



UNBOUND



Changrui He

Unbound

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Textiles in the Department of Textiles of the Rhode Island School of Design,
Providence, Rhode Island

by

Changrui He
2020

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Anais Missakian, Professor and Department Head, Textiles, Thesis Chair

Joe Segal, Critic, Textiles, Thesis Advisor

Laurie Brewer, Associate Curator, Costume & Textiles, RISD Museum, Thesis Advisor

Contents

Abstract	1
Camouflaged in Silence	3
Thorny Devil	6
The Walled Garden	10
Camouflage Fringe	18
Leaving and Making a Home	23
Garden Kimonos	26
Performing Beyond	39
All Dressed Up	45

ABSTRACT

For many years, I have been repeatedly trying to understand what the term “trauma” means to me. While invisible, my trauma is ever-present, and I have not been able to understand how it has trapped me and my inner feelings. At the same time, more recently I don’t feel helpless or abandoned. I have been trying to tap the potential of connecting with the world outside, thereby piecing together the broken bits and pieces and reconciling with my family, past sorrows and myself.

In my thesis collection, I pay homage to a garden I often visited as a child. The garden was a refuge, a place where I felt safe and free. My garments depict and interpret elements of that garden in a wide range of applications, from felted fringe to printed silk. They play with varied forms of camouflage, protection, and reclamation. These garments recall memories and hardships that I experienced growing up as well as places where I found extreme warmth and comfort that helped me get through it all. They are meant to be wearable and in being worn, offer solace to all who may be stuck in a dark world and hoping to find peace and freedom someday.



Camouflaged in Silence

The first time I heard the word “gay” I was in middle school. I had heard the word before, but never like this, as an insult. I panicked.

Middle school was the toughest time, a complete nightmare. I was bullied for being gay, and afraid of coming out and admitting to myself and to the world who I really am. I was anxious every day and every second of my life. I dreaded going to school. It was desperately frightening not knowing how people would perceive me when I presented myself in a certain way. Several times I attempted to talk to my mom and tell her the truth. But the minute I tried to utter the word “gay,” which has immediately negative connotations in Chinese, she forced me to be quiet and never talk about it again. My father’s response came earlier, and was more extreme. One day when I was ten, I happened to put on a dress and danced around the house. At the time, I was absolutely unaware of what this action might signify. I will never forget how my father caught hold of me. He forced me to sit in front of him, kneeling down, and showed me no mercy. I was hurt and so desperately wanted to escape.

From that point forward, I hid my actual self and my identity for years. I tried to be “ordinary,” I tried to blend in with the everyday Chinese culture, so no one would ever know my secret. I struggled with the intolerance and suffered from self-hatred for being attracted to men. Afraid of being bullied and marginalized not only by the world, but by those people who I thought were most important to me, I constantly tried to be a good son, grandson, brother, and friend. I was tired of hiding but I knew I had no choice. There seemed no way to break the silence but to adapt to the environment I lived in, to face social challenges and follow the norms of what it meant to be a part of a respected family and society.

Thorny Devil



The first piece in my final collection, which is called the thorny devil, plays with the idea of armor and self protection. This black, knitted wool dress with fitted, long sleeves and a slatted skirt that flows like ribbons is covered in thorn-like protrusions. The “thorns” are two-toned: black on top and brightly colored underneath. They metaphorically represent the protection that allows me to hide and keep a safe distance from family and friends, from whom I have always received a negative response about my identity.







The dress resembles animals that use their spikes, thorns, or points to intimidate or injure other animals who present a threat. For example, a hedgehog relaxes its quills, but when a predator approaches, the quills stand up. I was also inspired by creatures that are dangerous, yet very beautiful, with bright colors and textures on their skin, which they use to attract others and prepare for attack. Texture is extremely appealing. Wearers and others may want to touch and feel this dress. While the surface looks hard or sharp, it actually feels soft. The “thorny devil” Australian lizard, which inspired this dress’s name, is covered on its back from head to tail with sharp, thorny spikes, but its belly is smooth, soft, and invulnerable, because it’s protected from above.

