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XinXin Zheng
xz6842@rit.edu

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DIVA

-the present-day woman-

XinXin Zheng

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART

Metal and Jewelry Design
School of American Craft
CIAS

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Committee members

Leonard Urso

Chief Thesis Advisor
Professor
School of American Crafts

Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez

Associate Thesis Advisor
Professor, Graduate Director
School of American Crafts

Liaung Chung

Associate Thesis Advisor
Visiting Professor
School of American Crafts

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Abstract

Diva presents a look at women in the present day. The inspiration for this thesis project comes from rhythmic gymnastics, a unique sport exclusively for women. The movement of the ribbon, twining and surrounding a woman's body, highlights the beauty of the woman. The twining movement symbolizes the complex and developing roles women are playing in contemporary society.

The structures of the pieces in this thesis project are open and vast, creating a sense of allure, as well as a reflection of the open mind of the contemporary woman. The pieces are separated into two parts, black and white, symbolizing different characteristics of women. Black and white are classic and basic colors, but opposites. Neon pink, a modern pop color associated with women, relates to femininity and links the black and white together, symbolizing different kinds of women in the modern world.

Introduction

I have long desired to work on a theme relating to the experiences of women. As one of these contemporary women, I believe it is a priority for us to inform society of who we are. Compared to men, women tend to dress themselves up in a manner projecting who they are. Fashion trends provide many options encouraging women to speak out and express their identities to the public.

Women are more independent than they were in past decades, physically, spiritually and financially. This not only reflects their social status and rights, but also their feminine privilege of beauty¹. They have the strength to present beauty and attractiveness alongside their desire, whether physical or intellectual. As a result, a market started gradually to grow based on the demand for beautification. There are millions of businesses around the world significantly focused on women today, for example, in fashion, cosmetics, beauty publications, social media, and more. Because of the desire and demand for beauty, people have specifically developed more and more businesses for women. Fashion first indicated its specificity to women as a cultural expression, influenced by moral, economic, artistic, and social trends over different eras². Beauty

¹ Aldous Huxley, "From 'Beauty in 1929'," in *VOGUE 100: A Century of Style*, ed. Robin Muir, (New York: Abrams, 2016), 32.

² Stephen Calloway, "The Book Beautiful," in *The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-garde 1860-1900*, ed. Lynn Federle Orr and Stephen Calloway, (London: V&A Publishing, 2011), 194.

has built a bridge between fashion and art, especially suited to the female body, addressing aesthetic appreciations of every movement in history. Under the influence of new art forms, fashion in the present day has developed many feminine styles to depict and redefine contemporary beauty³. Some artists become designers, just as some designers turn to art. They redefine and challenge the boundary between art and fashion, in order to explore the possibilities created by combining the visual and the tactile. For instance, Issey Miyake, an artist of fashion and sculpture, has developed a new relationship between art and couture (Figure 1), designing garments by infusing them with sculptural effects, expanding flat forms to be complex three-dimensional shapes, or as I rather would call the pieces, a wearable sculpture⁴



Figure 1: Issey Miyake, dance for a collection of Pleats Please clothes and accessories, 1981.
Photograph: Masaya Yoshimura

³ Caroline Evans, "Mutability and Modernity: the 1990s," in *Addressing the Century: 100 years of art and fashion*, ed. Peter Wolle and Fiona Bradley, (London: Haywood Gallery, 1998), 96-99.

⁴ Peter Wollen, "Addressing the Century," in *Addressing the Century: 100 years of art and fashion*, ed. Peter Wolle and Fiona Bradley, (London: Haywood Gallery, 1998), 15-18.

Inspiration

I was attracted by ribbon rhythmic gymnastics (Figure 2, below), a sport for only female athletes, which encompasses the elements of ballet, gymnastics and music. The ribbon dance not only inspired me with its movement, but also because of the interaction of the ribbon and the



female body. Associated with the rhythmic motion, the ribbon becomes a fluent and undulating line into the air, and a space is created between the air and the female body. The athletic body, thin but muscular, outfitted in a silky bodysuit to demonstrate feminine sexuality as natural. The perfect proportion of the female body is here seen as a beautiful art form,

demonstrating a notion of the free modern feminine⁵.

