

## INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL CRAFT TECHNIQUES AND CONTEMPORARY FASHION

Phoebe Ryder



Figure 1. Phoebe Ryder, wax-resist dyed garments, 2017. Models: Mackenzie Hollebon (left) and Henessey Griffiths. Photograph: Ruby Harris.

The more I am educated, the more conscious I become that the current fashion system is not beneficial or sustainable for our planet and its inhabitants. As a young designer, I feel responsible to be part of the change that needs to occur, and at this point my response is to slow down the excessively fast process that has become the current fashion model. In response to the idea of slowness, I have used my most recent project as a chance to further extend my body of work while developing and exploring traditional textile techniques. Influenced by the natural world around me, I have incorporated wax-resist dyeing techniques to create clothing adorned with landscape forms.

My research began with looking into the practice of traditional wax-resist dyeing techniques, but was soon taken over by researching *through practice*<sup>1</sup> as I started sampling my textiles, leading my project to become very process-driven. The concept of 'flow' – which Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as an energised

focus, where identity disappears from consciousness and individual existence is temporarily suspended<sup>2</sup> – is a practice I have sought to embody in my process. I discovered Csikszentmihalyi, who developed the concept of flow, early on in my research into practice.<sup>3</sup> He describes flow in terms of an intense and focused concentration on the task at hand, allowing identity to disappear from consciousness and a temporary suspension of existence.<sup>4</sup> I am often challenged by my over-analytical mind and fear of failure, so as I continue to develop my skills and craft I am seeking to embody Csikszentmihalyi's ethos into my practice.



Figure 2. Early exploration of mark-making onto cloth using dye and wax. Photographer: Phoebe Ryder.

to engage with the cloth and interact three-dimensionally with his work.<sup>8</sup> Pollock worked as though his canvas absorbed the paint as dye, as opposed to it sitting on the surface.<sup>9</sup> This attitude is similar to my own when it comes to making my mark on cloth; I use dye the same way an artist would use paint on their canvas – only when I work, I am thinking of the final garment and its potential wearer:

It became clear early on in this project that undertaking research *through* practice<sup>10</sup> was key to my achieving the desired results. I have worked with dyeing cloth before, but using wax as a resist was a completely new skill that I had to develop in a short period of time. This meant that continuous sampling was important as I tried various methods and different types of wax to find the best method for the resources I had available.

I discovered the traditional Japanese wax-resist dye method, *Rozome*, which I found to embody another good illustration of cloth being used as a canvas. Contemporary *Rozome* artists continue to produce kimono each year alongside their large paintings and panels; the kimono remains the traditional canvas of the Japanese textile artist.<sup>11</sup> I find this an interesting play-off between art and fashion, as the *Rozome* artists use the cloth of the kimono as their canvas, whereby they create a textile that will feature not only on the body, but be displayed on the wall as a piece of art.

My designs were not pre-planned, but were instead influenced by my feelings and memories of landscapes which

As the demand for mass-produced, inexpensive items increases, the creative freedom of designers diminishes as goods are manufactured impersonally and sold anonymously to customers through various distributors.<sup>5</sup> In my efforts to slow down and rebuild the relationship with the consumer, I am continually drawn to traditional craft techniques and practice. I resonate with the ideas of Gale and Kaur, who believe that fashion can transport traditional crafts into the contemporary world,<sup>6</sup> and I believe that I am beginning to achieve this within my own work. It is important to me that I am fully involved in my craft, and it was paramount that I was personally in control of as many of the processes as I could be during this project.<sup>7</sup> I have hand-cut, washed, dyed, painted, and sewn the garments involved myself, which has resulted in a handmade quality that could not be reproduced in mass manufacture.

I often look to artists for inspiration when designing, and for this project I first turned to artists who use cloth as their medium. In the book *Whole Cloth*, Jackson Pollock is quoted talking about the closeness he felt towards his paintings when working with unstretched canvas on the wall or the floor; as it allowed him

I recreated on the cloth. The wax-resist dyeing techniques have brought a new dimension to the otherwise clean silhouettes of the garments. It has been important to me that the clothing is unique and has a quality that can't be replicated through mass manufacturing. These clothes hold a story, and a part of me that can be shared with another person. The craft aspect is important to me – the reality that I have been involved in the whole process, creating garments that are full of my energy.

I began with all-white, natural cloth which I hand-dyed and painted with my wax resist, a therapeutic process which allowed me to create my mark on the cloth. I experimented with different tools such as Indonesian *tjantings* used for batik dyeing, as well as paintbrushes and lino-cutters to create line and build up landscape forms on my textile.