The Walled Garden



When I was a small child, my grandmother would take me to a garden on top of a hill in the northeast of my hometown, Dalian. It was one of the most beautiful and unforgettable places I've ever known. Later, in middle school, during lunch break, about once a week, I would sneak out the back door and run the mile or so to get there, spend some quiet time, then return, undetected. Covering at least 70 acres, the garden was filled with flora and fauna. The flowers and plants created the most gorgeous expanse of color whereas the trees and vines marked some of the clearest lines of this painted landscape. Amidst the tall trees and hilly slopes were lakes and ponds with millions of tadpoles and fish. Great reveries arose as I sat next to the pond, playing and swirling a stick in the water, and sometimes even catching some of the fish in glass jars and then taking them back home to add to my grandmother's aquarium. From secret paths with picturesque views, in this open landscape, I was no longer mired in the self. With this new, ever-energizing experience came a true companionship with nature and possibility. In this refuge, surrounded by stone walls and fences, I felt safe and could reflect on my story, giving over to rich imaginings of a different self.







Later, when I was in college, I revisited the garden. Immediately upon seeing the entrance, memories came flooding back. Images of what were once expansive gardens in my mind were now much smaller. I almost couldn't recognize the place. It looked so different that I had to check my location with the GPS on my phone. While walking through the garden, I kept losing my way and constantly stumbling upon new paths and corners previously unknown. The entire landscape had changed. The old temple had been revamped and painted in a fresh, lustrous coat of red pigment. The wild trees had been cut down and made to resemble beautifully manicured lawns. Flowers were forced to grow in a particular fashion, lining up in neat rows next to one another. Countless modern structures such as bridges and paths had been constructed.

Looking at this totally new place, I didn't have the same feeling of being protected anymore. All of my nostalgia for a place that represented freedom and peace disappeared.

Camouflaged in Silence



This piece plays with the idea of camouflage, with hiding and blending in with the environment and the garden I would often visit as a child. It is inspired by my experience in the beautiful yet wild garden where I spent most of my time as a child. I remember hiding behind the overgrown plants and cuddling by the uncut grass, which over time became a healing spot for me. The soft, natural fibers translate this feeling of warmth and nostalgia.



This dress is made of felted raw merino wool. I started off by dyeing large pieces of felt using acid dye in various shades of bronze, bright, and yellowish green. These pieces were later cut into small strips which were then individually hung on the knitting machine to create the thick fringe, using an interspersed and overlapped technique on the backing. The small pieces were intentionally cut into uneven and irregular sizes. The bottom section has a more uneven edge compared to the top, giving the dress a varied, raw look.



San Francisco



到着ロビー | 도착편 대합실 | Sala de Llegada



Leaving and Making a Home

In 2017 I traveled oversea, to the United States of America, a totally new country, with completely new people, languages, and culture. I went to pursue my MFA in Fine Arts at the California College of Art, in San Francisco. This was my first time so far away from home. I was nervous. Before leaving China, I remember hugging my parents tightly and crying, because I didn't know when I would see them again. When we left the house, I put a note on the table for them to find when they got home. I wrote to them, “短暂的离别是为了更好的相遇” (which translates roughly to “absence makes the heart grow fonder”). My mom told me later that my dad cried when he read it. I never saw him cry before, and this was only the second time she'd ever seen him cry, other than at his mother's funeral.

From the plane, I stared out the window, grasping the land as it receded into the distance. As I got further and further away, my heart felt vaguely lost. At the same time, I was so excited. I was unprepared for what was before me, but ready for something new.

My first few days in San Francisco were distinct. Stepping into this new place was at first difficult, and I often felt lonely and sad. But soon I made new friends, my English improved, and I started to feel more confident. Every day was a new experience, full of surprises unfolding before me. In particular, I was surprised to see how open and welcoming this city was towards the queer community, a complete contrast from the world in which I had been brought up. I was amazed to see a culture with such open-minded people. I saw men holding hands with one another and freely walking on the street without being separated or feeling judged. I saw the LGBTQ community rainbow flag hoisted everywhere. I soon started to feel liberated and energized by the power of being able to voice my thoughts and feelings. This was authentic freedom. It was then that I decided to never look back.

