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Patterns of Identity

Tameka S. Phillips

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PATTERNS OF IDENTITY

by

TAMEKA PHILLIPS

(Under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

ABSTRACT

People interpret and categorize visual cues not only to create a concept of an identity. We assume who a person is, and what their personality is like, based on these visual cues that are in turn plagued with established norms and biases that can connect or divide. Cultural norms, such as gender, sexuality, race, or political standing can be further expressed visually through textile patterns, motifs, and color. Even so, the many cultural signifiers serve only as clues to a person's identity that encompasses many different cultural aspects, despite common practice to relate to only one. Through my textile statues, which mix different patterns, colors and motifs found in fabrics, I convey the multicultural nature all people share. In this paper I explain my concepts of textiles as representing identity as being multicultural, creation of the textile statues, artistic influences, and a reflection on the final thesis exhibit.

INDEX WORDS: Culture, Multicultural, Cultural identity, Cultural signifiers, Statues, Pattern, Motif, Textile

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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PATTERNS OF IDENTITY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Themes of multi-culturalism and cultural/ethnic identity have always been an important influence within my life and in aspects of my artwork. As a youth I was in love with and curious about learning and understanding different cultures of the world, poring over world art books, and visiting museums of both art and history. Global art was of high interest and influence from the start, and I became especially interested in how different groups expressed their cultures visually. I wanted to learn how different groups expressed their identity, and how their visual expression of identity has been interpreted, assimilated, or reflected by others. I knew that I wanted to pursue art and somehow fuse it with global studies as a future career.

When I began college and started learning about fashion, I was given the opportunity to learn about textiles and the use of patterns, motifs, and colors to evoke the designer's seasonal themes. Looking deeper into how textiles are used as a fashion student led me to discover their potential in representing cultural diversity. Different patterns and colors became symbolic of many cultural identifiers such as economic/social status, gender, or nationality. Essentially, we all embody many facets of culture that combine to form our individual identity, but according to societal norms we focus only on a few, while ignoring similar traits that we share with others. This creates a mentality of "us" versus "them."

Combining these life-long interests with my studies of fashion and art, I make textile works more akin to statues (rather than soft sculpture or drapery) to explore the ideas of multi-culturalism and cultural/ethnic identity that, as humans, we all share. Colors and patterns often become so deeply rooted as representative of a certain demographic, that their appearance creates

a story about their wearer—think of the identities that come to mind with plaid, for example, which in certain contexts can be associated with the image of a lumberjack (burly, strong, etc.) or with gothic/grunge music scenes (an idea of being against an establishment). These ideas change when given different colors or a change in the pattern: a red plaid would be viewed differently than a brightly colored plaid or the width and placement of lines could denote contrasts between simplicity and complexity. These identities and complex associations apply to all fabrics even within its simplest forms. Building on and complicating such effects, I use mixed color palettes and patterns with a combination of textiles to create alternate ways of interpreting cultural identity. While we all share similarities with one another, we also have unexplored aspects of culture within ourselves that go beyond what we choose to identify with, or are restricted into identifying with. These complexities of identity, from the shared to the distinct, and from the fully realized to the unexpressed, is what I wish to examine with my work. I feel that creating art that explores different aspects of cultural identity, with a specific emphasis on identifying patterns, will inspire others to explore more deeply how we associate and represent visual aspects of multiculturalism, and how those aspects are present within ourselves in ways both overt and subtle. By mixing different types of fabric to represent one figure the statues explore the different associations we have with textiles as it pertains to identity, hinting at the personality this figure embodies.

Because the word plays such an important role in this paper, it is important at the start to define how the word *culture* is used here. To define culture with any precision is difficult, however, as there is a broad range of approaches. For example, there are anthropological definitions, sociological and psychological definitions, and theoretical definitions of culture. Even a simple, non-specialized definition as found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary gives two

different meanings, each of which is further broken down into multiple senses and parts.¹ More broadly, and to complicate matters further, many theorists, writers, and researchers such as Edgar Schein, former professor at MIT, have alluded to there being layers of culture at play in everyday existence, identifying the self as the epicenter of culture, which spreads out to ideologies, shared norms, and the production of objects that reflect the shared norms and ideologies—all of which interact to define a culture. For me culture is and contains the all-encompassing embodiment of the human experience and identity that we all share but more so our (need) to classify and compartmentalize the experience into smaller, easily relatable groups for better understanding. [For example, all of us love, but there are different forms of love and ways it is expressed, such as love for a parent/child vs a significant other. Customs on how that love is expressed may differ greatly between different groups of people, but the concept of love remains universal. Concepts are then categorized and labeled. All that was mentioned, the shared experience, concept, expression/approach, and the categorization can be considered “culture”.]

