

FROM ARMOR TO AUGMENTATION

Reclaiming My Everyday Body

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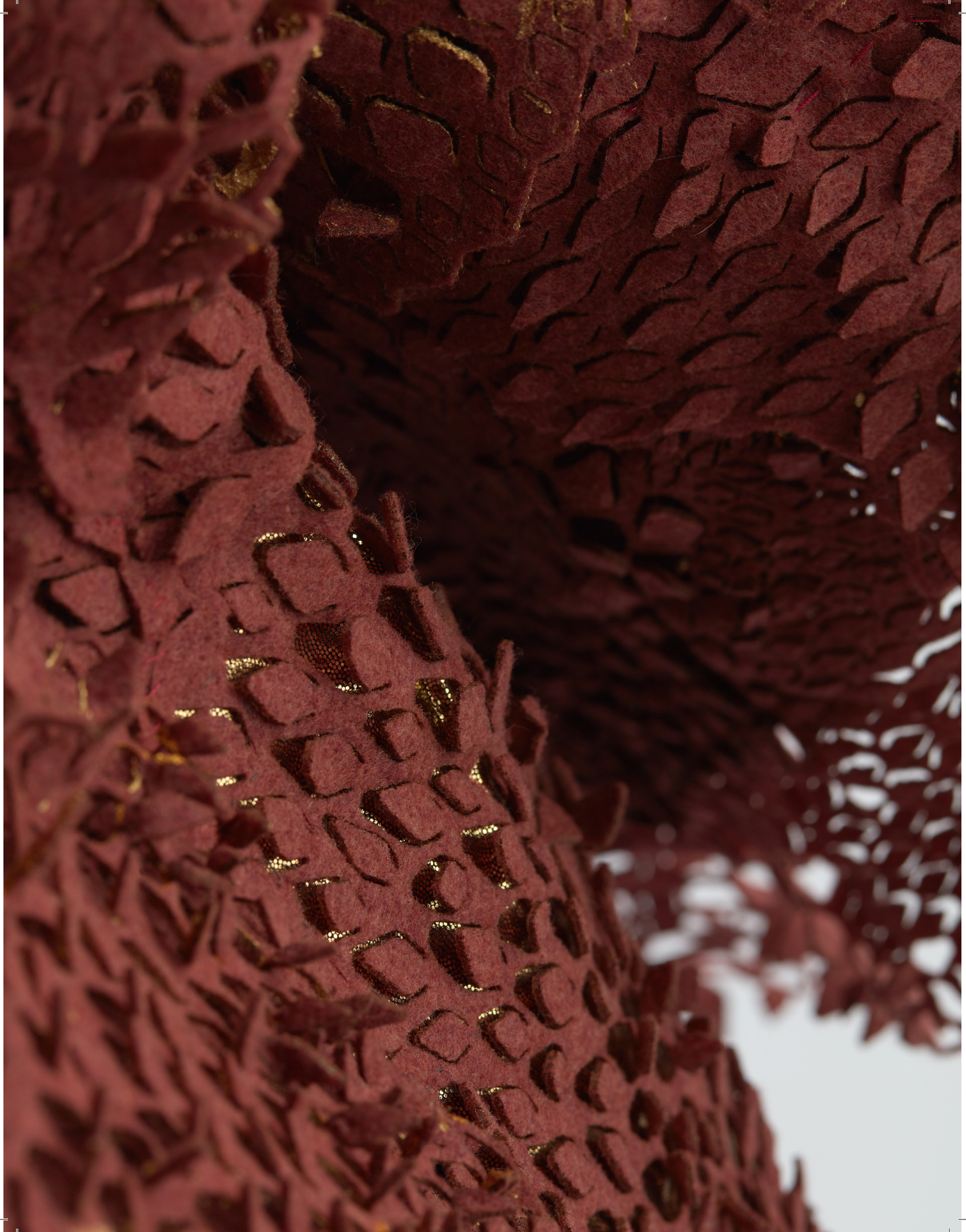
ABSTRACT

My work explores the silhouette of the body and how we can be empowered to augment it. First impressions are formed instantly and inform much of our social interactions, but these impressions are often made with the limited information of a quick glance and the simple outline of a body shape. There is a negative stigma about some body types and this can make social interaction daunting. This is especially true for women in general, for whom physical appearance is closely tied to perceived value by society. It is even more of an issue for women like myself, whose body type does not match the impossible, idealized female form perpetuated by modern media. My work explores how I can be empowered to change my silhouette to take control of the first impressions I make. It examines the idea of clothing as a form of adornment and augmentation, and how fashion can be used to remove negative stigmas and reclaim my sense of self.