As I grow as a designer, my identity is becoming linked to my practice,<sup>12</sup> and the actual process of making is really important to me. Beginning with a blank canvas, and using dye and wax as my tools, I became fully involved in transforming my cloth into a landscape for the body. The wax allowed me to add shape, depth, line and mood to the cloth, which resulted in suggestive landscapes that envelop the body. This process was organic insofar as I was never really sure what the final outcome would be; every one of my samples turned out slightly different, the only constant being my energy that went into creating the textile. During this process my thoughts and inspirations came from memories I hold, mostly of landscapes that are important to me. The resulting textile is both heavy and delicate in terms of line and shape, alluding to various natural forms such as rock formations, the sky and the ocean.

Learning a new skill in a short period definitely has its challenges, which I found to be very testing and emotionally draining. Characterising a craftsman, Gale and Kaur discuss how it can take many years to develop and perfect a new skill,<sup>13</sup> so I was definitely faced with some difficulties in this regard. When dyeing fabric, you are continually surprised and never guaranteed the outcome you desire. This forced me to let go of a lot of preconceived ideas, and reflecting on my ideas and outcomes as I went became a crucial part of my making.<sup>14</sup> I was confronted with many challenges when it came to using the wax; it is a messy process and removing the wax from the fabric at times proved rather difficult. I ended up using soy wax, as it seemed to be easiest to work with and remove. Soy wax is a lot more fragile than paraffin, and beeswax reacts to the dye differently. Sometimes the wax was dissolved by the dye bath, which changed the look of my initial designs. Instead of an obvious line, the mark became subtle and broken, resulting in a really beautiful stitch-like line "scaping"<sup>15</sup> the garment.



Figure 3. Sampling different wax resists. Photographer: Phoebe Ryder.



Figure 4. Phoebe Ryder, wax-resist dyed garment, 2017 (detail). Model: Henessey Griffiths. Photograph: Ruby Harris.

From the beginning, I tried very hard not to plan too far ahead, but whether consciously or not I found I had drawn up definite images in my mind of what I thought my final designs would look like. As I have mentioned, it was crucial for me to be reflecting and adapting as I moved forward in my process. It was important that I figured out the best way to apply my textile and, after experimenting, I found it was easiest to create the landscape forms when the cloth was still flat. It would have been interesting to pursue the idea of creating the garment first, then manipulating the textile, which would have created quite a different look. Initially, I thought I would be using more colour in my collection. I had visions of dark greys with pops of green and pink, but instead I followed my gut instinct as I began creating my first piece. Working without a set plan was challenging, and I have been surprised that the outcome was something I couldn't predict, but I am confident that the depth and tone I have created through the dyeing techniques have been successful.

I have set out to create clothing for the body that tells a story, resulting in a quality that is handmade and unable to be replicated en masse. As a maker, I have complete control over the array of different processes that were applied. I wanted the textile to be the main focus of the garments, which meant creating clean silhouettes that allowed the textile landscape to adorn the body. The process of hand-dyeing each garment means that every piece is one-of-a-kind, containing small imperfections and characteristics that enhance the handmade quality of the garment. I want the wearer to notice and appreciate the small differences in each piece; just like a natural landscape, they are enriched with both faults and gems. These garments do not set out to be perfect or flawless – there is beauty in the imperfections and it is important that the wearer can see myself, the maker, within these garments, and know that someone has put their time and energy into creating a piece of work, to be worn upon their body, that is enriched with thought and emotion.

This project has been a huge learning experience and has allowed me to expand my knowledge and skills working with textiles. I am continuing to develop and push my outcomes, while becoming more confident in my design practice and identity. I am looking forward to slowing down the process from maker to wearer even more in the future.



Figure 5. Phoebe Ryder; wax-resist dyed garments, 2017. Models: Mackenzie Hollebon (left) and Henessey Griffiths. Photograph: Ruby Harris.

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- 1 Peter Dallow, "Representing Creativeness: Practice-based Approaches to Research in Creative Arts," *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 2:1-2 (2003), 49-66.
- 2 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology* (Rotterdam: Springer Netherlands, 2014).
- 3 Dallow, "Representing Creativeness," 51.
- 4 Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and Foundations*, 89.
- 5 Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur, *The Textile Book* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 8 Mildred Constantine and Laurel Reuter, *Whole Cloth* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 10 Dallow, "Representing Creativeness," 51.
- 11 Betsy S Benjamin, *The World of Rozome: Wax-resist Textiles of Japan* (New York: Kodansha Amer Inc., 1996).
- 12 Gale and Kaur, *The Textile Book*, 65.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 14 Dallow, "Representing Creativeness," 53.
- 15 This is my own term, as in landscap(ing).