

The catwalk as spectacle: Hussein Chalayan a magician of technology

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Abstract

Technology, textiles and fashion have always been inseparable, however to describe a technology as being new or 'sophisticated' is relative. In the digital age we already take for granted tools and technologies that from a historical perspective are still in the computer stone age. Each age: stone, bronze or digital may require a master craftsman to move beyond the phase of simply using technology for its own sake, to create the unexpected and rendering the technology irrelevant. The cutting edge aside, Hussein Chalayan suspended belief with his One Hundred and Eleven Spring 2007 Womenswear Collection. To have a magician explain exactly how he performed a 'trick' would for many, ruin the magic, and true magic appears to be effortless. In assisting Chalayan with the digital printing of three pieces used in this collection I saw in advance only a small part of what on the catwalk looked to be deceptively simple. Despite my own obsession with technology I did not want to know how the magic was created before the show. Witnessing the audience reaction I was suddenly thrown into a world that is in fact more familiar to me than fashion, that of theatre and spectacle. From a behind-the-scenes perspective there was also a similar flirtation by the director with the danger and drama of pulling off a last minute miracle. This paper will explore the seductive nature of new technology.

Often It is the simplest ideas that are the most beautiful.

Most of the technology that lies behind Chalayan's metamorphosing garments is not entirely new. What is extraordinary about his work is that he has done what will probably seem obvious in the future. Although retrospectively there is a tendency to believe that it was a technology itself that has made a new idea possible, often it is in fact

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the uninhibited imagination that leads, leaving uninspired gadgetry behind. Hussein Chalayan's work may have become synonymous with technology and fashion, however as his audience draws its breath I do not believe that it is only clever mechanics they are reacting to but unexpected beauty.

Ever since the first tool was crafted, the original fire lit by hand and the first art carved or drawn, the emotion experienced by an uninitiated viewer of a significantly new invention has been that of awe. Each age, whether stone, bronze or digital, is defined by master craftsmen whose techniques are so refined that their work upon completion seems to appear by an elegant sleight of hand.

An initial idea may be purely conceived. However there is nothing immaculate about the creative process and if all goes well the subsequent birth of a finalized work. Galleries are traditionally designed to create a setting that presents work in a sterile environment offering no distraction and little trace of the creative process to the viewer. The same is true of a successfully staged fashion show. However behind the scenes where creation takes place, the studio and back-stage are generally very messy places where chaos appears to reign.

I assisted Hussein Chalayan and his design team in the digital printing of fabrics for the *grande finale* of his 1011 (Spring/ Summer 2007) and his Airborne (Autumn/Winter 2007-2008) collections and so was literally thrown into the back-stage fray. High fashion exists in a spectacular world of its own and so as a textile designer I was an uninitiated outsider.

The most apparent technologies used in the showpieces for these two shows, were the computer-controlled mechanics used in the metamorphosing garments, LEDs, and artificially generated wind. The resulting pieces speak for themselves and are more or less indescribable. They are best viewed on line as video archives. For the purposes of this paper I will therefore explore his application and engineering of digital imagery and printing, far less obvious from an audience's perspective.

The dissection or detailed discussion of the tools and processes used in Chalayan's textile designs may seem to contradict my premise that technology at its best is magical since to dissect is also to destroy. This is

not my intent. A musical instrument is only a noise-producing machine, a fact entirely forgotten as we listen to music, until a new kind of instrument is introduced or the underlying technology is changed or improved. Analogously, although inseparable from the technology he uses, my interest lies in exploring the finely tuned and orchestrated event that Hussein Chalayan achieves in a manner that appears deceptively simple and effortless, though is in fact very complex and labor intensive

Having worked hands on with the digital printing of fabric for 12 years, ever since the process was at the experimental stage, I consider myself to be a technician as well as a designer. However in spite of the obsession I have with raw technology and the actual mechanics hidden under the lid, as an artist I continue to find the actual possibility of digital textile printing to be almost miraculous. I have not and hope never to take it for granted.

The way in which Chalayan has made use of digital textile design in his last two collections goes far beyond the obvious or the superficial decoration of a surface that is inherent to the idea of printing itself. The images incorporated into his clothing are not additional or secondary but integral to the forms themselves, creating topological areas of colour and imagery that in fact emphasize the sculptural quality of the garments. Each image seems to exist on several levels, the serious and conceptual as well as at times the weirdly humorous and pun like.