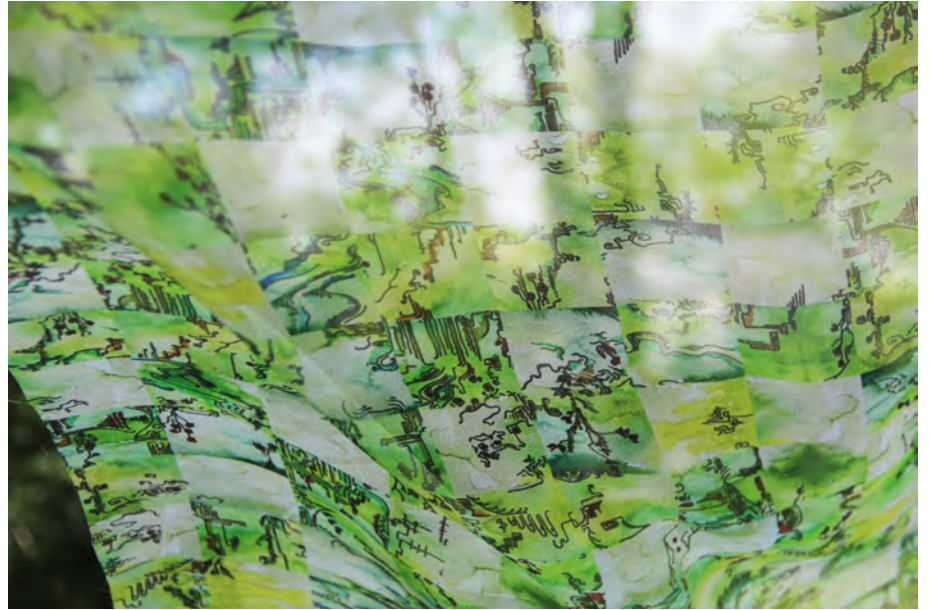


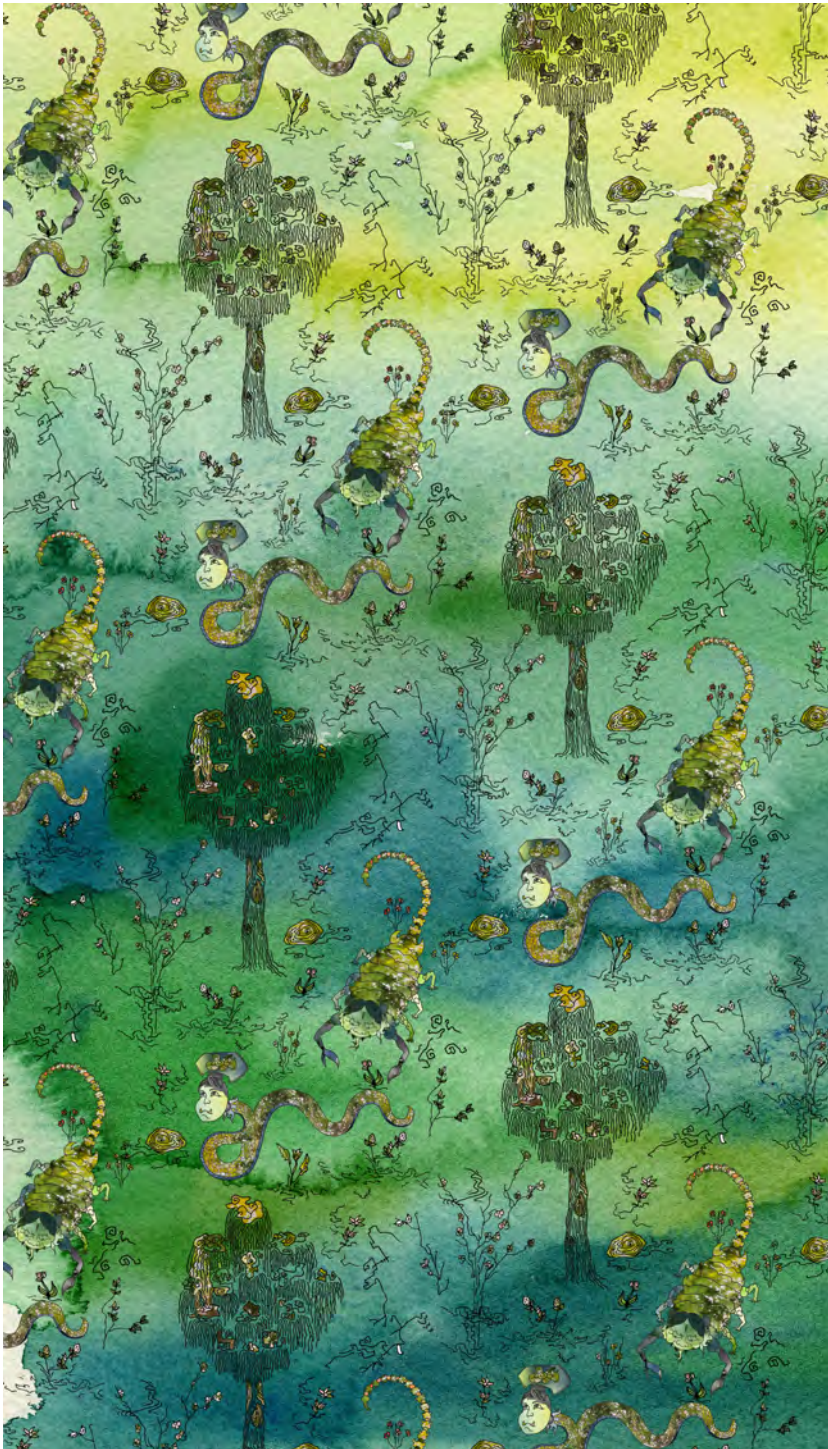
Garden Kimonos



Three kimono-like dresses made of digitally printed silk in three patterns tell three different stories. The first features a green-checked motif that was initially constructed from a layered drawing. The background of the original artwork is a washy watercolor painting in green and yellow ink that mirrors itself like a Rorschach test. On top of the background is a schematic map of a garden sketched in black ink pen, with botanical features drawn using colorful markers and gouache. For the pattern, I cut the image into squares and rearranged them, turning them to different angles. Moving the branches near the river or the flora near the fauna might bring new shapes or sparks of possibility. This garden is not real; it's a fantasy of my ideal garden. The fluid drape over the body expresses freedom and being independent and true to oneself.



