

FASHIONING IDENTITY AND THE ART OF BRICOLAGE: STUDIO-BASED RESEARCH METHODS AND REFLECTION-IN-ACTION IN FASHION DESIGN

Sharlee Ghent

I am, as researcher, a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories, an assembler of montage.

Ainslie Yardley¹



Figure 1. Sharlee Ghent, hand-knitted over dress.
Model: Cecily Reed. Photograph: Thamarat Saikerd Sri.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes my recent Honours year project in Design (Fashion), which I completed at Otago Polytechnic. The purpose of this project was to develop and expand my skill base relevant to my design philosophy, which is based on the critical theory of bricolage and reflective practices. In this project, I explored an amalgamation of avant-garde and ready-to-wear clothing, creating an aesthetic that could be described as "apocalyptic streetwear." My intention was to capture the drama that avant-garde commands, while simultaneously achieving a wearable, ready-to-wear outcome. Key themes were a relaxed fit and fabric manipulation. To achieve this, I employed multiple elements of textile design that interest me: bleaching, devoré, hand painting, hand knitting and hand embroidery.

Bricolage – a French word meaning 'making-do' – is about using what is around you to create something new. As a design method, bricolage is established within the modes of assembly, generating new meanings through this process. Bricolage is a resourceful and creative approach to gathering knowledge and materials. The evolving nature of bricolage gives the inquirer scope to take small chunks of research or authentic life experience from various places and piece them together. Whether in an organic fashion or as an ordered process, constructing a 'whole' body of work which has been assembled from different perspectives can be more relevant and meaningful than traditional approaches for those who are more comfortable with an evolutionary approach to designing. I am happy to use bricolage and 'chance' methods, as my design process relies on spontaneous action through making. Drawing on a multitude of tools, themes and experiences, inspiration remains in a constant state of flux.

Bricolage embodies the notion of impromptu action and a 'what if' design philosophy. My first step when designing is dedicated to retrospective thought, to reassessing past tools and materials used, and to re-evaluating practical steps in relation to previous experiences. Conceptually, I focus on drawing parallels between my own experience and my bricolage-based identity, and the designs I create using a bricolage process, reflective practices and studio-based research methods. Critical reflection on a sequence of events during the process of learning and development is the key concept of reflective practice. To retain information based on a past action, we must analyse the intended purpose of that action and evaluate its results. Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action² have become essential processes throughout my design development, and ensure that my design outcomes are coherent, wearable and marketable.

BRICOLAGE

Christopher Wibberley has researched the use of multi-method approaches, in particular bricolage, in the research undertaken by his health, social care and education students at postgraduate level.³ In the context of teaching and learning, bricolage refers to the refinement and/or innovative development of new systems. Wibberley explains how a range of craft-based metaphors have been used to define the action of bricolage: sewing, montage, weaving and collage are all considered apt descriptions of the way researchers bring together their knowledge, tools and materials to create a new kind of order. According to Wibberley, the process of bricolage is about the "reworking of material into a different and often artistic form, forming stories which are seen to provide portraits of life experienced."⁴ The bricolage process can be brought together in a constructed order, like the way a patchwork quilt is pieced together from a variety of fabrics to form a structured whole. The result could also be presented as disjointed and inharmonious, much like collage, expressed as a clash of elements and juxtapositions expressive of a mindful yet chaotic result. For Wibberley, bricolage implies "engaging in a process out of which numerous outcomes can potentially emerge."⁵ The final outcomes of this process can be delivered in multiple ways.

Challenging tradition by utilising the 'no one way' approach of the bricolage model to suit my own design perspective is empowering. Bricolage design processes and reflective practices provide me with the opportunity to resist and challenge conventional fashion ideologies and to construct my own designed identity through the medium of fashion. Permeating my design practice is an absolute belief that design fluctuates between logical making methods and conceptual leaps of the imagination. Through making and then stepping back to reflect on where design

development can take me, I have realised my research aim of developing a refined knowledge of bricolage and reflection-in-action as a design research methodology.