Because this paper also explores notions of multiculturalism, I will use that term as defined by The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), as “the

¹ 1a: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group
also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time

b: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization
a corporate culture focused on the bottom line

c: the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic

d: the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations

2a: enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training

b: acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills

3: the act or process of cultivating living material (such as bacteria or viruses) in prepared nutrient media
also: a product of such cultivation

4: CULTIVATION, TILLAGE

5: the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education

6: expert care and training [such as] beauty culture

co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles.” (IFLA)²

As the above suggests, a single definition of culture cannot quite encapsulate the fullness of this umbrella term, but for the purpose of my paper and research I refer to the first full definition provided by Merriam-Webster as it pertains to the creation of objects: “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group ; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time” (Merriam-Webster). I use this definition because the production of objects is the most recognizable in terms of cultural identity, as its tangible nature allows for more definitive observation and discussion and is readily apparent in its relations to specific groups as points of origin.

Regardless of specific definitions, however, we all culturally embody and act upon various ideologies and beliefs. Through my work I would like for viewers to realize that our definitions of cultural identity, often limited to binary thoughts of *this culture* or *that culture*, are less defined and more open than commonly believed.

² <https://www.ifla.org/publications/defining-multiculturalism#:~:text=%22Multiculturalism%22%20is%20the%20co%2D,of%20thinking%2C%20and%20communicative%20styles.>

CHAPTER 2

FABRIC AS IDENTITY

Throughout human history we have used patterns to artfully express ourselves. The earliest pattern recreations were inspired by nature—such as spirals found in various natural objects, or animal skins—which were recreated in pottery and sculptural objects. As civilizations came into being, we began associating pattern within a performative scope of identity by using color and patterns within textiles. Certain groups wore specific colors, such as violets, which were associated with royalty. Similarly, textiles were often assigned to specific jobs or specific social classes, becoming visual representations of one's cultural identity in terms of gender and socioeconomic status. Different patterns, colors, and textures became visual cultural signifiers, showing the status and expected personality visually through the garments worn or assigned to a person.

Over the course of millennia, pattern and color have played an integral part of visually identifying a person, and colors and patterns that were more difficult to produce came to be linked to higher levels of social class³. Color has been thoroughly studied—not only in book form, but also by companies⁴—with research dedicated to the shorthand expression of color as a cultural signifier of gender, sexuality, and even as representations of mood. The same cannot be said of pattern, which has not been as thoroughly studied at a global level. Instead, pattern is often considered only in a restricted sense, studied in relation to a singular cultural identity or group, as with Scottish kilts.

³ Schneider, Jane. "The Anthropology of Cloth." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 (1987): 409-48.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155878>.

⁴ One company that comes to mind is Pantone, who produces various colors aligned with and for various art and design marketing seasons in order to evoke particular ranges of feeling.

While on the surface such a restrictive or singular approach to pattern might seem viable, the origins of many patterns are not limited to specific ethnic or national associations, but represent combinations of influence that arose as people came to travel afar and interact with others. For example, Scottish kilts were originally a British concept in origin⁵, while such prominent patterns as the blue and white designs of Chinese Ming dynasty pottery also have a mixed heritage that emerged over a wide range of time and geography⁶. What we today consider the meanings and cultural value of many patterns were in fact adopted by a range of groups, and changed according to different migrations, political changes, and varied uses over the generations, thus creating vast complexities of cultural identity, appropriation, and appreciation in the design of products and works of art.