The print designs that Chalayan and his design team created for both the metal plate dress in the 1011 collection and the flying dresses in Airborne are made up of an incongruous mixture of elements. The artwork used in the panels of the metal plate dress is hieroglyphic in the concepts it conveys. As an isolated image it is no longer a surface embellishment, and becomes a digital drawing (Figure 1).

The designs created for Airborne are a translation from three dimensional raw materials to their two dimensional copies, through the scanning and digital manipulation of the various fabrics used in his ready to wear collection. Spread out as swatches, the mix of fabrics seemed uncoordinated: A bold blue and white stripe, a sheer beige silk woven with an interspaced yarn, a bronze jacquard patterned with a traditional rose, and a black, red and orange heavyweight woolen cloth. However once these textures had been digitized and superimposed

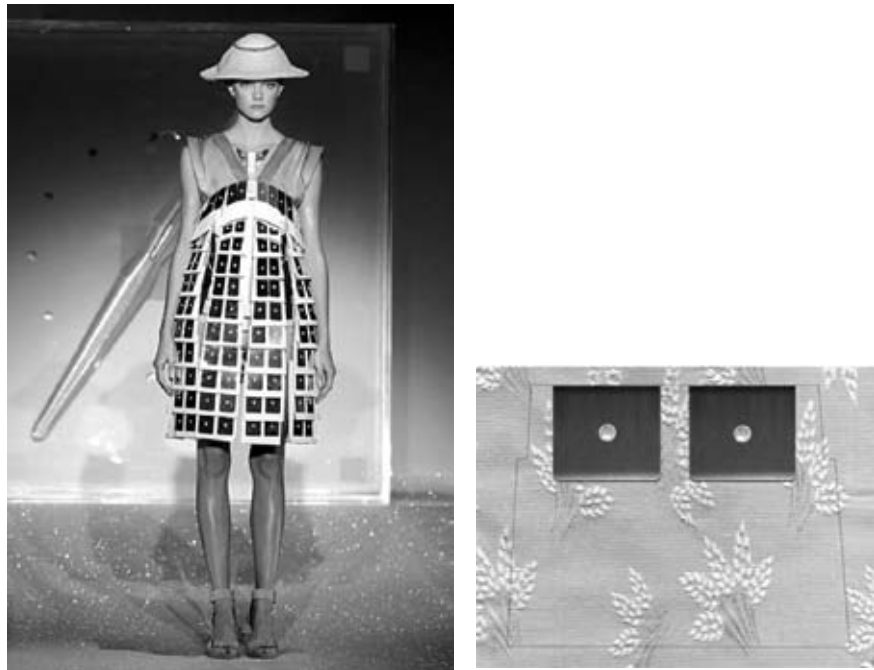


Figure 1 Metal plate dress Spring 2007

transparently onto each other into the geometric shapes within the engineered pattern pieces, an unusual harmony emerged. It is as if as the reality of surfaces has been refracted creating a strange new dimension of floating layers where the real and digitally unreal mix. Chalayan's prints are emblematic of his overall ability to fascinate by removing what has inspired him from its original context and then to reconstruct something new, that follows its own logic.

As a textile designer this desire for reconstruction speaks to me of my own rebellion against the claustrophobia I feel when faced with too many 'pretty' textiles. Chalayan's prints make reference to tradition while also managing to be almost entirely modern. The layering of styles and textures from different time periods with the futuresque schematics that Chalayan uses in his textile designs would most likely produce an inharmonious collage in different hands.

The print for the first dress down the catwalk in 1011 involves a trick of the eye in that it is not quite what it seemed at first sight (Figure 2). Its design evolved impulsively from a photograph that one of Chalayan's assistants took of the mannequin and toile for the dress. This was then developed into a print, a change in direction from the

fabric originally planned for the garment. The isolated figure was first subtly re-colored, rendering it more abstract and then made into an all-over pattern. In colour and delicacy, from a distance this print resembles a traditional floral but when viewed closely reveals itself to be an entirely different motif. As this occurred very close to the time the collection was due to be transported to Paris it is an excellent example of the immediacy that digital printing affords and is just one step behind the spontaneity of the creative process.



Figure 2. Dress and print design Spring 2007

Chalayan's use of colour and geometry in the prints for the Airborne collection is very sophisticated (Figure 3). The hard-edged juxtaposition of graphic forms is softened by gradual shifts of related colors within his palette and is punctuated by brighter focal points. This, like the golden triangle is very effective in moving the user's eye around the composition.