According to Joyce Yee and Craig Bremner, the bricolage action of re-appropriating and combining elements into new and authentic outcomes mirrors the processes used by some designers.⁶ In my research practice I have used bricolage as a design process; working within the realms of my personal aesthetic, it has become relevant to my identity, which I also consider to be constructed through a bricolage process. Identity, I believe, is inherited and learned from one's individual interpretations and responses to recent and past life events. It is these roots in personal history that support identity, and through new experiences our identity is strengthened. J Sanchez-Burks believes that people who successfully manage to combine multiple and even opposing social identities are better at compiling diverse sets of knowledge to improve their "creative performance."⁷

Bricolage has connections with cultural processes that can also construct identity. Claude Lévi-Strauss defined the bricoleur as someone who proceeds in an improvisatory fashion, and the bricolage process as an activity based on adapting to, and interpreting more meanings from, "being" in the world.⁸ This statement also describes my personal identity, which has always been based on the principle of adaptation, while also referring to my physical design methodologies.

Wendy Knepper extends the definition to what she calls cultural bricolage.⁹ While agreeing with Lévi-Strauss, through examining the cosmopolitan nature of the modern world and how our identities are influenced by other cultures, Knepper identifies a more contemporary understanding of "being" in the world. She describes cultural bricolage as encompassing "identities, linguistic transformations, and aesthetic practices that have been shaped by the fragmentation and intermixture of various traditions."¹⁰ What results is a designed identity made up of meaningful experience and personal interpretation of the world around us.

In life, we are constantly adjusting ourselves on the basis of experience and what we learn from our surroundings, in order to inject more meaning into our existence. Lévi-Strauss identifies this kind of re-imagination of existing ideas, coupled with our current surroundings or at-hand tools, as a "meaning-making" form of bricolage.¹¹ Fashion is an extension of this concept: clothes are things that display meaning and invite questions about identity. Fashion can be seen as a kind of performance, referring to experiences based around the body,¹² acting as an artefact of culture and playing a silent yet profound role within social commentary.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

As a designer, I rely on reflective practices and evolutionary design. I begin with an improvised style of designing based on a knowing-in-action approach, courting surprise, followed by conscious reflection on the many outcomes possible. I take inspiration from what is around me and fashion new meanings from the elements at hand. Donald Schön discusses how humans act and react through spontaneous and unthinking actions as we go about our daily lives, and how our decision-making is based on the "soup of knowledge" in our heads.¹³ This process, which Schön calls knowing-in-action, is consistent with intuitive design processes. *Reflection-in-action*, as Schön phrases it, is a more conscious approach to what we do and is often used in conjunction with *knowing-in-action*. Schön asks us to look past technical rationality, which has been described as binary thinking within professional knowledge. He suggests that "knowing" is a fundamental constituent of resourceful action.¹⁴

Bricolage and reflective practice share the process of attempting one thing, stepping back and reflecting on that action, then trialling another. Throughout my process, I challenge the well-worn traditions and order of garment creation. I want to rethink the design tradition whereby first we research, then we sketch and finally we make. The questioning of these tasks undermines their place as the foundation on which design practice is based, and opens up new possibilities for alternative design practice.¹⁵ With this in mind, my design practice relies predominantly on the act of making, allowing me to think on my feet, experience 'surprises' and then reflect on the design direction I

want to take. This brings subjectivity, and consequently the unforeseen, along with it. The methods of the bricoleur epitomise the investigative practices that I find are critical to my creative processes.

In short, I believe in a design model that values diverse making methods and reflection-in-action as a valid approach to designing and design research. Design outcomes are often eclectic and reveal a juxtaposition of styles involving a variety of practices and materials. Formulating the design rationale, or the 'why', can be a process which is only developed in hindsight.¹⁶

Schön also discusses tacit knowledge: the idea that we know more than we can say.¹⁷ We may not be able to express in words how we know something, or how we do something; we act intuitively, on hunches or informed guesses. Informal and unquantifiable ways of knowing are part of a practice-led process, as opposed to something that has been predetermined or defined. Design decisions led by impulse can lead to swift changes. Experiments offer multiple forms of expression, and generate perspectives which are not pre-thought, but led by action and re-action. This approach allows the designer to develop strategies and new theories as they go.