In addition to capturing the movement of the waving ribbon and the female body, this thesis is designed to indicate the essential beauty of

⁵ Kathleen Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the women of the Stieglitz Circle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 85-92.

Figure 2 (above): Anna Bessonova, two-time Olympic bronze medalist.
[HTTP://WWW.CHINADAILY.COM.CN/OLYMPICS/IMAGES/ATTACHEMENT/JPG/SITE1/20080823/0013729C05180A1A60A017.JPG](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/olympics/images/attachement/jpg/site1/20080823/0013729C05180A1A60A017.JPG)

contemporary women in two sections of color, depicting different characteristics and personalities of women in present-day society.

Identity

I consider this thesis as an autobiography. Beyond the thesis, I identify as a contemporary woman. I grew up with different kinds of women around me from different generations, backgrounds and cultures. I observed the changes to them over time regarding, but also to myself. Giving an identity to the thesis is identifying myself as well.

Fashion is an inevitable and spontaneous experience for most women. It was around most of us since we were very young. In modern time, fashion unleashed new possibilities of what a woman could be. Alexander McQueen (1969–2010) is one of the designers who has impressed me the most, not only with his designs, but also his attitude toward fashion.

McQueen was never limited by fashion, but explored all the possibilities of new materials, techniques and ideas. He redefined female aesthetics and gave women confidence and attitude when they put on his clothes. At his fashion show *Nihilism*, in 1994, he said, “I really want the woman to feel strong and powerful.”⁶ To demolish

⁶ Judith Watt, Alexander McQueen: *The Life and the Legacy*, (New York: Harper Design, 2012), 59.

the rules but keep tradition was McQueen's theory about design. He liked to push against the prevailing mode, in order to transcend the norm of what a woman was *supposed to* look like. His collections were always influenced by his own life, personal identity and the people he interacted with⁷ (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Lee Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer ready to wear 2008
<http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2010-ready-to-wear/alexander-mcqueen/slideshow/collection#43>

⁷ Ibid, 60-69.

Material and Color

This thesis has remarked on my Chinese heritage. As an international student in the United States, I have been influenced and educated by both western and eastern cultures. People have identified me as multicultural; however, I have been roaming back and forth between west and east. Therefore, when I was first exploring the idea of *Diva*, the color white first came to mind. As a clean and soft color, white complements my Chinese culture, reflecting where I was born and retaining purity from the deepest parts of my memory. Compared to black, white is more capable of representing the stereotype of Asian women who are humble, gentle, smooth and delicate. In order to demonstrate its character of white, the lines tend to be very fluid and undulating or even circular; sharp and pointed angles have been veiled by many layers of mesh.

Black stands on the opposite side. The idea for including black appeared while I was working on white, and it revealed the other part of me. Black is known to symbolize dignity, elegance, mystery and darkness, which also can be indicative of a group of brave, ambitious, passionate and powerful western women. Therefore, the scale of the black pieces is bigger and exaggerated, and uses sharp and pointed angles.

The color pink, as a spontaneous common color representing female beginning with babies. I set the color pink to be a connection between black and white. Neon is a new element that was invented in the modern era; it adds a glowing effect to the

pink that represents the brilliance of contemporary women. Neon pink is unrelated to either black or white, but symbolically builds a feminine bridge between them.

However, black and white will always be contrasting colors, so the conflict remains even as they interact with each other. I considered the relationship between black and white in this thesis work as an element of ying-yang, where their interrelation becomes a cycle of equilibrium to keep nature in balance.