The complex relations of identity and pattern have thus emerged with the spread of products and artifacts representing cultural groups. When designs created by indigenous groups came into fashion globally, then different groups would recreate the design for their own group's consumption, as when Ming dynasty pottery was recreated to reflect European scenes and references by Dutch artists. Along these lines, indigenous groups often create products designed with their own culture-specific patterns, for the purpose of selling to outside markets. This is done by some groups to retain aspects of their cultural identity and ritual against colonialist restructuring, and in other times to compete in newly globalized cultural markets. Often when this is done, the cultural significance is broken down or completely removed for the marketability of a design's formalistic properties. An example of this is Panamanian mola textiles, which are still used by the people with their own cultural traditions, but which also exist

⁵ Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Invention of Tradition*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pg. 15-41

⁶ Krahl, Regina., Effeny, Alison., Raby, Julian., Wilson, J. Keith. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. Singapore: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2010. *Tang Blue and White* pg. 209-211

within broader markets of mola-embellished modern fashion. On the other hand, textile patterns are also used as a means to reconnect to a lost cultural identity: Kente cloth, originally created by Ghanaian textile artists to indicate tribal identity and social status, has been adopted as a symbolic identity for the global African diaspora. The specific Ghanaian traditions and tribal identity tied to the use and wearing of kente textile is mostly unknown and completely different from its use outside of Ghana, as in America, where it is specifically used to represent African American social groups in the educational field.

It is for the ways pattern and color embody a multitude of cultural signifiers that I use textiles as a source of inspiration and motive in my work. As the value and meaning associated with certain patterns evoke different senses within the viewer, especially those referring to a nationalistic or ethnic identity, I create textile statues to explore the ideas of multi-culturalist identity—a topic more and more prevalent as we seek to connect and identify ourselves to a greater notion of humanity and human representation, a growing concern given the political climate of today. Many issues that we have concerning identity are still influenced by colonial and post-colonial thought and policies that linger today.

For many it is unknown how far-reaching these bias systems are, and for others the worst aspects of cultural bias are commonplace. Unconsciously—and consciously for some—we classify cultural identity based on visual cues and associations such as colors and patterns. By using different patterns and textile motifs I push to represent and reveal the reflections and assumptions we have about the various forms of identity, and our reliance on visual identity norms. For example, in my piece *Untitled: Ruffles* (figure 1), the fabric cloaks the figure's identity. Because the figure's gender, race, and age are unknown, the viewer is left to rely on looking only at the gesture and the fabric to allude to the figure's personality.



Figure 1. Untitled: Ruffles 2020

As this suggests, by using mixed color palettes and patterns within different textiles, and by embodying these materials as the basis for the human figure, the statues become viewpoints of how we interpret or approach multiculturalism. In creating these figures, I make a way for the viewer to connect and evolve past identifying labels that have been socially divisive, and instead explore more deeply the ways we associate and represent visual aspects of multiculturalism.

My pursuit of eliminating identifying labels admittedly raises several questions and issues, especially in the context of recent events and sociopolitical issues. Why pursue erasing identity signifiers such as race or gender? How does the perception of visual identity play in the understanding of an artwork? Does knowledge about the artist play a role in that understanding?

Moreover, erasing identifying labels is a criticism that can be seen as a sign of being ashamed, or of whitewashing concerns to avoid their wider societal implications. Through the production of my statues I am actively working to eliminate identifying labels that, as a person of mixed nationalistic heritage, person of color, and a woman, are from my point of view integral and important aspects of my own self-image. It is not through being ashamed that I create my work, and I view the elimination of identifying labels as something both positive and negative. For example, on the one hand there is freedom in erasing identity. Colonialist and post-colonialist thoughts and policies created a standard culture by which to compare all else. Those not within the standard, for any multitude of different factors, can, from erasing identifying labels, feel a freedom in not being judged according to visually based preconceived notions. In a sense, one can be seen and appreciated for their true self. On the other hand, there is a great need for representation within the art world, whose very foundations are also based on limiting standards. There is a need for greater representation to inspire the next generation of creators.

Another issue is the way artworks can sometimes be read based not on the work or its formal or visual aspects, but from knowledge of the artist. I think of Cindy Sherman's claims that her works are not feminist theoretical critique of the male gaze⁷, or of the relations of Nick Cave's Soundsuits, and their performative aspects, to the perception of the viewer about the artist and how they affect the discussions surrounding their works.