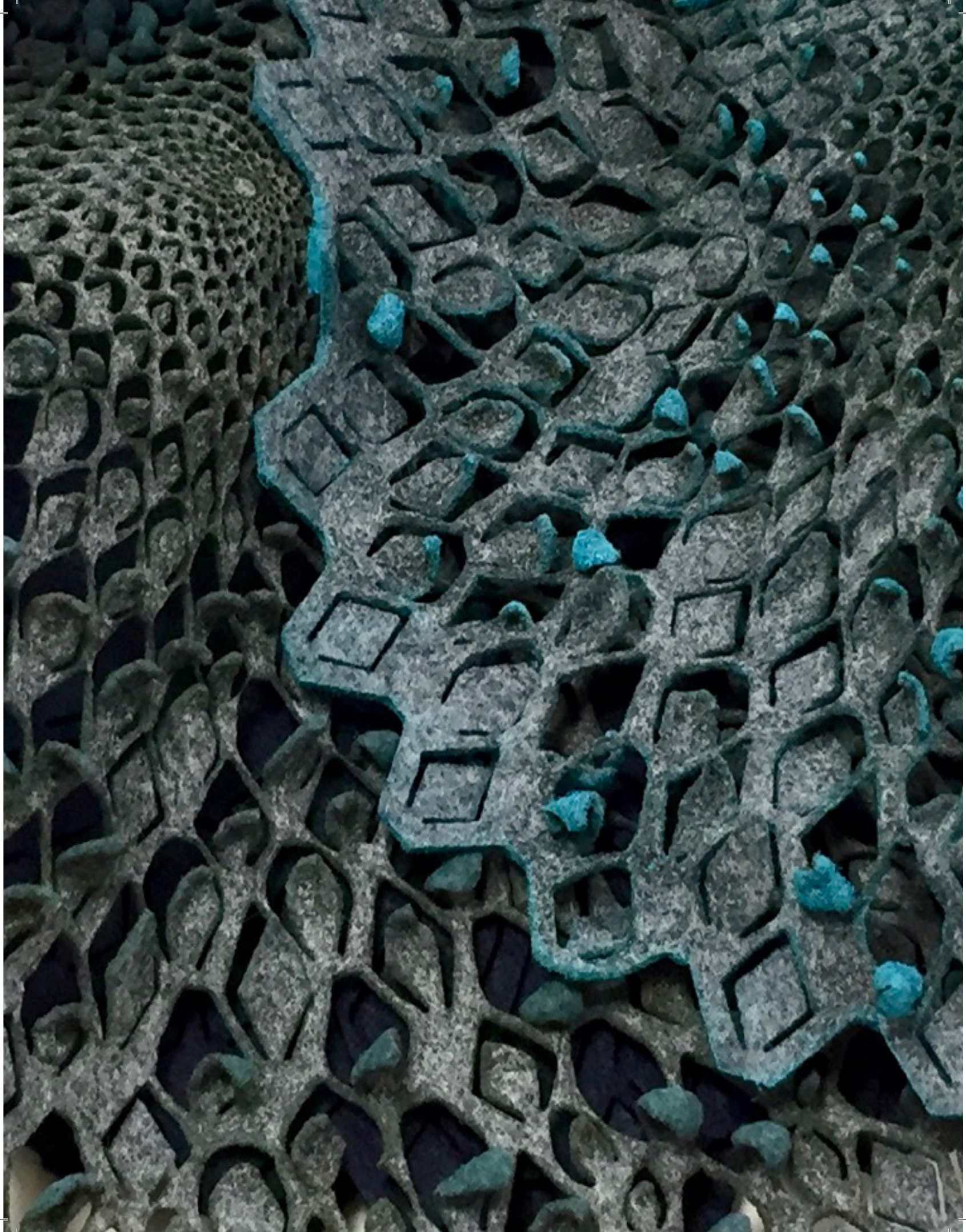
Lateral Extensions (Detail)