There is also a conflict between steel wires and soft fabric. Steel is a strong, hard metal that can be formed with fire and hardware, capable of constructing a three-dimensional statue like a skeleton. In contrast, fabric, especially mesh, is very delicate and soft; it flows on the female body, creating a sense of freedom and fluency. The translucence is another reason I like working with mesh. In connecting and closing the spaces between wires, air and the female body, the translucent quality encourages audiences to discover the negative space by seeing through the positive space. On the other hand, mesh is much lighter than many other fabrics; it allows higher volume by the addition of more mesh but does not drastically increase the weight. As a connection, the wire structures were painted in neon pink, constructing and supporting all feminine types as a whole. The contrast of black and white represents contemporary women with different characters and personalities, and autobiographically, evokes my race and ethnicity.

I believe each material has its own inherent quality. While combining them, I only built up the concept depending on the nature of materials rather than changing or shifting its meaning to another, so the materials stay pure and natural if they get

separated⁸. Therefore, referring to the theory of materials, my art works tend to represent contemporary women, in instead of affecting the way people think of women. I wanted it to resonate with the female audience, to put women in the material piece and to help them appreciate who they are.

Space and Lines

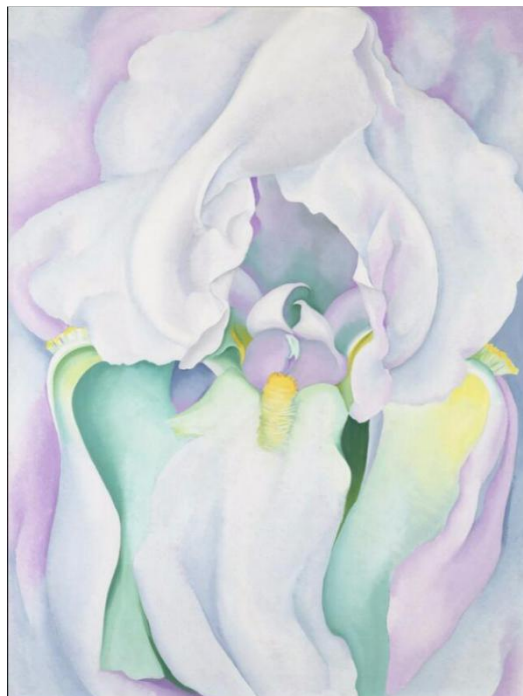


Figure 4

White Iris, 1930

Oil paint on canvas

40 × 30 in

101.6 × 76.2 cm

© 2016 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/DACS, London

I wanted to present an organic form around the female body. While finding inspiration from ribbon rhythmic gymnastics, the undulating and flowing lines drew most of my attention. The ribbon is no longer a straight uninteresting line, but

⁸ Jacqueline Hofer, "Ruth Asawa, A working Life," in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: contours in the air*, ed. Daniell Cornell, (Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 2006), 41.

becomes vivid and alive with every movement and pose. In collaboration with the rhythmic music, the ribbon dances with the body fluently and with undulation, depicting the beauty of the female body. The undulating line is very organic and feminine, presenting rhythmic movement while interacting with the contours of the female body.

The 20th-century female artist Georgia O'Keeffe has inspired me with her



undulating lines. O'Keeffe's art uncovered the hidden truths of feminine sexuality as a natural phenomenon. Her paintings of flowers and landscapes are somehow abstract enough that they maintained a sense of mystery with their vivid effects of undulating and rolling lines (Figure 4). O'Keeffe's artworks reveal elements of the feminine role according as a reaction to to her sensual and spiritual experience, the undulation signifying her sense of

Figure 5
Peace, 2015
 Nylon, Steel wires, spray paint

modern feminism⁹.

⁹ Kathleen Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the women of the Stieglitz Circle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 238-239, 250-255.

Peace is the one of the very first pieces I made for this thesis project (Figure 5). This is the smallest piece in this project and is designed to be worn on the chest. “Peace” to me is a very spiritual concept that brings to mind the sound of waves. It is difficult to achieve this feeling/condition in the present day due to our busy lives and society having a focus on other more material things. The whole piece, formed with undulating wires and sewed with frilled fabric, depicts the fluency of the mind and ocean.

