

VISIONARY: AN ANALYSIS OF INNOVATION, SUBTRACTION CUTTING, AND FUNCTION IN MY OWN FASHION DESIGN PROCESS

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To stress the deep respect for the actual execution of clothes, over and above any concept that may be behind them: "For us the passion is the creation."

Susannah Frankel¹

INTRODUCTION

My collection "Humming Wires" focused on three main inspirations: innovation, subtraction cutting, and function in fashion design. Subtraction cutting is a process that some practitioners in the fashion industry use to create garments that challenge the conventional notions of flat patternmaking and accepted silhouettes. This practice also advocates minimal fabric wastage as it uses the whole width of a fabric. Using subtraction cutting as the method of patternmaking, combined with the removal of threads as a form of fabric manipulation, creates garments that challenge ready-to-wear clothing. The results are wearable and multipurpose garments with unique and conceptual aesthetics and silhouettes. This writing discusses the process involved in creating the collection and how my core values are integrated into the outcome.

The concept behind my collection *Humming Wires* began with a brief entitled 'Visionary,' which encouraged creative freedom and innovative practices. The name, inspired by the song *Red Right Hand* by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, reflects the distorted lines created through the fabric manipulation used within my collection. Beginning my research, I knew that function would be an integral part of my philosophy for the collection. The wearability of clothing beyond the catwalk is crucial to me; therefore, all garments needed to be both desirable in a commercial environment as well as flexible in terms of their ability to be worn in multiple ways, thus increasing the total value of the garment.

My approach to combining innovation and function began with some research on Maison Martin Margiela, a fashion house which shares this philosophy. According to fashion director and commentator Susannah Frankel, conceptual fashion "has been weighed down by negative associations, denoting clothing that one feels should be appreciated – it's clever; it's challenging – but that, to be honest, one doesn't actually like all that much let alone want to wear."² I wanted to combine the functionality of adaptable styles with decorative embellishment that served for aesthetic purposes, thus making the garments visually engaging and also enticing to wear. The garments are designed to incorporate the concept of 'Surrealista Minimalismo,'³ which combines the contrasting ideals of Surrealism and Minimalism into design. This became a central theme in the designing process as it reflects my complex relationship with the fashion industry, characterised by finding fashion compelling, yet having a strong belief that the frivolity of our mass consumption culture is vulgar and obsolete. According to Brooks Stevens, an American industrial designer,

planned obsolescence is “instilling in the buyer the desire to own something that is a little newer, a little better and a little sooner than is necessary.”¹⁴ While Stevens’ comments were directed to his field of design, the theory can easily be translated to the fashion industry. Human nature seems predisposed to yearn for the new. It is as though we as consumers have an inbuilt radar that senses new as better and old as obsolete. This disposition requires our returning to a more environmentally sustainable belief in quality in design, construction and fabrics to slow consumption and result in more refined and timeless clothing.

To help interpret the sustainable element of my philosophy I chose subtraction cutting as my primary method of design. “To not directly apply the same rules and processes habitually can prove beneficial ... each practitioner must find their own method of working within zero-waste.”¹⁵ I developed my own style of subtraction cutting, one that characterised my design philosophy. While contributing to the innovation element by providing a means to create less conventional styles, I was also able to minimise fabric wastage, as subtraction cutting utilises the entire width of the fabric. The collection is a synopsis of my approach to design and the direction I plan to take in future endeavours. In combining these three elements, I aim to develop design that is equal parts interesting and advantageous to its wearer or viewer, without damaging the environment.

INNOVATION

Having a strong concept behind my design process was a motivation to produce designs with a cohesive mood and aesthetic. In order to satisfy my need for aesthetic embellishment, I developed fabric by manipulation of thread removal from a woven piece of fabric to create pattern. This decision was not informed by a transient fashion idea, but more prosaically born out of a lecture spent playing with a piece of linen as I listened.

“It remains more important for us that someone finds their way of dressing as opposed to a way of dressing as prescribed by anyone else or by overriding trends.”¹⁶ Here Frankel discusses Margiela’s commitment to developing an individualised design style, a concept which is synonymous with my own ideas. It was important for me that I establish my own aesthetic rather than relying on a transitory style as a basis, because this would have conflicted with my other key ideas: function and sustainability. This concept provided a satisfactory substitute for my initial idea – communicating my conflicting views on the fashion industry through distorted painted portraits on garments.