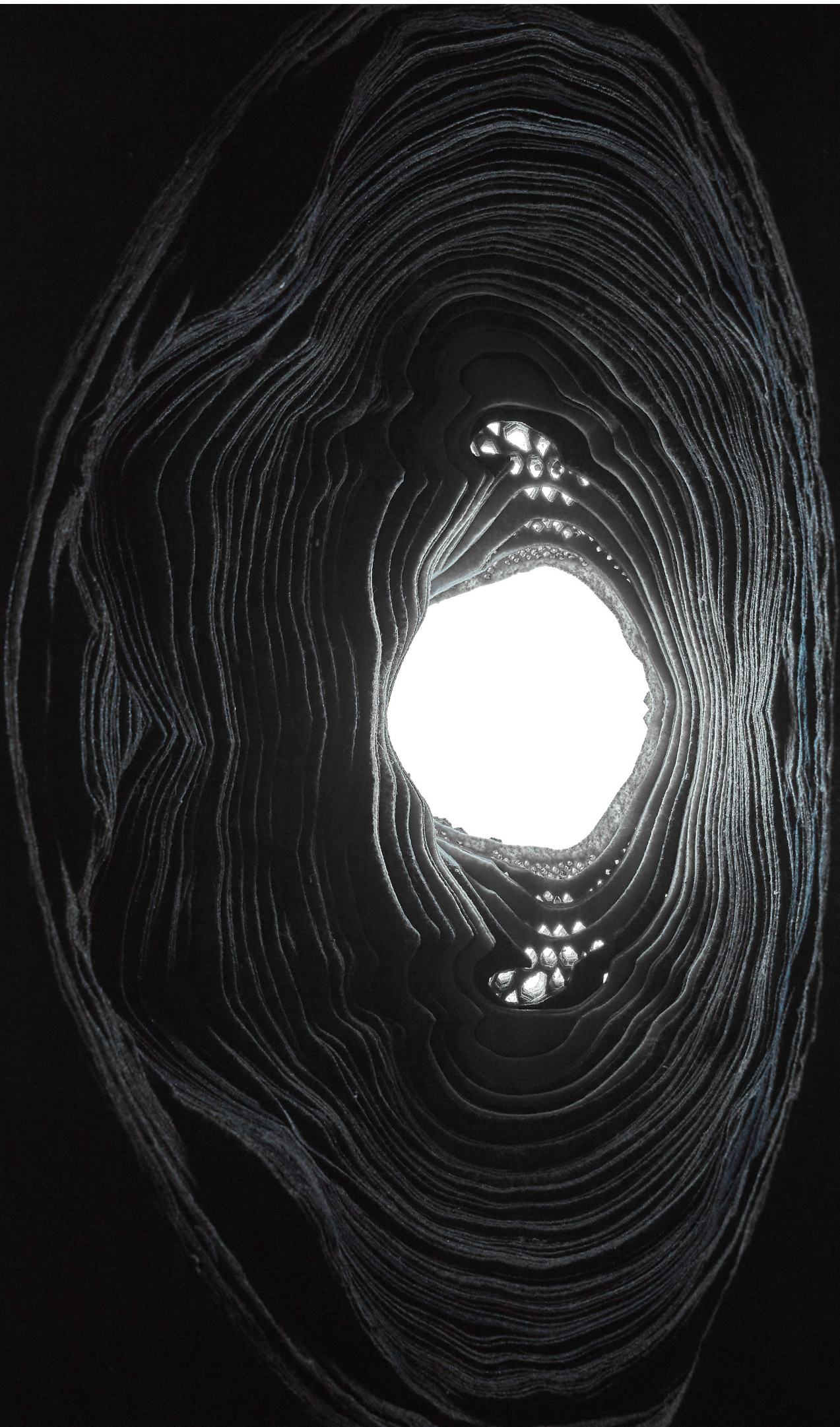
Upper Body Amplification (Detail)



Medial Augmentation (Detail)



Décolleté Embellishment (Detail)



Elevated Crest (Detail)