Circle (Figure 6) is a piece that represents the role of nature as female. Unlike the other pieces using undulating lines, the *Circle* is depicted in a circular form and worn on the torso, indicating the cycle from birth to death. The female, as an aspect of the mother, plays a very important role in nature.



Figure 6
Circle, 2015
Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

Dignity (Figure 7) is the biggest form and was presented in my thesis exhibition with the "hat." The piece was composed of five pieces of irregular and undulating circles and sewed with a high volume of mesh around the sides. I was inspired by the giant, elegant gowns from the Victorian era. Women of the time were obsessed with dressing themselves in heavy gowns with very tiny waists. The tiny waist and big bustle exaggerated the contour and shaped the body straight and tight. There was no doubt that this fashion created attractiveness if exaggerated female figures, but initially nobody was aware that the women's breath would become compromised by tightening the waist, that standing still made their legs sore, or that their internal organs suffered by being squeezed inside the body by a tiny corset. In the modern era many women still suffer by keeping themselves in such rules from the past. Even though women are freer, they are still trapped by moral and public judgment. There are still many rules women are expected to follow. Therefore, *Dignity* is a piece that represents dressing the woman like an elegant statue. Instead of tightening up the waist as corsets did, in this piece the woman's legs are tightened by four rings inside the dress. The dress is a giant cage that looks dreamy and attractive and the elegant hat requires the model to pose very steady to keep it from falling. The woman wearing *Dignity* is forced to stand still and cannot find her way out until she dares to take it off.



Figure 7
Dignity, 2015
Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

Ruth Asawa, a Japanese American female artist, has inspired me with both her sculpture and her spiritual experience of identity. Her sculptures are composed of organic shapes with twisted steel wires and loops. In her works Asawa explores her race and ethnicity, especially focusing on her Japanese heritage¹⁰. Asawa's sculptures (Figure 8) are known by her highly skilled technique and use of space. Asawa considered the positive space as important as negative space. She developed her own language of space by bringing forms together, connecting shapes next to each other

¹⁰ Jacqueline Hofer, "Ruth Asawa, A working Life," in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: contours in the air*, ed. Daniell Cornell, (Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 2006), 30.

to create space¹¹. Most of her sculptures are transparent (it became a keyword for her works) and gave me the idea of overlapping materials to interact with the positive and negative while associating with the pieces to the effect of shadow and light¹².



Figure 8: *Untitled (S.065)*, 1962

Copper and brass wire
 94 × 17 1/2 × 17 1/2 in
 238.8 × 44.5 × 44.5 cm

Because of Asawa, I subsequently paid attention to the space in my thesis work. *Dignity* (Figure 9), for example, revealed the interaction of positive and negative space among wire, air, mesh and the body. The wire, as a connection, separated the air into two shapes; the body divided the sculpture inside and outside; the mesh cut the sculpture in four pieces side by side and layer by layer. The mesh has been

¹¹ Emily K. Doman Jennings, "Critiquing the Critique: Ruth Asawa's early Reception," in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: contours in the air*, ed. Daniell Cornell, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 131-136.

¹² *Ibid*, 143-144

layered several times to increase the volume of the dress. The body can be observed by looking through the overlapping layers of mesh, which create a positive space outside and a negative space inside. When you observe the piece from the top, you can see the depth of the piece through overlapped wires and mesh as well. Whether viewing the piece as a whole or as a part, the negative and positive spaces explain and display how the body and the sculpture interact with each other.



Figure 9
Dignity, view from top

Compared to the white collection, the wires in the black collection tend to be more dramatically undulated, twisted and spiraled around the body, performing both

actively and dramatically. In order to admire the beauty of the female figure, in *Attitude* (Figure 10) I built organic forms over the body to contour and exaggerate the shape of the female body. The female body should be defined as an instinctual beauty of nature, full of imagination and allure that provides an example of new social impressions, rejecting all limiting traditional roles.