My previous studies in art have shaped a desire to incorporate artistic elements into fashion design; bridging the gap between art and fashion by using clothing as a metaphor for a theme that is integrated into the designs. I wanted to depict the idea of Minimalist Surrealism, which epitomises the direction I wanted to take in designing the collection and in the future. The juxtaposition of distorted, manipulated areas with clean silhouettes and high-quality finishing techniques was the way I chose to depict this. Communicating distortion through the removal of threads proved more suitable than painting, as it proved to be representative of my theme in a minimal way – without being too obvious, and adding interest on closer inspection. I was able to mirror this idea of minimal but complex designs through the use of subtraction cutting, which I discuss below.

According to Maison Martin Margiela, while in the past their work has been intelligent and concept-driven, the fundamental fact is that they make clothes and therefore they need to be wearable: “A dress that tries too hard to be intellectual and/or intelligent will automatically become ridiculous.”¹⁷ Aligning myself with this view, I have refined my silhouettes to make them as clean as possible, using exaggeration only when it significantly adds to the design and is still desirable in a commercial space. Removing threads in sections exposed different layers of the outfits, and created contrast by having conservative pieces that then exposed the body through the transparent areas of the manipulated fabric. The idea was developed through experimenting with different fabrics; I found that woven fabrics with a cross grain were easy to remove threads from and the removal of thicker fibres was simpler. Experimenting with heavy linen gave a satisfactory finish which inspired me to create the cropped jacket entirely from this fabric (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. Ariane Bray, example of fabric manipulation using thread removal.



Figure 2. Ariane Bray, outfit 1 with manipulated linen jacket.

SUBTRACTION CUTTING

Some approaches to subtraction lend garments a flamboyant appearance, as in the work of its inventor Julian Roberts. While his work is engaging and highly complex, I decided on a more refined aesthetic as I felt this would be more wearable in everyday life. This approach suits complex garments that require close scrutiny to comprehend, juxtaposed with clean and minimal aesthetics. By utilising subtraction cutting as my primary design method, I was also able to integrate environmental sustainability into the collection. Each piece began with an uncut length of fabric and slowly transitioned into a polished garment through a practice-led and organic process of reaching a design outcome.

In my first attempt at sustainable design through subtraction cutting I did not endeavour to make my designs zero-waste; however, the practice has enabled me to reduce waste significantly compared to flat patternmaking. According to fashion designers Katherine Townsend and Fiona Mills, "Taking experimental knowledge and applying it within a sustainable framework presents pattern cutters with many problems to solve and in doing so the opportunity to think and design holistically."¹⁸ For Townsend and Mills, developing a particular patternmaking technique can produce more well-rounded garments. I found this to be an accurate assessment when subtraction cutting, as I abandoned any preconceived notions of form and allowed the fabric to guide me. My process involved taking a step back from conventional styles, an approach which sat comfortably with the idea of working against planned obsolescence in design. I developed a new perception of both patternmaking and form by reverting to a more basic approach which I believe provided a more creative outcome.



Figure 3. Ariane Bray, chiffon dress

FUNCTION

I intend my designs to be wearable in daily life and adaptable to multiple styles. The planned obsolescence of transient, fast fashion is a system I strive to work against. Rather, I advocate for perennial forms and high-quality construction and finishing techniques that will last far beyond the season. The combination of these elements in the development of my collection aimed to produce garments that would be unaffected by trends, thus working against the obsolescence of mass consumption. Describing the difference between clothing and good design, German fashion historian and theorist Ingrid Loschek argues: "Design is not created arbitrarily and not according to a pattern but is constructed with intention. Design must speak for the product and lend it an unmistakable quality."⁹ In combining the three elements of innovation, subtraction cutting, and function, my aim was to create design that could be appreciated beyond the consumer's desire to own something new and 'of the moment' and serve a purpose as a usable item. As discussed above, I support Margiela's functional approach to design which appreciates that a garment is primarily to clothe the body and therefore should be wearable. According to Frankel, the Martin Margiela house opposes designers putting the label 'conceptual' on their work in order to bring it "closer to art and as far as possible from its original purpose, that is to put clothes on people's bodies."¹⁰