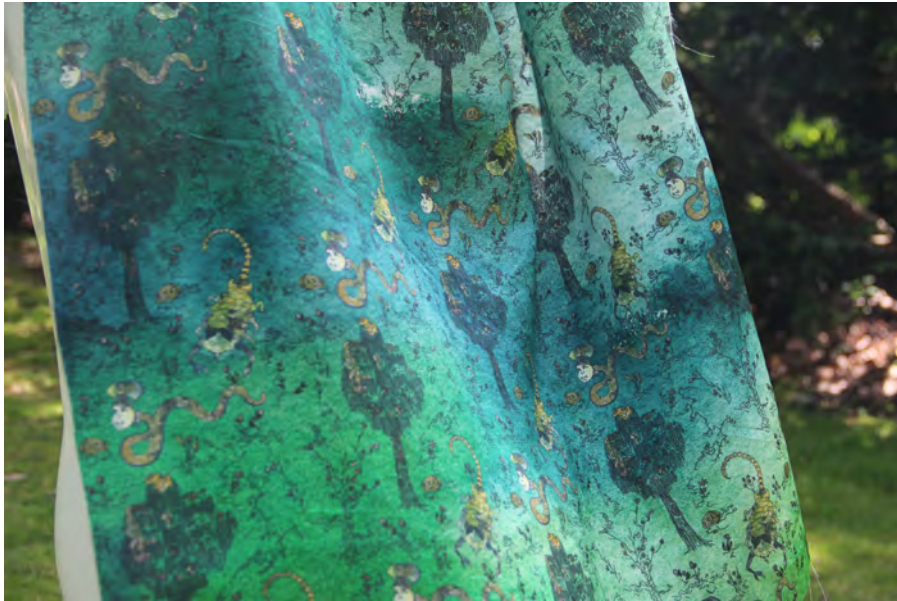




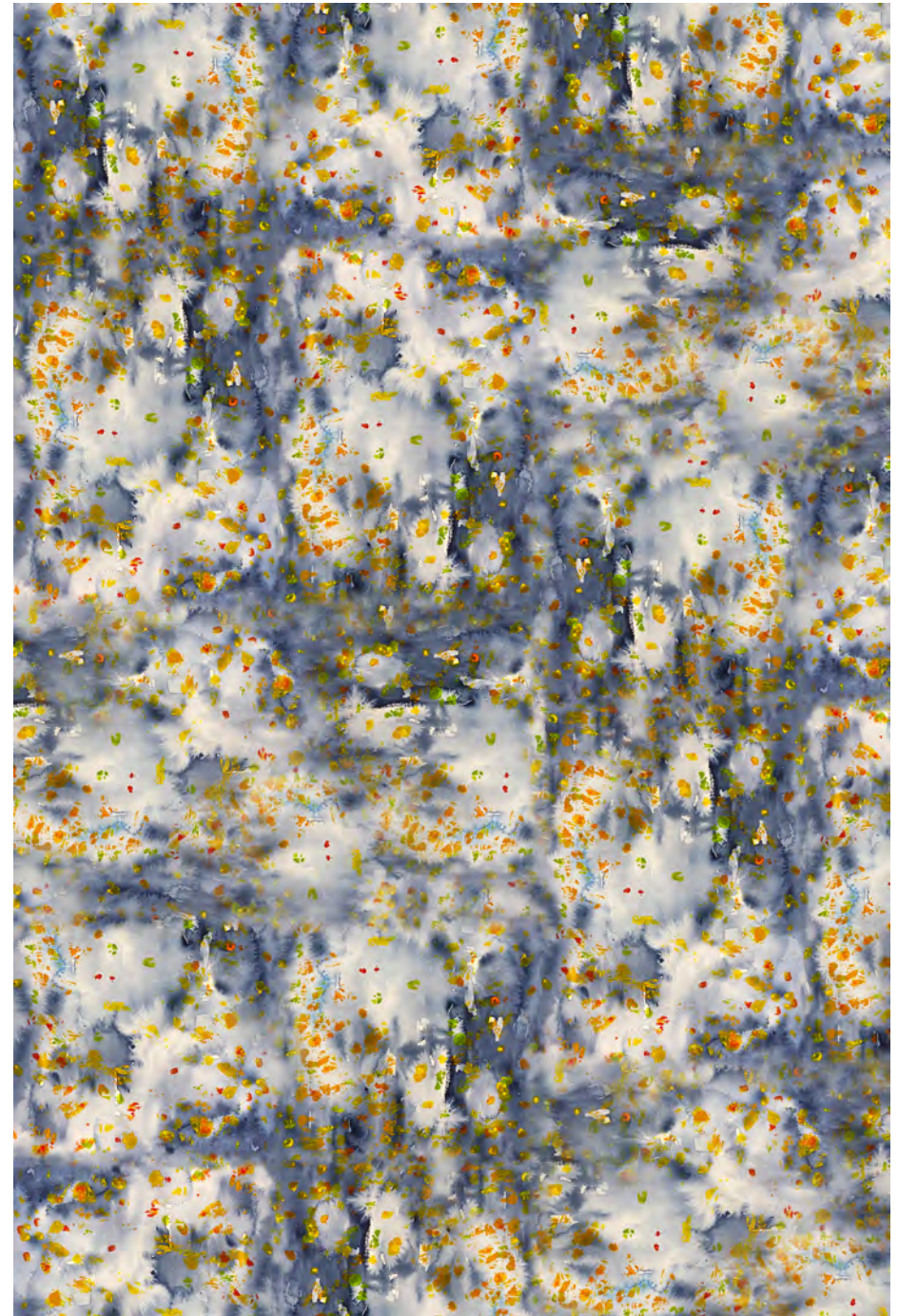
The second dress recalls the lake in the garden I visited as a child. The lake had no fence around it, and adults would tell stories of monsters coming out of the lake to steal babies, to keep children from going too close to the water. In my drawings, a large, draped tree is covered in abstracted monster heads. Two hybrid creatures—a human-serpent and a human-scorpion—are covered in menacing, mottled-green scales, but have a comic, even sweet mood in their faces. Their traditional Chinese hairstyle and head decoration add a sense of festivity. Here, the monsters that were once scary, representing a childlike fear, become transformed into something playful.