Figure 10
Attitude, 2015
Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

Women today play a lot of roles in society. They walk through different stages and perform whatever role they need at the time—mother, wife, traveler, co-worker, etc. These roles are challenging women constantly. In order to give an effective performance, they need to learn and practice extensively before they get on that stage. *Performance* (Figure 11) describes women as ballet dancers. Audiences admire watching the ballet dancers perform fluent moves with their delicate bodies. They are so professional that every move and pose is very precise. However, few understand the pain they have suffered for their art. The wires in *Performance* had been dramatically twined around the shoulder, neck and torso, and the mesh was sewed on the piece in many layers like a ballet skirt.



Figure 11
Performance, 2015
Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

Ambition (Figure 12) was formed on a large scale with several undulating lines and tightened by ribbons with many little bows. The whole piece was twined from the neck to the shoulders, across the torso and drawn down to the thigh.

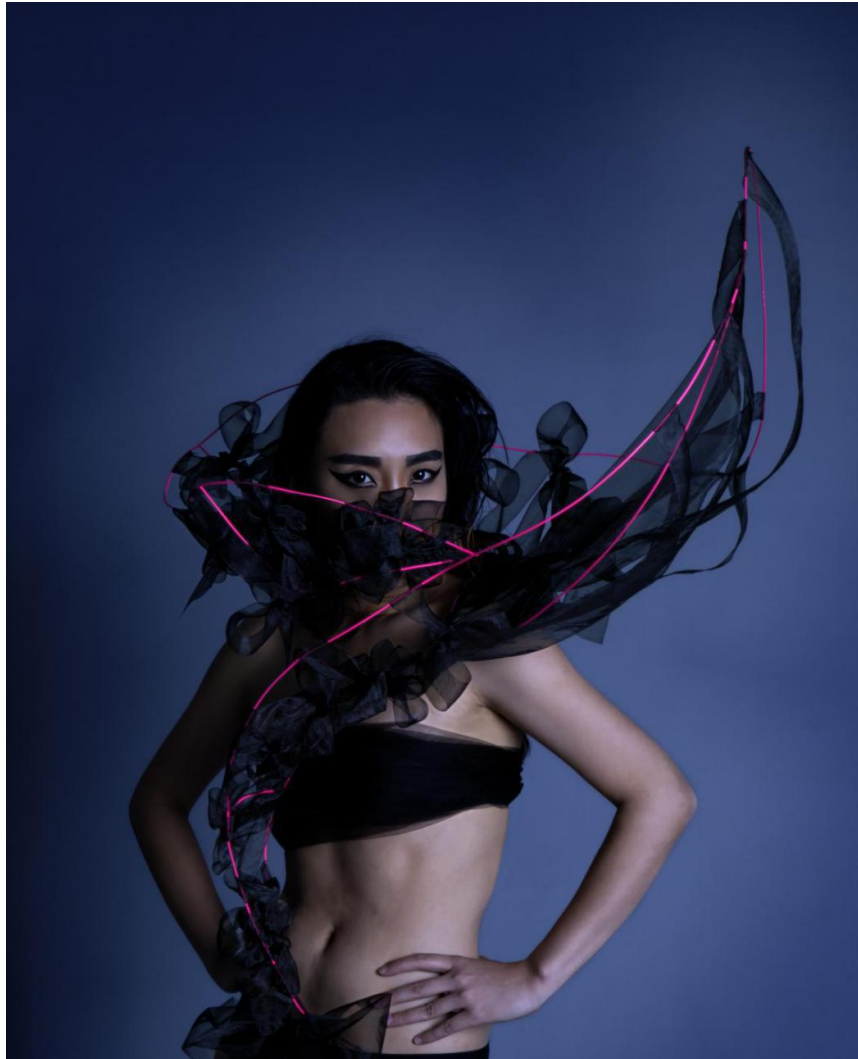


Figure 12
Ambition, 2015
mesh, steel wires, spray paint

In the dictionary, “ambition” is defined as a passion to achieve goals. It helps to make the dream come true no matter how big you are dreaming. Therefore, the scale of the piece was large and wide open, like putting armor on women to protect their

