

THE LAYERS OF UGLY

Lah Laufiso

In the Summa attributed to Alexander of Hales, the created universe is a whole that is to be appreciated in its entirety, where the contribution of shadows is to make the light shine out all the more, and even that which can be considered ugly in itself appears beautiful within the framework of the general Order. It is this order as a whole that is beautiful, but from this standpoint even monstrosity is redeemed because it contributes to the equilibrium of that order.¹

Umberto Eco



Figure 1: Lah Laufiso, outfit for her collection *The Layers of Ugly*.

The Layers of Ugly was designed and constructed for the Fashion Design Studio 5 (FDS5) third-year paper in which I focused on and explored 'ugly' as a concept. These processes included researching terms such as "Art" "Beauty" "Ugly" and "Culture". Other developments explained in this report relate to design, toiling (mock ups or samples) and construction. In explaining the processes underlying *The Layers of Ugly*, I hope to make clear that the most significant personal achievement was that of critical thinking around the concept of Ugly.

CONCEPT

You might feel revolted by an object, but if you try to objectively explain why it is ugly, it's harder than you think.²

Lisa Hix

To begin the project, I flicked through an old issue of the *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, which included an article promoting the 2012 Brancott Estate World of Wearable Art Awards show. Accompanying this article was an image of an entry from a previous show, depicting a dress with a 'bird cage' – or perhaps a hamster cage – at the neck. It caught my eye as I felt it was deeply unattractive. This is when I started to think of garments in terms of 'ugly.' Although the colour combinations on the skirt of the dress complemented each other surprisingly well, what I found ugly was the design aesthetic: the image on the garment and the style of pleating which, to me, belonged on a curtain, not a dress. My confusion was centred on the question, "How did this UGLY garment come to be considered as 'wearable art?'" This gave rise to more questions:

1. How do you decide if works of art are indeed art – or not?
2. Why would works of art be considered art?
3. What is art?

When I googled the term 'ugly art', I came across a disturbing painting called *I'm Too Ugly to Live*. This painting seemed dark and odd. There was no instant attraction. In fact, I could easily and naturally conclude that this painting was ugly. The next thought to occur to me was, "Who is to say what is ugly?" This was a question not only for me to consider personally, but also one that might throw light on how global popular culture thinks about ugliness and how we judge objects as ugly.

In expanding on the statement quoted above, Lisa Hix asserts that "Most people are influenced by the dominant tastes and fashion sensibilities of their generation, class and ethnic group, and when you remove those factors from the equation, an exact, universal definition of 'ugliness' becomes almost impossible to pin down."³ When I considered this further, I thought about how our society conditions us to think. Often we will unthinkingly and instantly judge an object or an artwork as 'ugly.' However when challenged (or when we challenge ourselves), we will discover that we have not really thought critically about ugliness or beauty as concepts, or considered them in depth.

In starting to critically examine and challenge my own beliefs about "what is ugly?" I recalled the things that I had previously labelled as 'ugly.' These include, in my opinion, the prevalence and over-use of puffer jackets as fashion garments. I thought about how I judge and criticise my body, saying that I find my teeth and my hair ugly. Then I thought about ugly attitudes and behaviours in people and in society. While in Auckland at the beginning of this year, I told someone to "stop littering and pick up your rubbish." While the person's reaction was negative, this only strengthened my belief that our society should care for and be responsible for our environment. The most personally challenging part of the conceptualising process was to explore why I smoke between two and three packets of cigarettes a week when I find smoking to be a disgusting habit – something Ugly.

I first tried smoking cigarettes at the age of nine, and by 14 I was smoking around a pack (of 20 cigarettes) a week. When I started, I thought that smoking was cool. I smoked because all the people I was close to also smoked – so cigarettes have always been a part of my life. A few years ago, I started to reconsider my attitudes after noticing groups of people, younger than me, smoking in town after school or at night, this prompting me to think about how I must have looked when smoking at their age.

