a conceptual 'unpacking' of materials, and asked the students to consider cardboard boxes as the material they would use to drape shapes and forms over mannequins. The aim was to build a dialogue between art and fashion, between sculpting and draping. While I had already worked with three-dimensional shapes, this time it was with stiff cardboard material, which was a creative challenge. The design ideation was heavily based on drape techniques and used a slotting method of construction. The space between the body and the sculpted form had to be considered carefully. The designs were left at this stage, with the potential for future development.

As the project continued, we had the privilege of attending a lecture by visiting scholar Holly McQuillan, as well as a day-long workshop with her on zero-waste patternmaking techniques. This shed further light on the creative possibilities inherent in design practice, as Holly introduced a variety of methods, tools and technique to make designs, with zero wastage of materials as the prime goal. She used paper as her material with which to think and create designs at half size, before translating them into full-sized pieces in fabrics. This method of working was conducive to sustainable practice and encouraged designing through paper modeling. Using this method of designing, several side-opened kurta-dresses were created (Figures 6 and 7) by cutting the front neck to become the facing for the back neck. The second iteration of the design in Figure 7 had further shaping incorporated around the sleeves. The only seam in the entire garment was the underarm sleeve seam, which curved into the open side seams.

The weights of the fabrics were considered carefully to support the draping methods of design development. Making a kurta involves a synchronised arrangement of placing and slicing different sizes of rectangles to form into a three-dimensional garment. However, this kurta (Figures 6 and 7) is conceived from a long, single piece of rectangle, and has been strategically sliced to create a three-dimensional sleeve arrangement; it is very different from a traditional kurta.

The Geometry of a Rectangle

As exemplified by McQuillan's zero-waste design practice,[13] paper modeling opened up new dimensions for exploration for me. A rectangular piece of paper became the material for sculpting shapes and forms of clothing. The use of these basic rectangle shapes, that are so easy to work with, has become imbedded within my design practice. An A4 piece of paper was folded, sliced, displaced, constructed and sliced again in several iterations to become conceivable designs. Figures 8 and 9 show one of these design iterations, exploiting the geometric play of a simple shape, the rectangle. In this design, the rectangular piece of fabric has first been sliced horizontally followed by angular vertical cuts, then swapped along the horizontal lines. This strategic cutting and swapping of pattern pieces has transformed a standard tube into a bubbled tube through which the body passes. Similar technique were used to form the sleeve shape.

A4 sized paper lent itself readily to the process of cutting and moulding into new shapes and forms. This unconventional paper modeling method has been used to create a skirt design (Figure 10). The workbook shows the complexity of a design which was conceived from a piece of rectangle and worked out in a true scale of 1:10. The design conceived through paper modeling has been then transposed into the full-size garment in fabrics shown in Figure 11. The ensemble was completed with a kurta top in tussar silk which belonged to my husband and was altered to size 12.

Figure 6. Kurta dress, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

Figure 7. Kurta dress variation, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

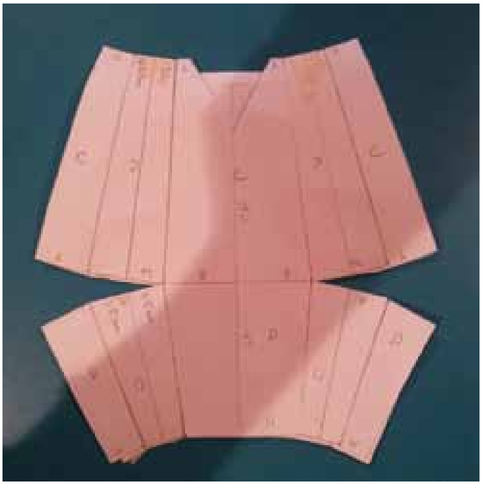

Figure 8. Paper pattern for linen dress, Rekha Rana Shailaj.

Figure 9. Linen dress, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

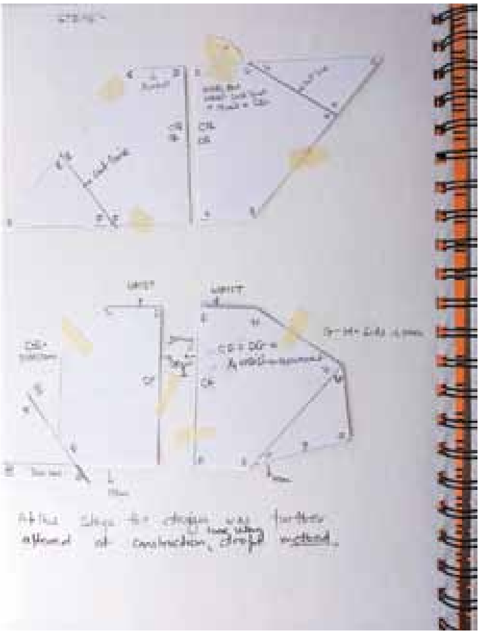

Figure 10. Design development, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.

Figure 11. Skirt design, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

Figures 12a and 12b. Dress in wool and silk fabrics, 2014, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photographs: Simon Swale.

Figures 13a and 13b. Silk velvet dress, 2010, Rekha Rana Shailaj. Photographs: Simon Swale.

Figure 14. Linen dress, 2008, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

Figure 15. Lycra dress, 2016, Rekha Rana Shailaj.
Photograph: Simon Swale.

Other geometric shapes besides the rectangle can also be used to fit the form of a body. Potential designs are not limited to a few shapes; they can be extended to other geometric shapes. Two shapes, a rectangle and a semi-circle, were draped to create the designs shown in Figures 12a and 12b. Different weights and compositions of fabric were used to create these design iterations.

The design shown in Figures 13a and 13b dates from 2010 and was made from a bias bag, using a rectangular piece of fabric. The bias bag technique is traditionally used to construct Indian-styled leggings called *paijami*. Here the bias bag has been used to design a silk velvet dress. As a designer, I have found it essential to try my designs in more than one type of fabric. Thus this design was constructed once again in the linen fabric shown in Figure 14. The comparison between the two silhouettes highlights the importance of fabrication at the design development and conception stages.

The black lycra dress design in Figure 15 is a blend of two techniques – the construction of a bias bag and folding rectangles into tube shapes – resulting in a large vertical fold along the side seam. The neck opening is then displaced within the geometry of a rectangle. These designs are unconventional as they lack conventional side seams, sleeves or armholes. All these elements are displaced within the design.

Designing is a complex and a dynamic process for me, and many of my designs are draped on the body but not turned into full-size garments. These are the happy iterations that could either sit in the archives for some time, awaiting a future response, or inform further design projects.

CONCLUSION

As a design methodology, I operate in the emerging "third space" where my design practice is constituted through the connections between the notions of difference, displacement, conflict, transformation and the unconventional. Today, the meaning of fashion is fabricated through differences and supplemented by continuous changes forming several constructed layers. This palimpsest of meaning is embedded in differences and diffusions. My personal perspective on dressed bodies is that they are fabricated by individual, social and institutional subjectivities, each threatening to tip the balance of the fashion equation. Each wants the balance to tilt in the direction that benefits it by bestowing visibility. These tensions between various fashion variables are only getting stronger as personal, social, national and global perspectives change. No-one can claim possession of a unitary acculturated fashion. Its fluid form is being continuously disrupted by the circulation of global, local and specific discourses, creating a new dimension of beyond for "the end of fashion."

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