dreams. The space inside the piece is designed to be more interesting than the outside (Figure 13). The inside of the piece creates a continuous space collaborating with the body, which looks completely different from the outside. The undulating wires create a shape that embraces the neck and head, moving from the shoulders and elevated all the way to the pointed top. The whole piece offers a unique form from each view.

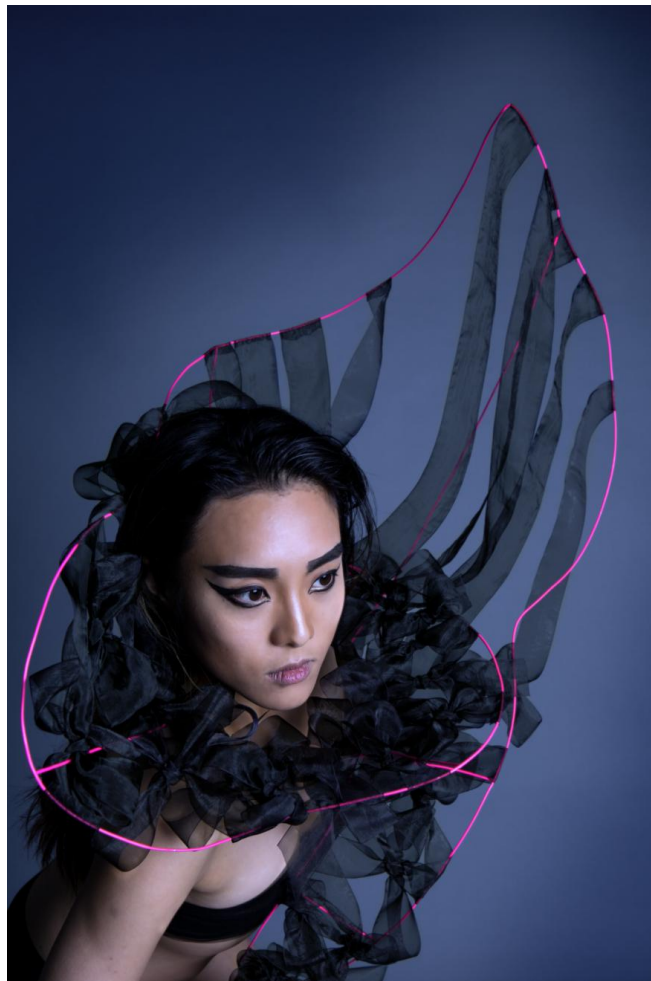


Figure 13
Ambition, 2015
Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

Mystery (Figure 14) is a piece that explores the possibilities of spiral wires and how they interact with the shape of the female body. Wires were released from the roll and soldered together without a lot of forming or hammering. The spiral wires

were able to freely twine on the body, creating shapes to connect the space between the female body and the piece.

The space, to me, is a very important element to develop a sculpture in three dimensions. The wires here, as undulating lines, defined and enclosed air in different