INTRODUCTION

Throughout all of history clothing and jewelry have been used by people to augment their appearance in order to surpass social stigmas and navigate through first impressions. In social situations a first impression is made almost instantly and it informs the rest of our interactions, but it is made with very limited information. Our silhouette is the most basic representation of our human form, a basic outline of our body. How can a split-second impression of our basic form be enough to create a lasting first impression? It feels unfair to me that I will be judged every day based on a two-dimensional representation of my body. I move and exist in three dimensions, and have complex emotions and a depth of personality that can't be conveyed by the quick glance of a first impression. This is an issue that is very close to me personally because there is a pervasive social stigma about women with my body type. I know I am being judged constantly not by who I am, but by a silhouette that I have very little control over. My work is about taking that control back. I am taking charge by transforming my silhouette into something powerful, something that puts me in control of how I am perceived by others. Throughout the entire history of clothing it has been used as a form of adornment or a way to influence the way that other people perceive us. My work takes that ingrained concept of how clothing is used and pushes it to transform our most basic outline, the lines and curves that are so simple yet carry so much importance in how other people see and judge us.

PERSONAL INTENT

There is a feeling of anxiety I get when walking down the hall, or going to a professional meeting, or even heading to a casual event. It is when my body starts to tingle, my temperature rises, and the pit in my stomach grows a little bigger. My mind fills with worry that I will be judged on my appearance too early. Thoughts race through my head - is my clothing too tight? Should I put on more layers? What could I wear to change the lines of my body? There is a constant fear that I will be judged harshly for my appearance and be quickly dismissed or easily overlooked.

Blurring the lines of my silhouette is a desire I have had for years. It is the craving to mask my form in an effort to avoid the scrutiny of others and that of myself, which is sure to follow. It is a simple fact that my body and silhouette are un-hideable. I might like for my body to be only my business, but realistically I know that other people notice and that it affects how I am perceived.

Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication. What we wear is a decision made every day that affects both our own self-image and others perceptions. Most clothing made in larger sizes tries poorly to mask the silhouette of a larger figure, the result being a shapeless mess and an insecure look. Instead, how can we adorn a plus sized figure in a way this isn't about hiding, but is about adornment and self-curation?





PROUD TO BE ~~FAT~~ FATESS

It is so weird to think one has to “come out” as their body type. To admit to themselves and present to everyone else that they are what they are. I really hate that word. I don’t get it. Maybe if we compare it to an addiction then the first level would be to admit it. It is very hard for me to transform my negative thoughts into thinking “fat” is beautiful.

I do admire those who can see themselves as beautiful, which makes me feel like I could be letting people like me down by giving into body-phobia or fat-shaming. I hate the word fat but I love the word fatness. Somehow it seems to take the pressure off of the individual. It seems more like a movement, a state of mind, like there is an agency to be had, a group to be a part of, like a hashtag I’d actually use. #proudtobefatness.

WE'RE HERE, WE'RE SPHERES, GET USED TO IT!

Marilyn Wann, an author and activist in the fat acceptance movement, is quoted as saying, "We're here, we're spheres! Get used to it!", spinning off the Queer Nation's motto: "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!". Wann, inspired by her queer friends, set an example in coming out as Fat and she did so loudly and proudly at a national convention, making waves and inspiring a coming out movement for the fat-pride community. "While coming out usually refers to revealing something hidden, body size is hyper-visible. It is what Goffman referred to as a "discredited identity".¹ This type of identity can be described as seen in plain sight, uncovered.

1 Goffman, 1963



ADORNMENT AS ARMOR

Describing adornment as armor is not a new philosophy, but it is very relevant in this body of work. This type of armor isn't about hiding the body and it won't protect you physically, but it is about empowerment and providing protection emotionally and socially. I refer to this body of work as emotional armor in an effort to convey its purpose to the wearer. Bill Cunningham, The Times' legendary fashion photographer and icon, talked about the importance adornment can have for everyone, stating that "fashion is the armor to survive the reality of everyday life."