⁷ "I know I was not consciously aware of this thing the 'male gaze.' It was the way I was shooting, the mimicry of the style of black-and-white grade-Z motion pictures that produced the self-consciousness of these characters, not my knowledge of feminist theory. I suppose, unconsciously, or semiconsciously at best, I was wrestling with some sort of turmoil of my own about understanding women." Cindy Sherman, artsy.net

"Often with the simplest of means—a camera, a wig, makeup, an outfit—Sherman fashions ambiguous but memorable characters that suggest complex lives that exist outside of the frame. Leaving her works untitled, Sherman refuses to impose descriptive language on her images—relying instead on the viewer's ability to develop narratives, as an essential component of appreciating the work." ART21

I address the issues concerning visual signifiers of cultural identity by allowing the viewer to come to their own conclusions about who this person may be, and (hopefully) allow them to connect in a way that goes beyond a simple, often binary, label. Total eradication of identity is not a goal, as my figures are still recognized as being humanoid. Gestural context, height and size may also offer some form of identifying features beyond that of the color and patterns used, as for example in my work *Untitled: Ball* (figure 2), in which the height and innocent posture suggest a youthful quality that is further enhanced by the softer choice of fabric selection.



Figure 2 *Untitled: Ball* 2020

CHAPTER 3

CREATING THE FIGURES

Multicultural identity has always played an integral role in my creations. In the years leading up to my undergraduate studies I would interact with people of different backgrounds, and research how different global groups created art and objects to define a visual for their nationality. It was interesting to see how many of their visual expressions changed throughout history—migration, colonialism, and assimilation of various groups influenced how different global groups represented themselves or were represented by others. It was with these notions in mind that I began incorporating pattern and color into my works.

Building on this experience, my undergraduate studies in fashion helped me with exploring different uses and techniques pertaining to pattern. In fashion we are taught that a person's look can be used to identify a target group or identity. Often, we were trained to design with a person or identity group in mind, to let the fashion emerge and revolve around the persona. For example, when plaid is used one may read many different meanings depending on the type of plaid and its color, mentioned previously. Textiles can evoke feelings, as when florals create a sense of nostalgia, femininity, or a sense of regality, depending on the density of the pattern or the type of material used. The texture of certain textiles can also relay adverse feelings or reactions, such as wool being itchy or soft depending on the manipulation. The relations of textiles and material qualities to the exploration of identity and multiculturalism remain crucial aspects that continued from my undergraduate studies to my thesis work. For example, within my work various plaid/line-centric textiles makes an appearance in several figures, but the color, design aspects like lines thickness and angles, and overall placement/inclusion of the pattern may

read differently from one figure to another. (*Untitled: Feather* and *Untitled: Ruffle* both feature a repeating fabric with lines but the placement of the fabric on *Feather*, (pointing down) aligns with the gesture of the figure changing how the fabric is conveyed in general.)

During my graduate career I have used textiles and various materials to represent a range of cultural identities. My early graduate works, such as *Untitled: Mask Series* (figure 3), were made in an effort to represent my family's nationality and background, but left too many ambiguities to which culture I was referencing.⁸ Part of my intention was that, as masks that reflected cultural identity, they could be interchanged from person to person at any given or specific times. Due to the masks' openness, however, I felt a need to reassess what was being portrayed and why. Also, since these were masks, there was a suggestion of a performative element. I knew I did not want to make performance art, nor did I want to run the risk of being solely defined by notions of tribalism—this was less interesting to me than conveying a mixed heritage. At the same time, by taking a step away from my own family tree, I was able to move towards creating art more inclusive of different viewers—I wanted viewers to be able to relate to my works in their own personal way without distinguishing a particular culture within the realm of “us” or “them” mentality.

⁸ Reflecting on this work now, I see that I was trying to represent a distinct nationalistic culture whose thought processes were that of an imbued multicultural society of which I was only vaguely aware and did not personally share.



Figure 3 Untitled: Mask Series

With the masks' blend of problems and possibilities, I began researching how to form sculptural figures. In my research I found out about Mark Jenkins, an artist who uses tape to create realistic figures. I was amazed by how the tape was able to cast many details of a subject's natural gestures and small nuances of pose. To create my figures, I follow the same initial process as Jenkins, wrapping my model in plastic wrap, overlapping packing tape on top of that, and then cutting the tape mold off from the model. I would instruct the models to make a pose normal for them and would only begin the process when they became comfortable and relaxed into a more natural feel. After removing the tape mold, I stuff it and apply plaster gauze, and select the textile materials based on the general mood conveyed through the gestural pose.

By using the human form, a relationship is already created between viewer and object due the recognizable shape—people inherently relate to other people, however abstracted. I researched many ways to create a natural form. Capturing a realistic and relatable pose that implies movement, while at the same time capturing a moment in time, is very important in creating relatability in my work. If the pose becomes too unnatural the figure will not be seen as

a humanoid object reflecting, but rather as a mannequin merely displaying pattern and color as merchandise.