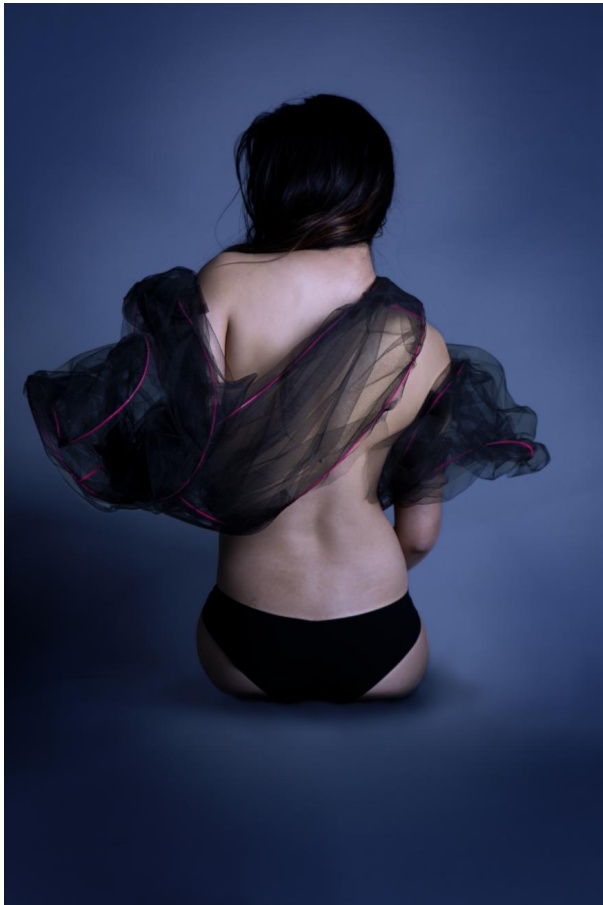


Figure 14
Mystery, 2015
 Mesh, Steel wires, spray paint

spaces, exploring connections between air and the female body. The transparency of mesh reinforces the sense of distinction between positive and negative space, inside and outside, foreground and background, visible and invisible, and of course, the female body and the piece. I enjoy observing the space by looking through the overlapped layers of mesh; it provides depth in the space and shifts your eyes from one space to another. The space of the spiral and

twining lines somehow changes a three-dimensional shape into two dimensions when seen in a different position.

Therefore, it challenges your brain when you view the piece from one side to the other.

Models and Makeup

I considered the female body as a part of the sculpture, so the models played a very important role in the display and photographing of the works. In order to show the distinction between black and white, two different types of woman were chosen to model the works.

For the white collection, the model's figure needed to be petite and delicate-looking, which fits the idea of tenderness and purity represented by white. For keeping the purity of white, a small amount of makeup was used and the model was given pinkish blush on her cheeks and lips to make her look sweet, with less attitude, and exuding more softness and to make her look appealing. In contrast, the model used for the black collection tended toward a masculine body, giving a definitive sense of being strong. The makeup on this model was very heavy, with long thick eyebrows, exaggerated pointed eyeliner, a highlighted nose and dark contours on the cheekbones. She was given sharp, heavy makeup to empower the black. The concept was for not only women to be afraid of her, but men as well. Prior to the thesis show, I considered to pick Asian women to be the models, so nationality and race of the two models confirming my reflection on identity and ethnicity.

Conclusion

Diva is an autobiographical thesis that represents my identity as a modern woman. People have been asking me “Are these pieces fashion or a jewelry design?” I think the best answer is that they are “wearable sculpture.” They are neither pieces that can be worn in daily life, nor small delicate jewelry to be hung on your neck and ears. Wearable sculptures can stand on their own, without a body involved, like a statue.

I was inspired and influenced by contemporary fashion and art, but struggled to distinguish them. Fashion, to me, is closer to a person’s daily life and has more to tell about his or her story. Art, beyond life, is an innovation of spiritual experiences, which digs deeper into society and creates the ability to self-examine and challenge civilization. I am not trying to define or distinguish fashion or art in this project. I like the fact that they both impact my understanding of contemporary women. They both live importantly inside of my spirit.

Diva helps to redefine me. For the first time, I looked closely at myself and tried to figure out who I am. As a contemporary woman, it is always helpful for me to connect the self to society and observe the women around me. I do not want to change a person’s understanding of the contemporary woman. I want women to figure out their own identity by exploring and putting themselves into the pieces. I like women to be the theme; they are the inspiration that impacts me constantly and encourages me to explore their beauty.

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