Through my work, I explore what it means to blur the lines of my silhouette. Initially, I had this desire for many years as part of wanting to mask my form and avoid the scrutiny of others. However, through this work I have realized that empowerment is not about hiding the form, but more about giving the wearer agency and a choice in what to conceal and reveal. Armor is a form of protection, but that does not mean it is simply a shield to hide behind. In making these pieces, I strive to distract myself from those areas of my figure that I negatively fixate on but also to highlight and give visual interest that will convey confidence.



REDEFINING OUR STANDARD

A changing world, and changing bodies within it, present us with the unique opportunity to adapt, rebuild, and redefine our standards. As companies and mainstream media adapt to the evolving demand to accept and fit more bodies, it is opening the landscape to make different types of female forms more socially acceptable.

Women and feminine people are really misrepresented and under-represented in media and it subconsciously tells us that there must be something wrong with us if we don't see ourselves ... when you go into a dressing room and you try things on and they don't fit you right, you think that there must be something wrong with you.²

Mallorie Dunn, a fashion designer based out of New York City, highlights the problem of how there is traditionally one predominate female body type portrayed in media, as opposed to men who have a broader variation of body types that are represented. Gender fluidity is gaining more awareness and social acceptance, but this creates even more variance of body types outside what is traditionally considered male or female. Inclusive body type representation is now both more important and more behind than ever before.

2. Mallorie Dunn, 2017

As a woman, I cannot ignore the differences in male and female bodies with regards to social acceptance. In an article from 1993 in the New York Times Magazine, Deborah Tannen³ explains how women are seen as 'marked' in consideration of their daily style choices - make-up, hair, dress - while traditionally men are seen as 'unmarked' - no makeup, no distinguishing hairstyle or dress. For women, a standard style doesn't exist; if we don't make decisions about our hair style, we are perceived as not caring. Tannen uses the example of choices for women when filling out forms; through the three options of Miss, Ms, Mrs, we have to decide how we want to be identified and how much we want to reveal while simultaneously considering the stigmas that might come with each decision. I have reservations about blaming this problem of body acceptance on the varied treatment of men and women in the workforce, as opposed to focusing on a solution. However, to solve a problem we must also consider the many factors that contribute to it.

3. Deborah Tannen is a well known author, editor, and professor at Georgetown University.

CHANGING SILHOUETTES

This body of work is made as a response to contemporary western beauty standards. In western fashion, the silhouette is always changing in terms of necklines and hemlines shifting in, out, up, and down. However, what has been consistent is that the emphasis has not been meant to enhance or flow with the natural contours of the body, but rather to manipulate and fashion the shape of the body to create the popularized silhouette of the time. It is typically about conforming to an imposed ideal.

Throughout history undergarments have been used to enhance or conceal various parts of the body, like hoop skirts or corsets, and in each scenario it has been clothing's job to conceal or alter the form rather than celebrate or showcase the natural lines of the body. Today, women take even more extreme approaches to manufacturing silhouettes, from dieting to various forms of cosmetic surgeries. In contrast to these strategies, my work is less about conforming the body to an external ideal and more about developing an independent internal ideal that leads to feeling more confident about the body as is.





STIGMA & SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Studies show that it takes a tenth of a second to form a first impression. We automatically judge, make decisions, and form thoughts about someone before talking or interacting with them. In any situation, first comes a round of 'silent judging'. We might decide if they are trustworthy, approachable, likable, or competent. When someone meets you, especially for the first time, it is important to feel confident in yourself. You should do whatever you can do to feel more self-possessed, because ultimately that is the way you will feel most comfortable.

Pinnel (1999) coined the expression 'stigma consciousness' to denote the evolution apprehension and anxiety that a target possessing a stigma feels when anticipating an interaction with a non stigmatized individual."⁴

An article in the Social Psychology Quarterly talks about 'coming out' as your body type as a tool for destigmatization.⁵ Fashion can be a way to counter the stigmas surrounding different body types. It has the ability to cover unwanted parts and give agency back to the wearer.

4. Ambady, Nalini 2011
5. Saguy, Ward 2010

ADAPTING OUR LANGUAGE

1. Jacket /ja-ket/ (n.)

- a. a garment for the upper body usually having a front opening, collar, lapels, sleeves, and pockets.
- b. something worn or fastened around the body but not for use as clothing

2. Shawl/ SHôl/ (n.)

- a. a square, triangular, or oblong piece of wool or other material worn, especially by women, about the shoulders, or the head and shoulders, in place of a coat or hat outdoors, and indoors as protection against chill or dampness.