This point has been carefully taken into consideration throughout the collection by attention to fabric, fit, colour and adaptability. Each garment can be worn in various ways and there is no prescribed way that should be seen as the correct style. For example, the sheer dress illustrated in Figure 3 has four possible head holes, allowing the wearer to find a style they prefer. This feature increases the function of the garment, as it can be adjusted for different occasions or to reflect the wearer's mood. This potential for adjustment of the garment's 'personality' makes it applicable to a wider range of customers as it can fit more figures, personalities and lifestyles. The combination of this transformative capability with the minimalist aspect meant that the dress would be understated. It is adaptable without appearing to be worn back to front or the wrong way up.

Each outfit in the collection begins with an outside layer in the form of a jacket. In Figure 2 the outer layer is the jacket of fully distorted linen thread; this is an example of extreme fabric manipulation.¹¹ With its asymmetric cowed front, this garment is subtly reminiscent of its subtraction cut origins. The second is the wool crepe jacket that contains almost no fabric wastage, except for the curve of the neckline, cut to allow enough room for a head to fit through. The third layer is the cape, where waste occurs only in the circles cut for the neck and waist, creating a series of circles that the body travels through, anchoring at the waist and neck.

While these outside layers create much of each garment's form, they are complemented by the subdued forms of the underlayers. The colour scheme consists mainly of black, with varying textures and weights, accompanied by a subdued palette of dark greys and burgundy. The varying weights of fabric have been selected to maximise the drape of the garments and retain structure where it is needed. While the linen jacket was created out of a heavy linen, this weight was altered by the removal of threads, making it appear softer and closer to the draping layer of the chiffon and viscose dresses in the collection.

In fashion, importance is given to the distinction between designer and everyday clothing. But as Loschek argues, "We must take both into account along with their respective claims to innovation."¹² This inclusive approach is fundamental in this collection, which reflects my belief that both high quality and features suitable for everyday usage should be incorporated in garments. While it is understandable that someone would not want to wear an haute couture gown every day, I do believe that everyday garments should have the longevity, high-quality finishing techniques and quality fabrics associated with high fashion. This approach, combined with innovative patternmaking and forms, gave me the impetus to design and create my collection.

CONCLUSION

Combining the three elements of innovation, subtraction cutting, and function produced compelling outcomes which tested my beliefs about fashion design. Creating garments by means of a practice-led medium opened me to using silhouettes and shapes that I would never have considered by drawing or through flat patternmaking. While I am aware that this collection merely skims the surface of what this design style can offer, I believe I have achieved a refined and well-considered collection that embodies my design philosophy.

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- 1 Susannah Frankel, "The Birth, Death and Re-birth of Conceptual Fashion," in *Maison Martin Margiela* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), ed. Ian Luna, separate inset booklet at page 40.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Gian Marco Ansaloni, "Minimalismo Surrealista," in *Maison Martin Margiela*, 52.
- 4 Brook Stevens, quoted in Carroll Gantz, *The Founders of American Industrial Design* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), 157.
- 5 Katherine Townsend and Fiona Mills, "Mastering Zero: How the Pursuit of Less Waste Leads to More Creative Pattern Cutting," *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 6:2 (2013), 104-111, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17543266.2013.793746>.
- 6 Frankel, "The Birth, Death and Re-birth of Conceptual Fashion."
- 7 Maison Martin Margiela, quoted in Frankel, "The Birth, Death and Re-birth of Conceptual Fashion."
- 8 Townsend and Mills, "Mastering Zero," 105.
- 9 Ingrid Loschek, *When Clothes Become Fashion: Design and Innovation Systems* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2009), 223.
- 10 Maison Martin Margiela, quoted in Frankel, "The Birth, Death and Re-birth of Conceptual Fashion."
- 11 Because removing thread from fabric contradicts principles of sustainability, in the future I plan to consider extracting the thread by hand-loomed the fabric so as to produce less wastage and create new designs.
- 12 Loschek, *When Clothes Become Fashion*, 5-6.