

HOW CAN FASHION REPRESENT THE FLUIDITY OF MASCULINE AND FEMININE ENERGY?

Sofia Heke



Figure 1. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. Models: Dylan Reid (Left) and Toby Fletcher (Right). Photographer: Sofia Heke.

How can fashion represent fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? I explored this question in a project within my third-year fashion bachelor's degree. For the project we were asked to engage with fashion in a critical and conceptual way, to question what design is and can be in the twenty first century. We were to use the UK design council Double Diamond framework, consisting of both research and design (Council, 2019), which involves four key stages: discover, define, develop, and deliver. We were tasked with developing our own area of research, identifying a problem or issue, leading to a research question that would be our brief - followed by the design of a three-outfit collection. In this article I outline my exploration in the role of fashion representing gender fluidity, through exploration into my own gendered experiences, much research, and my design process which lead to the creation of five garments. (Fig 1)

EDITORS INTRODUCTION

Fashion Designing involves not only a complex mastery of technical, conceptual, and aesthetic knowledges, recognition of recent and contemporary Fashion practices, and for-seeing possible fashion directions. To master all of this requires practice, actual hands-on exploration of fashion design through experimentation and most importantly critique of one's own work through evaluation and reflection. Reflective practice is rarely innate, and for most fashion designers is something that develops over time. Only through deeper levels of reflection and self-critique do Fashion Designers develop professional confidence to develop and propose new fashion. We continue to follow a *Scope (Art & Design)* Fashion Special Issue tradition of inviting undergraduate students to write about recent projects and processes, an opportunity to reflect on their design work beyond handing in and presenting it for assessment. We aim to provide a space for reflection outside of the classroom – to explore a a more professional and academic side of Fashion Practice. Here, Sofia Heke, shares her reflection and examination of her recent Fashion design project - adding to the work of four earlier students writing in Issue 17 and five in issue 15.



Figure 2. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. Models: Dylan Reid (Right) and Jasmin Dunn (Left). Photographer: Sofia Heke.

Starting this project I was inspired by my own gendered experiences - specifically my hybrid identity as a young Māori woman having lived in Australia and New Zealand. Moving from Brisbane to Dunedin, I experienced great culture shock particularly within Dunedin's student party culture and the underlying sexism, homophobia and toxic masculinity that came with it. I researched into gender stereotypes and identities, and how masculinity and femininity are not descriptors of sexual orientation. This then led me to researching Gender and Te Ao Māori as well as sensuality. From here, I developed my research question: "How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy?". As I chose to express this concept through fashion design, I researched textile techniques and manipulations such as gathering, smocking, tucking, sculpture, and drapery. I wanted a technique that provided fluidity and sensuality in my collection. I discovered that the tucking technique allowed fluidity and sculptural movement with fabric,

so I manipulated and implemented this technique into my five-piece collection. As per my philosophy of using existing fabric over new production, all fabrics and accessories are 100% recycled from my own fabric scraps as well as op shop materials. I created this collection to be showcased as an exhibition online and on runway.

DISCUSSION

My research question "How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy?" arose as I was inspired by the fluidity and sensuality of the masculine and feminine. I was influenced by the concept that every individual can express both their masculine and feminine, without linking it to sexual orientation or gender. My goal was to express this fluidity through fabric on the human form, to bring this concept into a physical exhibit. (Fig 2)

“Femininities and masculinities are plural—there are many forms of femininity and many forms of masculinity. In everyday language, femininities and masculinities do not map onto biological sex. In any one culture, certain behaviours or practices may be widely recognised as “feminine” or “masculine,” irrespective of whether they are adopted by women or by men. Femininities and masculinities are not descriptors of sexual orientation.”