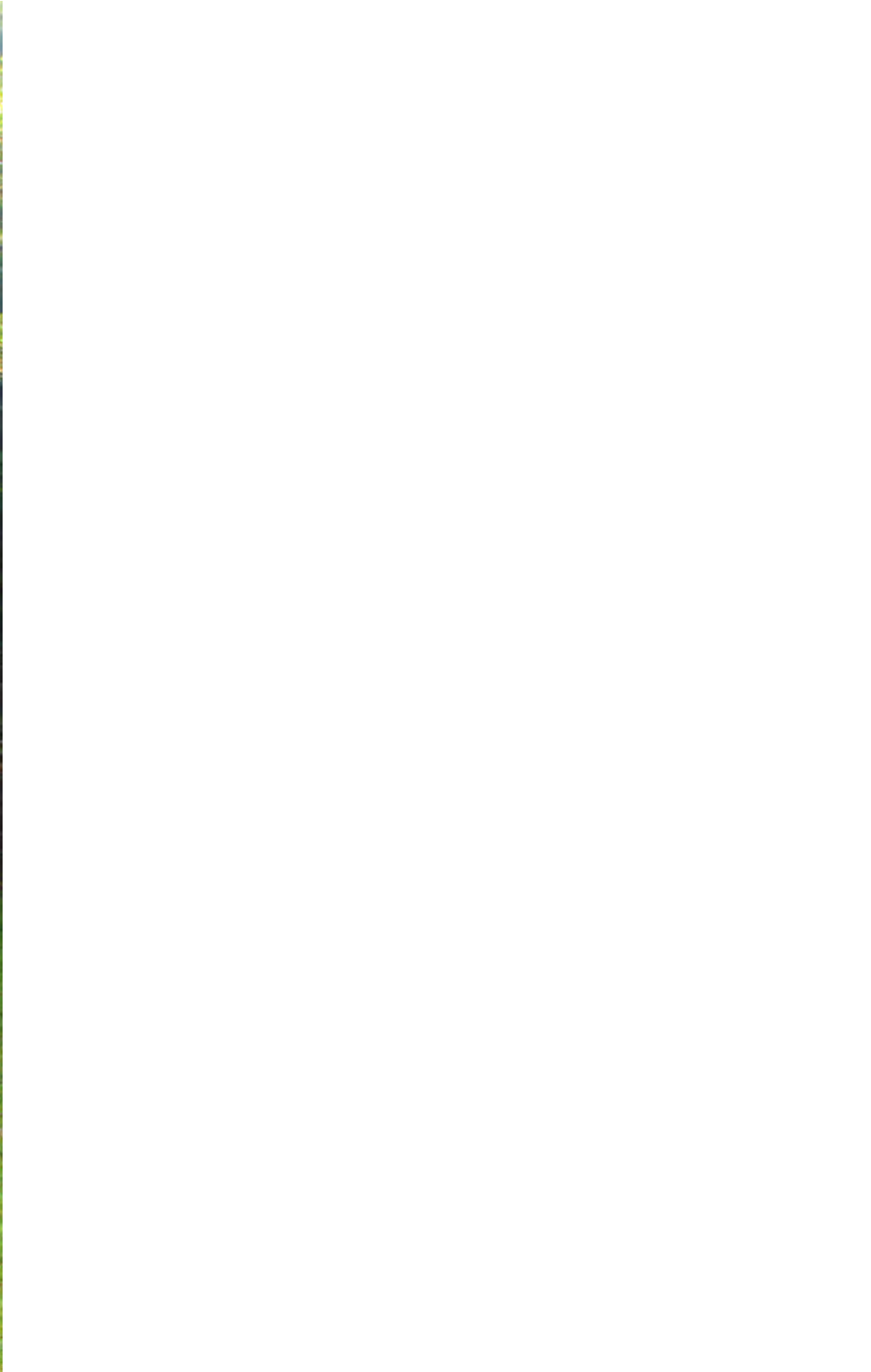




The third fabric design recalls the surface of a lake, a sky full of wispy clouds, perhaps a waterfall. The blue and white watercolor background has been digitally copied, turned, and merged into an irregular repeat. An overlay of yellow, red, orange, and green speckles might call to mind flower petals flying in the wind. This pattern suggests the potential for authentic escape and release.









Performing Beyond

Last fall, I discovered a book called *Queer Threads* in the RISD Fleet Library. I have since checked it out many times. The book introduces about 20 LGBTQ artists from all over the world who are remixing textiles, crafts, materials, and techniques to examine tastes, roles, relationships, culture, bodies, and spaces. Some of the artists create performance and site-specific installations, like Liz Collins, who made *KNITTING NATION*. Some create wearable fabric sculptures, for example, Nick Cave. The book's author, John Chaich, first introduces these themes, and then each artist is interviewed. I noticed many similar themes among the artists. Many of them refer to their grandmothers, who often taught them sewing. I wondered why these artists all chose textiles. In part, textiles can be both soft and hard, a metaphor for life. A lot of them talk about how their work doesn't have to be a huge statement of queerness. Textiles feel very comfortable, not overweighted with meaning.

Beginning a new phase of my life in San Francisco was the very first time I came across the terms “queer” and “gender identity.” One night, I was at a bar with two of my classmates, and they asked me, “Changrui, are you queer?” “What’s that mean?” I asked. They told me it could mean gay, but in a wider sense, and introduced me to the LGBTQ movement. They also told me one of our professors was a lesbian. Because she had a child, I couldn’t believe it. I had never heard of a queer person having a child. Suddenly I realized I was not alone. So many people were queer. And it was okay.