These unlikely products of Chalayan's imagination would not have been possible before the introduction of tools like Photoshop and Illustrator. When put into historical perspective, Computer Aided Design (CAD) is still in its stone age, as Photoshop was launched in 1990. The style Hussein Chalayan has developed in this new media is however very mature and his use of this technology very fluid. The first photographic

image created in 1826 would have seemed miraculous to many and similarly I still find the possibility of reproducing the absolute realism of a scan or photograph directly on to fabric very eerie. Chalayan experiments with this through his use of *trompe l'oeuil*.

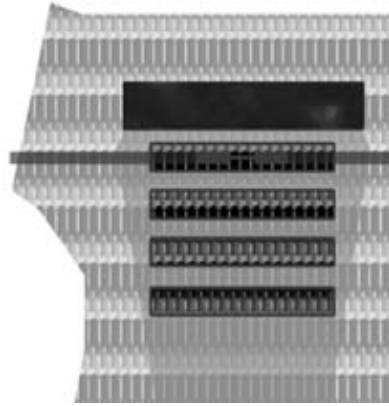


Figure 3. Art work (cropped) for part of the bodice of a “Flying dress”.
Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

My own experience with digital imaging and printing in terms of its speed is that it provides an almost direct link between the mind’s eye and the realization of an idea. Working on the computer I often find my subconscious takes over and actions become dreamlike. Decorative textiles may be reflective of an ancient fascination we all have with pattern and rhythm. However most traditional florals reveal little of their authors and have become mere conventions of accepted fashion. Chalayan breaks with convention and his print styles are unique and instantly recognizable. So much so that in looking at his prints I experienced the rather bizarre sensation of looking directly into the mind of another.

The lay plans for each printed length are themselves intriguing, bearing little resemblance to the traditional shapes recognizable as a sleeve or skirt panel (Figure 4). The layouts, incorporating all the pattern pieces that make up each garment also become abstract designs themselves. These lay plans are reminiscent of the cut along the dotted line, fold and glue paper construction kits for children to build simplified models. The transformation from 2 to 3D is always magical if successfully built, though in this case it is very difficult to guess what the final structure would turn out to be.

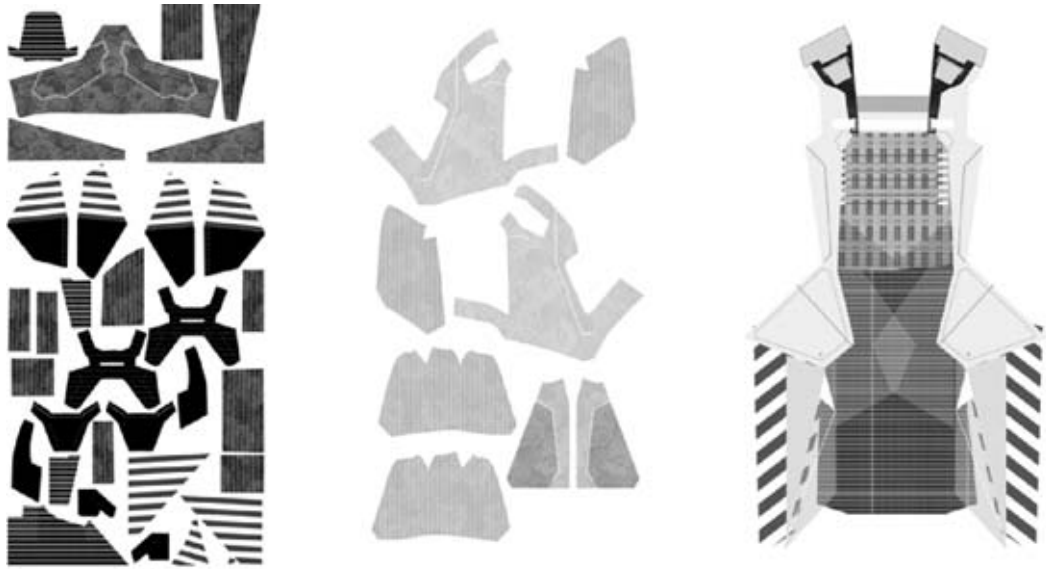


Figure 4. Lay plans for two "Flying" dresses and diagram of the mechanical dress. Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

The precise engineering and placement of prints within a pattern and across seams that computer aided design and digital printing facilitate is endlessly discussed amongst the fashion and textile design communities and has only just started to become more commonplace. In both the Plate dress (Spring/Summer 2007) and the Flying dresses (Autumn/Winter 2007) Chalayan has used this expertly, not with self conscious decision but rather as a natural development of his interest in sculptural forms.