Schön further suggests that we do not dwell on expected outcomes; rather, when our actions do not occur in a foreseen way, we tend to reflect on the moment more profoundly. As these unexpected design signals or surprises occur, they become knowledge or part of the tool-set for the bricoleur to store within their memory bank.¹⁸ Authentic knowledge which is unthought-of prior to improvised notions becomes a meaningful experience, one that can undo negative thinking when pre-planned design falters. Those who practice bricolage are reliant on their own experiences and their own history of events in everything they do. Bricolage allows for adaptation and appropriation; to reconstruct or deconstruct all our acquired knowledge and work without an imposed hierarchy or specific method.¹⁹

Re-evaluating elements and details within my work is a constant process. For example, experimenting with how leftovers from one piece might enhance another garment, while also adding coherency to the overall collection, is one way I use bricolage, reflection-in-action, and sustainability concurrently, creating something with new meanings.²⁰

FASHION AND BRICOLAGE

Dick Hebdige explains how the concept of bricolage can be used to illustrate the construction of subcultural style.²¹ Hebdige describes bricolage as "[b]asic elements [that] can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them."²² The Punk movement is an example of this. As Punk sought to disrupt tradition within society, fashion was its most overt tool. Objects were borrowed from mundane contexts and their meanings were reorganised to express a Punk critique of how 'modernity and taste' should be approached.

It is arguable that the Punk movement sought to foment unrest and reveal social subordination by drawing on a symbolic representation of the English working class. By using the tools and knowledge around them, Punks used a working class identity to parody English history and traditions. They reassembled order into a chaotic aesthetic, creating a bricolage of details that were used to expose an oppressive class structure. Punk was a bricolage process, a curated identity of personal expression and anti-establishment ideas.

THE STUDIO PROJECT: PROCESSES, METHODS AND RESULTS

Customisation of fabrics was fundamental to my project, and this involved a range of applications: bleaching, *devoré*, hand knitting, hand embroidery and painting on fabric. Improvised design is essential to the way I produce, and I work in no logical order, favouring bricolage and reflection-in-action as design methods. Combining elements of drape and traditional patternmaking techniques, I embrace a no-hierarchy, no-rules approach to how I assemble my designs. Altered fabrics provide different perspectives; in a design sense, composition can be unlimited and endless.

The designer is not the sole dictator of the process; modified fabric has limitations, which for me prompts surprise design directions. I would not have been able to foresee, or sketch out, all the design ideas that these altered fabrications offer. The character of these fabrics dictates how I physically interact with them, and I react to what is before me.

BLEACH

I had worked with bleach to create my own unique fabrics on a previous project. I was able to reflect on this experience, and for this project I undertook further experimental work that created fabrics that had further meaning for me. As each random length of fabric was altered, I would see more in it. I found that thinking on my feet was the only way to navigate through this process. Grabbing clothes pegs and hanging the fabric on the line was a brilliant move – now I had won back some control! I could see the fabric as a whole, which meant I had the opportunity to study the composition of the picture created by the bleach and add to it by scooping handfuls of bleach solution and running it down the fabric as I saw fit.

Bleaching was a pleasing process, both aesthetically and as a design method. Rapid-fire, instant results appealed to the hands-on, bricolage style of designing I love most. The haphazard character of these bleaching techniques complemented the concept of bricolage. This everyday cleaning product imposed new meaning on mass-produced fabric, with a range of results.

I worked with both viscose and silk fabrics, and assumed that the silk would talk to me as viscose did. So as I checked the silks from time to time and saw no visible change occurring, I thought, more bleach! Then it happened – the silk was screaming at me. The bleach/water solution was warm and getting warmer, and as I removed my expensive silks I saw that they had been burnt. Shock turned to grief, then came anger. This was followed quickly by overwhelming



Figure 2. Sharlee Ghent, bleached viscose jersey.
Model: Cecily Reed. Photograph: Thamarat Saikerdri.



Figure 3. Sharlee Ghent, bleached cotton knit top.
Model: Cecily Reed. Photograph: Thamarat Saikerdsri.

happiness, when I began to handle the silks after washing them. The simple act of draping them onto mannequins provided the necessary insight into how these half-destroyed fabrics could become something special. Suddenly I could see hemlines, albeit ragged and burnt, coupled with simple silhouettes to accentuate the complicated textile.