This was a repulsive and ugly mental image which I hoped to incorporate into the design. I hoped that focusing on the ugliness of smoking would give me the energy to stop smoking. In addition, the emotionally fraught time remembering when I told someone in Auckland to “stop littering” made me realise that I was still angry from that incident.

RESEARCHING AND DEFINING

Another source of inspiration was a story from my childhood called *Tangaroa's Gift*.⁴ In this story, Mere Whaanga tells of how Tangaroa, the god of the sea, originally gifted Paua (or Abalone) with a beautiful shell containing all the colours of the earth. However, as the shell's beauty was irresistible to the sea's other creatures, they pecked at and damaged Paua's shell. So, in order to protect Paua's inner beauty, Tangaroa then gifted Paua with an outer shell that was rough to the touch and ugly to the eye. This story inspired me to create *The Layers of Ugly* as a way of protecting and enhancing our inner beauty.

Initially, I intended to focus on changing the views and perceptions of other people – testing and pushing their boundaries about what is ugly. However, through the course of my research, I began considering my own boundaries with respect to the ugly. This led me to attempt to design a collection that would challenge my attitudes and change my own perceptions. Having reflected on the story of Paua, I decided that I needed to break down the concept of ugly. I was especially struck by the layers of armour (two coatings or layers of shell, one outer and one inner) needed to protect the flesh within in Mere Whaanga's story.

I considered that my own fashion choices were made to project confidence and therefore to conceal my actual lack of confidence. As Arabelle Sicardi puts it, “If I treat my trauma like an accessory, it doesn't define me and I can manipulate it like I manipulate clothes. Nothing will ever swallow me whole.”⁵ I concluded that garments are primarily used as armour to hide one's perceived flaws from the world. Since I believe that our society places too much emphasis on facial beauty (or lack thereof), I wanted anyone seeing my garments to make the connection between Paua's inner beauty and that of a person. This in turn led to the design of a mesh hood that would obscure the face, and therefore 'strip back' the layers of ugly.

In addition, my conceptualising process was driven by my curiosity, based on these questions:

1. Why do we perceive objects, garments or artworks as ugly?
2. What is the relationship between beauty and the ugly?
3. If we modify an object initially judged as ugly, will our perceptions of that object also change?

DESIGN AND SAMPLING

If you take away all things ugly, is there any beauty left?

Stephen Baley⁶

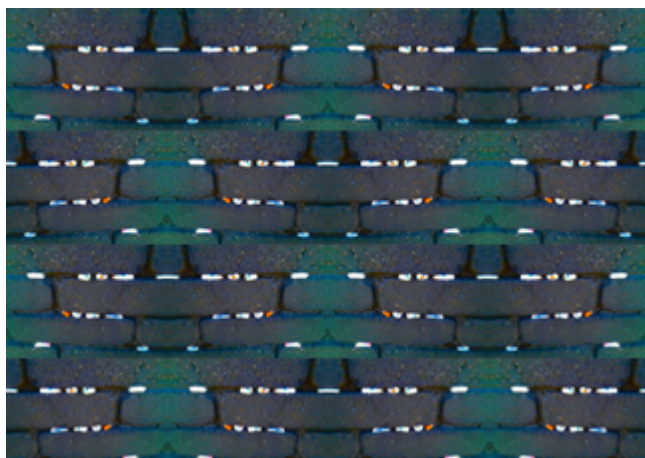
The Outer Layer –The Puffer Vest

I reflected on puffer jackets and littering as two aspects of society I found to be ugly and formulated a design that would combine these two aspects. First, a puffer jacket that would conceal rubbish and then a design that would expose rubbish – garments intended to show how common and “in your face” litter on our streets and in our environment can be.



Figures 2 and 3: Lah Laufiso, experiments working with rubbish in the outer layer:

First, I gathered rubbish such as rotting fruit and cigarette butts from our classroom bins and from helpful classmates. I overlapped and cover-seamed PVC material in order to create the 'puffer' look of the jacket. After this sampling process, I realised that the smell of the rotting rubbish was coming through the holes I had deliberately created in the PVC. I then had to come up with an alternative to sewing that would conceal the smell and prevent the liquefying rubbish from leaking out. I considered two possible methods, but settled on vacuum-sealing the rubbish within PVC. I visited the Otago Polytechnic's Hospitality Department where I learnt how to use the vacuum-sealing machine. Following this, I constructed three vests each consisting of four pockets with 12 domes.