3. Scarf /skar/ (n.)

- a. is a piece of fabric worn around the neck for warmth, sun protection, cleanliness, fashion, or religious reasons.

4. Jewelry/ jool-ree/ (n.)

- a. any ornaments for personal adornment, as necklaces or cuff links, including those of base metals, glass, plastic, or the like.

5. Adornment/ uh-dawrn-muh nt/ (n.)
 - a. something that adds attractiveness; ornament; accessory.

A lot of these definitions describe the practical applications for clothing, such as protecting against wind or cold. However, they do include secondary definitions that acknowledge purposes for clothing beyond protection from the elements. Maintaining warmth alone is rarely how clothing is chosen today and, arguably, clothing has never been used solely for function. Clothing conveys personal expression, value, gender, identity, and social hierarchy. These definitions have also evolving so that clothing and jewelry are also expected to protect against negative first impressions. Consider the following traditional definition of armor and my proposed secondary definition:

ar·mor

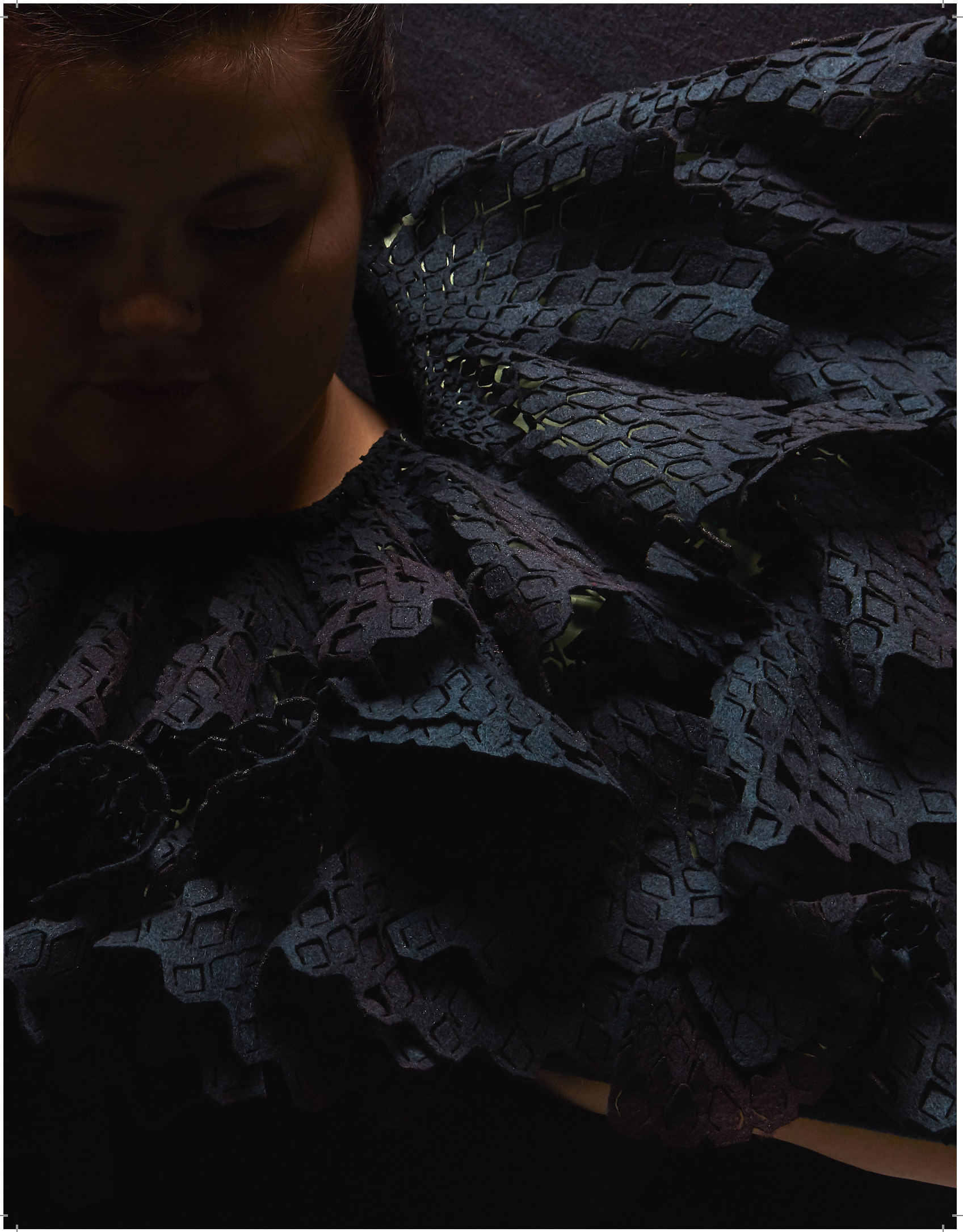
noun

1. The metal coverings formerly worn by soldiers or warriors to protect the body in battle.
- 2. Anything worn on the body for physical or emotional protection, to restore a sense of individuality, or to project a sense of strength and empowerment.**

Like the traditional definitions for clothing, the definition of armor focuses on its original practical application of being used for protection in battle. This does not tell the entire story. Similar to clothing, armor has also included adornments for aesthetic purposes throughout most of its history. The use of decorated armor dates back to the Bronze Age almost 3000 years ago.⁶ Often these adornments were used to intimidate, but they were also used to restore a sense of individuality. Since traditional armor masked the identity of the wearers, adornment was a way to reintroduce identification and restore a sense of self to the wearer.

6. Breiding, Dirk 2003

Plate metal armor is no longer used and medieval battles are no longer fought; the definition of armor needs to change to fit our current needs. Among the greatest battles we fight nowadays are those that challenge restrictive social norms and internal battles with insecurities and fear rejection in social situations. Modern armor is anything we wear to empower and protect us in these battles.





EMPOWERMENT

Christian Siriano: " What we wear can be armor, it can be therapeutic, it can be a source of joy, or an expression of strength. Fashion is not superficial; it is a dynamic tool to transform oneself, and it can be used to command the attention of those around you."⁷