I refer to my current works as statues rather than as sculptures, due to the way statues are generally more referential or representative of human form in different eras. My first statues' less generalized speculations on the figure's identity did not alter the overall form very much.

However, for my recent works the definition of statues vs. sculptures does not apply as much as the former, as I have progressively come to allow the fabric to define itself, manipulating the fabric less with the end effect obscuring the overall form and identity to a higher degree. It is with this change of approach that posture and form have taken on added importance: The latest figures embody a sense of actual presence, as if the figure can move at any moment, even as the form still expresses a figure frozen in time. With these latest works I employ different methods of fabrication to convey aspects of identity, manifest in the relations of pattern, color, posture, and fabric qualities or textile behaviors. In previous works fabrics were static, adhering strictly to the form. In my latest works I am letting the fabric fall, fold or gather freely, simultaneously giving the impression of the figure's gesture, obscuring the identity more and, through the nature of the fabric, giving more movement (whether through actual movement of fabric, or implied through the figure). Because of this my selection of fabrics is based on how the consistency of the fabric would change through the manipulation as well as color and pattern.

The selection and usage of fabric/material combinations is important to my work in many ways. The fabrics I use are found or recycled fabrics, meaning I must select the materials with the hope that there is enough to use, and that I must be flexible in the event there is not enough material to work with. During my fashion studies I learned of how toxic and wasteful the industry is regarding fabric creation, and in discarding fabrics for such mundane reasons as being

out of favor for the season. Although environmentalism is not the base argument or motive for my work, I feel that it is still important for artists to be aware of their materials, and, if possible, use materials that may help reduce rather than add to pollution.

The most important reason for my use of textiles is to show how different materials, patterns, colors, and textures can convey multicultural themes. Textiles, despite many contemporary associations, are not limited to one particular cultural group. The use of patterns, motifs, and colors most represented in textiles and pottery always represented a mixture of culture or ethnic backgrounds as artistic objects moved across geographical boundaries. Textiles, I feel, can be used as symbolism for multiculturalist ideologies.

The application and manipulation of materials is decided after the form is created, and it is here that I show more of the “artists hand.” I could, for ease, just sew together fabrics like that of a quilt and then attach to the figure as is. However, I try to create different manipulations with the materials I use, in order to explore how individuality is represented visually, and to push some boundary on what can be achieved with different materials. For instance, even if I use the same textile in more than one figure, the application of said material will be different across different works, implying that although these figures share personality traits, those traits may be exhibited in different ways. This is in line with my larger explorations of the boundary between openness and specificity, highlighting how a group of people representative of a single culture also have their own individual way of expressing their culture.

Of course, the mixtures of these different materials, no matter my intention, may read differently to each individual viewer. This is because not all visual or formalistic properties, whether color, shape, pattern, or texture, can be removed, and therefore the viewer will always insert their own personal influences into the meaning of an artwork. For example, my first statue,

Untitled: Hair (figure 4), due to the more fantastical approach to human form, prompted a wide range of different readings, with the most questions directed toward the topic of gender. The most obvious reading was that the figure was female, but I also had readings of the figure being transgendered. There were also multiple readings on the usage of hair and its weavings resembling the weaving done on rugs. The choice to use hair, for myself, was in the universality of hair braiding itself. Adding extensions to the hair in braids is a form of several cultural overlaps of which I am part, and today we see the spread of that culture more and more with various groups. The pose and hair-braiding were both simultaneously specific and widely open to interpretation.



Figure 4 *Untitled: Hair* 2019

I wanted for my next statues to have a more definitive pose for relatability. While the first statue, *Untitled: Hair*, was recognizable as a human, the form was unrelatable to what would be naturally achieved and so with viewers it was more of an art object than a figure to relate to. The next statue had such a definitive pose and form that some identifying traits of the model were readily guessed based on figure shape alone (*Untitled: Ball*). I then began to consider how I might assign different postures to each statue, and began to focus on how individuals stand or hold themselves: do they lean weight on one side more than the other? Do they hunch over or stand straight? In observing how people hold themselves I noticed the many ways that gesture, even if only subconsciously, tells a story about the person's identity and mood.