Schiebinger, L., Klinge, I., Sánchez de Madariaga, I., Paik, H.Y., Schraudner, M., and Stefanick, M. (Eds.), 2011-2021., p1)

I analysed gender stereotypes within my own life experiences and as seen in the media. I identified how the process of gender socialisation can have negative effects on identity construction, especially as these stereotypes are constructed in early childhood and within the family – both which are primary agents of socialisation. This can in turn lead to negative characteristics including sexism, toxic masculinity, anxiety, and overall identity insecurities. I then explored sensuality and how it is often paired with sexuality. I discovered how sensuality relates to the body, the senses, and sensory pleasure which is not necessarily sexual. This then raised a further question of “How can we embrace our sensuality without it being sexual?”. I further researched this and was inspired by Robyn Ho (2006), who states:

“Our bodies and our skin are the start of our relationship with the world. To design for the sensuous intellect is to construct situations where phenomena can occur”.

(Ho, 2006, p170)

According to the Cambridge dictionary, fluidity is “the quality of being likely to change repeatedly and unexpectedly... the quality of being smooth and continuous” (Cambridge, 2021). Today, identity is becoming more fluid and this fluidity is more accepted. For example, in popular culture, celebrities such as Harry Styles and Timothee Chalamet embrace and showcase their femininity and sensuality which have been showcased in major magazines including Vogue and Entertainment Weekly. For my collection, I wanted to showcase such gender fluidity that is becoming normalised and explore the concept of sensuality.

I have always created non-binary clothing. Up until last year, I designed to the stereotype of “unisex” fashion, which is stereotypically very boxy, masculine and based on streetwear. As I explored embracing masculine and feminine energy I discovered that the word “unisex” or “non-gendered” fashion is automatically associated with these boxy masculine garments that do not embrace femininity or sensuality. I saw a lack of options for masculine identities that want to embrace their femininity. I wanted to provide a new meaning to non-binary clothing with no limitations or restrictions. I want to re define non-binary fashion for all identities, that does not hide, yet embraces the human figure.

Another topic I explored was gender diversity and Te Ao Māori. Being a Māori designer, my family have always supported my passion for exploring my Māori identity and nonbinary design. I listened to the RNZ podcast “BANG” season 2 episode 6, where Melody Thomas speaks with professor Ngahua Te awekotuku about how old stories illustrate diverse sexualities and gender expressions in Te Ao Māori (Thomas, 2018). Takatāpui is an ancient term defined as “an intimate companion of the same sex” which today is similar to the way “queer” is used. Evidence of diverse Māori sexualities and expressions are seen in pre colonial Aotearoa. Clues have been uncovered in old chants, songs and carvings. This research showed me that pre colonisation, gender fluid Māori were accepted. It was not until English colonisers pushed their Christian beliefs of morality, sexuality and gender on Māori which framed sexual fluidity as a sin (Thomas, 2018). Māori believe that everyone inherits the wairua (spirit) from their Whakapapa (ancestors), which includes sexuality and gender identity. This researched informed my question, and inspired me to present this concept of Takatāpui to an audience. Since pre colonised Aotearoa and as seen in contemporary society, sexual / gender fluidity has always been here.



Figure 3. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. Process Journal photos.

DESIGN PROCESS

As I used the double diamond to structure my design process, I used three main processes to develop and deliver my designs. I observed fluid movement, draped onto the human body, and worked with a fluid process of unpredicted fabric response.

Observing fluid movement

I explored words that responded to the concept of my question - words such as fluid, sculpture, ethereal, structure and movement. I then found images that

responded to these words which allowed me to think of how I would express and define these words throughout fabric focusing on textile manipulation, fabrication and surface design. The research outlined above informed the development and delivery my collection. I trialled overlocking, gathering, smocking, hand stitch and cutting as a physical representation of these words and images. Out of these methods, I was particularly drawn to the tucking method, specifically when I trialled it in stretch knit. (Fig 3) The tucks shaped the body and moved when I stretched it - they instantly gave me fluidity.

Draping onto the human body

A big part of my process was draping my pieces on a human form to see how the tucks moved on the moving body. I placed pieces on a male figure as well as a female figure to see how the different curves of the body manipulated the tucks. As I aimed for this collection to be able to fit multiple body shapes and sizes, I loved that the tucks shaped each body differently. In my third outfit you can see this mostly on the top - on a feminine figure - the tucks drape in multiple directions around the chest, whereas on a masculine figure, the tucks remain sitting in one direction. The black dress also changes its look depending on the wearer; specifically around the shoulders and chest. Where parts of a body are more full or curvy, the garments stretch and move around. On areas where the wearer has a smaller figure, the garments fall gently along the body.