I feel calmer and more confident when trying on the pieces in this collection. When I observe others appraising me as I walk down the hall, I see them go through all the steps of engagement: (1) Acknowledgement or the double take that something is different. I know from look one that they are focused intently on the piece that I'm wearing. (2) Next is the assessment of how this piece works with my body. (3) As we pass each other, viewers are left to deliberate and I am left with a sense of satisfaction in knowing that my piece was successful in directing attention in the manner of my choosing, protecting me from social distress. Although the work is about redefining my body, it is not about hiding. Instead, the pieces replace negative attention with positive attention. In this way, jewelry and fashion not only influence our outward appearance and the perception of others, but also self-perception.

7. Siriano, Christian 2017

ARMOR TO AUGMENTATION

My latest collection is titled From Armor to Augmentation and represents a process of reclaiming my everyday body and confronting psychological dynamics within myself. These pieces are accessories or attachments for the body that enhance and curate my silhouette. These are not meant to be worn alone, but are seen as an outer surface that presents my always-everyday body in a way that allows me to feel confident. I say always-everyday body to further emphasize why this work matters so much to me. While the ideal silhouette in western fashion changes from year to year, my silhouette stays the same and I have no plans to conform to others. So, on one hand, "Armor to Augmentation" is about protecting myself from negative first impressions. Perhaps more importantly, it is about disrupting my own cycles of negative self image and deflecting my worst critic, myself.



CONCLUSION

A changing world and the demand for broader body type inclusivity present us with the unique opportunity to adapt, rebuild, and redefine our standards. All of us want to make a good visual impression, but we also want to be judged for who we are over how we look. We want people to understand us and connect with us as human beings. Jewelry and fashion have the ability to change both our inner emotions and outward appearance, but can also change how others perceive ourselves. A line taken out of a superhero comic book states that "A great costume can give a character a whole new identity."⁸ In this case a costume giving a new identity can mean that external transformation leads to both internal transformation as well as changing the impression of others. My work does this by changing the silhouette to accentuate the shoulders, augment the hips, or flatter my natural curves; changes that increase confidence as well as positively influence others' perceptions.

8. Wheeler, Andrew 2014



























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