The fruits of this research paid off in *Untitled: Feather* (figure 5), which many viewers relate to regarding both the figure's pose and the fabric placement. To many, the pose reads either of defeat or of being tired, a reading amplified as the low-hanging fabric emphasizes the motion of downward movement. With this piece, viewers felt their identity reflected even as they were unable to assign an identity to the figure. This prompted an interesting question: How do people represent identity through gesture? With this question in mind, I have lately used different poses to explore identifying gestures and positions, looking for alternate and open-ended ways the viewer might relate to the form. *Untitled: Ruffles*, for example, is initially in a relaxed pose, however, looks to be moving from this position into another. The mid movement of the gesture allows for different interpretations of purpose and feeling within the viewer.



Figure 5 Untitled: Feather 2020

CHAPTER 4

MUSES

My artistic influences tend to mesh different patterns on the human form, or work with ways of exploring cultural identity. I am drawn, perhaps from my fashion experience, to combinations of color and patterns, and I love artworks that incorporate that aesthetic.

Among the artists I am influenced by is Gustav Klimt, primarily his portraiture works that combine a range of patterns with abstracted bodies, while still maintaining relatability and recognition with realistic faces. Besides Klimt's fully realized works, I have also been inspired by his sketches—in general I enjoy seeing any artist's sketches, to see how they hash out ideas for possible future works. While many of Klimt's sketches are questionable in terms of the male gaze, he was also able to capture his subject in what I feel are natural, unabashed moments. With these unabashed moments, Klimt offers the viewer a portrait as a story that unfolds in a brief moment in time, rather than more typical portraiture, where the subject is stilted. The figures in Klimt's sketches feel relatable in their free forms, an approach influential to my own approach.

Lina Iris Viktor is a contemporary artist I find inspiring. Viktor works within the same vein as Klimt, mixing pattern not only as an individualistic identity but also as a phenomenon of nature, drawing out cultural connections as reflected in natural pattern. I am also inspired by contemporary artists Amy Sherald and Jacob Hashimoto. Sherald's portraiture work uses muted grays for skin tones, which emphasizes the bold and vibrant colors she uses for her subject's clothing and backgrounds. The garments she depicts give hints to the subject's inner self or personality, without over-defining anything. Hashimoto's bamboo and paper kites combine various pattern designs into complex layouts that have been described as abstracted landscapes. I

am most inspired by how various patterns work together in Hashimoto's work, combining to convey both complexity and calmness.

Another artist that I have gained some influence from is Nick Cave, specifically his famous Soundsuits (figure 6,)—a reference that has followed me throughout my graduate school career.



Figure 6 Nick Cave Soundsuit 2011

I previously mentioned my concerns about how one's knowledge of the artist plays a role in how we understand their works, and that question has become a concern for me in seeing the perception of viewers and critics regarding Cave's Soundsuits. I share many similarities with Cave, in terms of themes and goals for the perception of my work. For example, we each seek to eliminate visual cues of specific identity—as Cave states, “fully concealing the body, the

‘Soundsuits’ serve as an alien second skin that obscures race, gender, and class allowing viewers to look without bias towards the wearers’ identity.” [Art21]

Despite our similarities, however, I feel that our approaches to identity become vastly different when we consider the performance aspect of the Soundsuits, relative to the non-performative focus of my work. For example, the Soundsuits’ allusions to identity become readily apparent during performances, including when Cave himself dances. That is, because dance styles are heavily influenced by ethnic and cultural pattern, when in performance the Soundsuits take on a kind of implicitly assigned identity. This is highlighted further when different people are given the opportunity to perform in costume. Interns performing in Soundsuits sometimes revert to their image of tribal dance, and thus not only implicitly assign an identity, but also reveal unintentional biases filled with complex history and implications.⁹ As a result of these side effects, Cave’s works are often considered in light of tribalism, rather than in terms of his goal to create an alien being in which identity is erased. Rather than an erased identity, identity becomes inadvertently definitive, based on expectations of the artist’s culture that are in turn based on knowledge of the artist and his background.

As for my own work, I do not wish for my statues to be assigned an identity. My intention for the viewer is that they would be able to relate to the figure and see themselves in that moment, or relate to the mood that is conveyed. An identity would not be assigned as being resolutely from a particular culture but would rather remain open enough to question concepts and visual interpretations of identity at a fundamental level. Therefore, the notion of including a performance aspect to my creative works, including the masks, has never appealed to me, seeming at odds both to my goals and to the reasoning behind my statues.

⁹ It would be interesting to see how expectations were subverted if the dance styles changed at every Soundsuit performance.