One professor at California College of Art introduced our class to queer and feminist artists who were making textile and fiber art that expressed their strength, unity, and identity. Their work gave me the feeling that I could actually now open myself up and express my relationship to the LGBTQ community through my work. Being from a country like China, where queerness had been banned from public expression over many years, this realization gave me a fresh perspective on art and its true power.

In my work, I think of identity as a piece of fabric, assembled from bits and pieces of yarn and found materials which are then tenuously held together by thread. Trying to find my identity and the best possible way to express my feelings, I cut things off and bring them back, stitching together, building myself a relationship with family, community, and society. I juxtapose my rough experiences encountered through the different stages of my life by constantly trying to use extremely fine and soft materials. Working on feminine garment forms and incorporating a soft masculine color palette allows me as an artist to prompt conversations around gender, race, and sexuality.

Finally, textiles are important for me because of the closeness we have to them. They are part of our daily life and we use them to express cultural and spiritual affinities. I am interested in the tangle of the ego and the self, how we show and conceal our inner consciousness to and from the world. Textiles provide a metaphor for this exposing and withholding: the warp and weft can become intertwined, we use them to highlight and hide parts of ourselves. As they live on their body, they reflect and deflect our feelings from day to day life. I see my textiles as a performance against alienation. They do not behave as expected—they infiltrate beyond boundaries.



All Dressed Up

In the final week of my program at RISD, I returned again to my childhood and recalled my punishment for wearing my mother's dresses. I started this piece, which isn't finish yet, but I am excited by its possibilities.