This serendipitous moment would provide a trickle-on effect for my project that would aptly show how I work; entrenched in chance and bricolage methodologies and high on reflective practice, a bricoleur is by definition fluent in adaptation.

DEVORÉ

Devoré is an interesting technique. It uses a paste that after applying, drying and ironing, dissolves cellulose (plant-based) fibres in the fabric that are then washed out. Holes of individual design remain in varying states. If the fabric is a blend of non-cellulose and cellulose fibres, the non-cellulose material is left behind.

Inspiration for my *devoré* pattern came from an old plastic washing basket, the sides of which I utilised to make a stencil. Malcolm Barnard describes the bricoleur as “[s]omeone who undertakes a wide variety of tasks and who is forever making do, not necessarily using either the correct tools or the proper materials.”²³ The fabrics that resulted from the washing basket template are not only an example of bricolage action, but also of a successful outcome. The balance of structure and fragility achieved is analogous to bricolage as a design method. The *devoré* pattern was applied to the fabric with no prior thought as to what the final outcome would be. The pattern was created randomly, working on composition as I went.



Figure 4. Sharlee Ghent, the White Room dress, devoré and embroidery. Model: Cecily Reed. Photograph: Thamarat Saikerdsri.



Figure 5. Sharlee Ghent, cotton knit top with devoré application. Model: Cecily Reed.
Photograph: Thamarat Saikerd Sri.

KNITTING

Using unconventional materials is a major part of my interest in knitting textiles. I utilise a variety of needle sizes, and knit fabrics with the purpose of draping garments. My needles are homemade and range from the inner tubes of fabric rolls to a wooden sword and a handcrafted wooden needle. I am interested in experimenting with scale through the medium of knitting. I do not plan how many stitches I will use or even the pattern, preferring to improvise and changing the needle size as I go, responsive to what I see appearing before me. What I have discovered through experimental knitting is that a row of very large stitches needs to be followed by a row of small stitches to give the piece stability, thus dictating the use of some form of pattern. Length is usually dictated by the amount of yarn I have available, and what will be needed to complete a particular 'look.' The garment is designed as I hand-sew it together.

CONCLUSION

Discovering bricolage as a design methodology gave me a feeling of belonging, a sense that I finally had a place somewhere within the context of learning styles. No longer an outsider or alone in my process, I felt strangely at ease, with an increased confidence that my design process is actually a real thing. It has a definition, is justified, has purpose and is meaningful.

I make first and think with my hands, working in a fluid and impromptu fashion. I use previous knowledge gained through experience in conjunction with reflection-in-action, and I figure out the 'why' as I go. Getting too tied up in concepts can be a time-waster. Some of us work through our ideas without really understanding why we might be doing something until further into our design process, when we start making connections between our past and present work. Only then, after we have found rhythm, direction and commonalities within diverse and unique methods, do we start to see a story emerge.

The stand-out aspect of my research was that learning according to a no-hierarchy, no-set-rules methodology can result in completing work to a skilled standard. Working in a spontaneous manner throughout my design process did not mean that I was not working within some form of pre-planned structure. Just because each garment and design stage was not thought out and determined in a logical or traditional beginning-to-end fashion did not mean that my outcomes lacked coherency. Using bricolage and reflective practices as a design methodology was an experimental research approach. The purpose was to prove that a successful collection could be created through the use of impromptu and diverse design methods, with the emphasis on designing through making.

The emotional connections with my design work created through physical making methods have been vital throughout my process. Feeling invested in my process has been key to staying inspired and driven to complete the design activity. A process based on logical order can be restrictive and leave the student feeling disconnected from their work. Observing my collection as a whole during exhibition, I realised how much valuable 'making' information I had retained purely from the process of making. Through the use of repetitive making methods, I now feel confident in my processes.

I also feel that I have developed genuine knowledge and empathy in regard to guiding students, providing learning options that could be more authentic for some students through the processes I have researched. Logical or traditional design methods clouded my natural learning style, and I have now found solace and renewed confidence through my personal design processes. My hope is that students with similar learning habits might be better understood and nurtured through my research and reflection.

Sharlee Ghent graduated Bachelor of Design (Honours) from Otago Polytechnic School of Design, majoring in Fashion, in 2016. She is currently completing her Master of Teaching and Learning (MTchgLm) at the University of Otago.

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