The gestures represented in Cave's Soundsuits and within my own works are also different in approach, due to the performance-oriented aspects of the works. When not in a performance the Soundsuits no longer reflect an identity of any kind. They become elaborate static outfits. Posture for my figures works as a connection to the viewer, and is an important aspect in evoking a sense of identity independent of an outside influence.

These aspects also relate to another artist whose works I am influenced by, to an extent, Antony Gormley (figure 7). Gormley's sculptures are relatively defined, and there is no question regarding whose identity they represent—all his figures are based on himself. What I follow with Gormley's work instead is the inventiveness of his myriad approaches to figural representation. His figure works, which he refers to as sculptures rather than as statues, take on many different shapes, often obscuring or distorting the figure so much that they can hardly be recognized as humanoid if not viewed from the correct perspective.



Figure 7 Antony Gormley Big Shy 2016

Other influences on my work arguably do not come from the artworld at all. One of my favorite fashion designers, Issey Miyake, is known for pushing the boundaries on fabric manipulation with his couture works. Miyake's idea of creating origami-looking clothes filled with permanent pleats and body-obscuring shapes was grounded in the intent to push the dynamics of his medium, and to make the wearer into an art piece rather than to just create a product.



Figure 8 Issey Miyake Haute Couture

Miyake's technique allows the fabric to take on its natural characteristics using seemingly minimal manipulation to represent the human form – a large influence in my later works such as in *Feather* or *Untitled: Fray* where the fabric weights and texture allows the fabric to fall freely emphasizing the statue's gesture.



Figure 9 Untitled: Fray 2020

CHAPTER 5

EXHIBITION

When I created the statues, I envisioned them being placed in a public area, in an environment chosen so that the statues would be reflective and responsive to their surroundings. *Untitled: Feather* was first displayed as a public piece, which on a base level allowed for greater interaction with potential viewers. But what I learned was the effect of the environment on the fabric. The wind gently fluttering the fabrics added to how viewers interpreted the statue's gesture, making them more aware of the different textiles used. Being within an inside space such as a gallery changes the dynamics of how the works are seen, no longer as a human figure within a public space but more as an art object. Relatability found when placed in a public sphere is replaced with the question of intentions and meanings when seen more as an art object. When arranging my exhibit, I thought about the viewer's experience, about how the gallery space differs from a public space, and how to control the space so that viewers could best interact with the statues.



Figure 10 Patterns of Identity Exhibit 2020

The statues were placed at an equal distance to one another to create a visual balance with the room. Viewers would be able to move around and see the entirety of each figure. Lighting was focused on each statue to emphasize each figure and to highlight the textiles. To direct the movement of the viewer, the statues faced specific directions that pointed towards the other figures in the group, in order to imply interaction. Similarly, in terms of comparing the textiles, the placement of each figure as far as comparing textiles was made to also form an implied interaction between the statues. For example, in *Untitled: Feather* and *Untitled: Folded* there is a similarity in the fabric manipulation. Both take on a triangular shape with the fabric pointing downwards. However, the colors of the textiles were vastly different, with *Feather* featuring subdued colors and heavier fabrics, and *Folded* having very bold colors and a variety of textile weights that combined leather and sheer fabrics that echoed the figures' dynamic gesture. Linking the two figures is *Untitled: Ball* which has a combination of bold textiles like *Folded*, yet has fabrics of the same weight quality as *Feather*.



Figure 11 Patterns of Identity Exhibit 2

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As the art world becomes more diverse in mediums, the myriad textile and craft-based arts are becoming more recognized. Many emerging artists are creating works that use textiles to represent identity in their own specific and individual ways. As such, I can draw influences from various sources throughout art and design fields and am continually finding inspiration from new and innovative muses. Many textiles-based works focus on a specific cultural identity, usually representing a specific nationality. My works contribute to the greater textile artworld by opening this up, operating as works identifiable to people of many backgrounds through gestures, and through the mixture of various fabrics that, when placed together, are not specific to one cultural group.

People are diverse beings made up of different cultural aspects and norms. I create textile statues not only to embrace multicultural qualities but to also give a visual representation of how many different cultural aspects we all possess. By associating with the different fabrics, through color, motif and patterns, viewers could find a bit of their own experiences reflected and shared with others. As the world seeks to expand the definitions concerning identity and culture beyond a binary thought it is my intent through the creation of my work and the work of many artists, that the artworld does the same.

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