Fabric response

Another main part of my design process was developing a drawing method on the fabric. I drew fluid lines with fabric chalk, sewing them into tucks. This allowed the fabric to respond to me in its own unpredictable way, providing a fluid energy. Each tucked piece was firstly drawn by hand, with no structured measurements as I wanted my process to be as fluid as possible, resulting in an unpredictable silhouette. I was able to work with the fabric in a way that was exciting and refreshing, yet also very fluid and sculptural.

OUTCOMES

As a designer I often use physical experimentation to embody my ideas. In this collection I used a tucking technique to show fluid movement and reflective greens to express the energy flowing throughout. I wanted to highlight the sensuality of the body, allowing my garments to hug and embrace the human figure. I also created accessories to compliment the collection such as arm warmers, neck and waist ties.

LOOK 1: This look provides power yet delicacy through a simple yet statement off the shoulder tube dress complimenting a sleeve and waist attachment. (Fig 4) The beautiful metallic green glitter knit was sourced by my nana at a garage sale in my hometown. It gave me a sense of dark glamour; which provided a masculine yet feminine attitude. I chose a calf length to allow a long and sophisticated look, paired with delicate draping of my purple and blue textured satin polyester. I wanted the shining pieces to fall gently around the dress, with a juxtaposing sleeve and waist attachment that gives almost a utilitarian feel of protection and power.

Figure 4. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. LOOK 1. Model: Jordyn Chin. Photographer: Sofia Heke.





Figure 5. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. LOOK 2. Model: Dylan Reid. Photographer: Sofia Heke.

LOOK 2: This garment would be my statement piece, as well as the piece I spent the longest perfecting. The silhouette is a mixture of the masculine and the feminine, providing a fit that allows most body sizes to fit inside. (Fig 5) The garment moves comfortably and stretches easily. Not only can this dress be a singular garment, but it can be worn in multiple ways, as the technique I used allows multiple entrances to the body. I did not want conventional openings as these are not conventional garments - they are sculptural pieces on the body, hence why the majority of the seams are hand stitched or overlocked together. I weaved the shiny strips in and out of the thick tucks, as I wanted these colourful pieces to be able to have fluid movement. I hand stitched each piece to the top of the garment allowing the ends to be pulled through in multiple directions.

LOOK 3: My aim for the pants was to provide a silhouette that looks like an object floating and moving around the body. I achieved this by using my drawing technique, drawing then sewing tucks around the surface area of the laid out fabric, draping and shaping them into a pant. The fabric is a thick stretch which falls heavy onto the ground, yet bounces with movement. The brown compliments the greens, and also keeps within an organic palette. The top complimenting the pants falls gently around the chest, with the tucks changing in movement depending on the shape of the body wearing it. The addition of ties around the waist and neck keep consistency with the concept of energy.



Figure 6. Sofia Heke, How can fashion represent the fluidity of masculine and feminine energy? 2021 collection. LOOK 3. Model: Jasmin Dunn. Photographer: Sofia Heke.

CONCLUSION

This collection provides an insight into the way we view identity and the expression of self. I want to reflect on our past and understand that fluid identity expression has been accepted in Aotearoa since pre colonisation and is more common today. I strive to promote the idea that rejecting the rules of gendered fashion provides a more sustainable and circular economy. Fashion designers need to move beyond notions of sustainability focused on recycling fabric into everyday garments or using it as a marketing tool. Sustainable practice for designers should be implemented throughout the whole cycle from the designer to consumer. I want this collection to disrupt and reject the binary stereotypes in fashion and instead highlight the endless beauty of fluidity in identity.

Sofia Heke is a third year fashion student at Otago polytechnic. As a young Māori woman of Ngāti Ranginui decent - having lived in Australia and New Zealand, Sofia has a strong focus in sustainability and cultural identity. She creates fashion with a sense of purpose drawing on concepts that are personal to her own life experience.

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