Figures 4 & 5: The cigarette butt wall, F Block, Otago Polytechnic and Lah Laufiso, digital print based on the cigarette butt wall.

THE CIGARETTE BUTT WALL

Initially, cigarette butts were going to be used as filler (waste) for the PVC pockets. However, one day when I was smoking outside Otago Polytechnic's F Block, and I stubbed out my cigarette on the wall, I decided that a 'cigarette butt wall' could form part of the design. Knowing that smokers like me are not supposed to smoke less than 10m away from all Polytechnic buildings, the connection between the design brief and this particular 'tangent' was primarily about pushing boundaries.

Once there were approximately 15 (not all mine) cigarette butts jammed into the gaps between the bricks, I took a photograph (Figure 4). I then uploaded the photograph into Photoshop, where I used several effects including de-colouring and colour enhancing to manipulate and generate a pattern of (white) butts against a (coloured) brick wall. My final choice for the tones of the wall were purple, blue and green. (Only later did I realise that these colours echoed the tones of Paua's inner shell layer.) I sent the final image to a digital printing company, Digital Décor, to have the fabric printed.

I was sent a fabric sample and then received 3m of fabric for each scale selected – large scale, close-up and small scale. Using this fabric, I made one singlet and three skirts. I used ponte knit fabric for two other singlets. Each singlet was attached to a skirt by means of varying numbers of domes. For me, the cigarette butt wall is a metaphor for exposing or stripping away a 'layer of ugly.'

EVALUATION OF PROCESS AND CONCLUSIONS

I hate slick and pretty things. I prefer mistakes and accidents. Which is why I like things like cuts and bruises – they're like little flowers.

David Lynch⁷



Figure 6. Lah Laufiso, *The Layers of Ugly* – the final collection.

Initially, having no idea about what concept I might use for the FDS5 'Visionary' brief, I had to do a great deal of thinking and posing of questions, and as a result learned much about my critical thinking and conceptualising processes. I enjoyed experimenting with and learning techniques for design and construction. In order for my inner visualising process to begin flowing into the next stage of designing, I needed to thoroughly research and understand a concept. Once I was able to visualise it, I could grapple with the technical challenges a design presented. The creative process can't be forced – inspiration comes not from periods of intellectual activity, but from times when I am relaxed and am not actively thinking about the subject.

As far as *The Layers of Ugly* project is concerned, my main conclusion is that inner beauty should be valued over physical (or external) beauty. Beauty can always be found where we judge, find, name or label Ugly and, conversely, Ugly can always be found where we judge find, name or label Beauty. Finally, there is still tension for me regarding my intellectual versus emotional understandings about what I personally find ugly – such as littering and cigarette smoking. Resolving this tension is a 'work in progress' – something which I believe will come with a deepening maturity.

Lah Laufiso is a third-year student working towards her Bachelor of Design (Fashion). She enjoys developing the concepts behind her designs and focuses on creating visual interactions between the wearer and the viewer.

- 1 Umberto Eco, *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea* (London: Quercus Publishing, 2010).
- 2 Lisa Hix, "Think you Know Ugly? Think Again," *Collectors Weekly*, <http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/think-you-know-ugly-think-again>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Mere Whaanga, *Tangaroa's Gift* (Auckland: Ashton Scholastic, 1990).
- 5 Arabelle Sicardi, "Trauma and Fashion Armour," *The Style Con*, <http://www.thestylecon.com/2014/03/03/trauma-fashion-armor>.
- 6 Stephen Bayley, *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything* (New York: Overlook, 2013).
- 7 David Lynch, *Lynch Night*, exhibition catalogue, <http://www.thecityofabsurdity.com/events/lynchnight2.html>.