When I questioned Chalayan about his process he claimed to be more or less illiterate in the use of CAD himself. Whether this is entirely true or not, what became evident was that most of his more complex ideas are dependent upon collaboration, his design team having a very significant input into creation. He is an excellent director and one who is able to communicate his vision very clearly.

Technology is never completely reliable and inevitably we did encounter some fairly severe problems in printing. At every set back in the process what impressed me was Hussein's absolute determination, as if sheer will power alone could make things happen and this I sensed was

coupled with a complete faith in his team. He exhibited what seemed a child like belief that ultimately everything is possible.

That last minute changes and the fine tuning of elements crucial to the completion of a final piece would not have been possible without the digital tools was demonstrated in the case of the plate dress when Media Moons (Director of Special Projects) literally made adjustments to some of the segments used in constructing the garment, as files that she had just finished were printing. This job was finally printed, steamed, washed and delivered a few days before the collection was due to travel to Paris. From a behind-the-scenes perspective Chalayan seemed to be flirting with danger, as the possibility that his showpiece might not be completed in time was very real. I also sensed a kind of enjoyment or adrenalin thrill in the drama of pulling off a last minute miracle.

As in a performance itself there is a constant awareness that each new stage in the process cannot begin until the previous step has been completed. In the production line timing is crucial and tension palpable if any one is kept waiting for too long. With the responsibility to deliver all the printing for the show pieces in Airborne (the Mechanical and three Flying dresses) this stress became only too real to me. Due to the tightly limited time frame, as well as a last minute decision by Hussein to switch to another fabric, plan B was not an option.

Until recently the world of theater has been much more familiar to me than that of fashion (Figure 5, overleaf). Simon McBurney, the director and founder of UK-based Theatre de Complicité has been a friend for many years and I have witnessed at close hand the very real birthing pains of each new play. The experience of being behind the scenes and in the preparation leading up to a Chalayan show was also one of being in a very tightly choreographed dance where one stumble would mar perfection. Medea Moons explained that the staging of each mechanical garment on the catwalk was not just computer controlled but also choreographed in terms of position and timing.

The constant process of reassessment and then adaptation and readjustment necessary in pulling together a complex production was a fascinating process to watch. Both Chalayan and Mc Burney have the rare ability to solve a dauntingly large number of problems at once. Another similarity between the building of a collection for a fashion



Figure 5. Scene from *The Elephant Vanishes*. Theatre de Complicite 2004

show and the development of a dramatic production is that for both the event and each garment to be successful, the director and all those taking part must be constantly open to entirely new directions of action and last minute changes. This of course can be disastrous if not carefully orchestrated. Both Chalayan and Simon Mc Burney have the ability to move at great speed, indecisiveness is not an option. Neither keep themselves at a distance from those they are directing nor are they above getting their own hands dirty.

As a director Chalayan has also moved with apparent ease in to the world of film and has produced a number of short pieces. His presentation of his *Afterwords* collection in 2000 bore no resemblance to a fashion show, owing far more to experimental theater.

My observation of Chalayan's skill in transforming his vision in to a performance that immediately mesmerizes his audience, reminded me of Mc Burney's ability to momentarily transport his public. The applause that Chalayan's *grande finale* receives is reminiscent of the theatre. The audience's reaction is very different from the typical measured and self-conscious response of a fashion crowd. There is an air of heightened suspense as well as an expectation for entertainment that is not often present for a parade of clothes down a run- way. High fashion exists in a rarefied air of its own and is in itself all about spectacle. The audience is there just as much to be observed, as it is to observe. All this was forgotten as soon as the show- piece gowns in 2011 began to take on a life of their own, an experience akin to watching a

fast motion film of a flower opening. A secret has been revealed and the everyday is no longer ordinary. Chalayan is also a master of the theatrical in the way that he is aware of the need for comic relief. In 2011 this was done in an understated way by setting some of the more exaggerated pieces to space age music of the genre that indicates an alien is about to appear. The mechanical dress in Airborne comes almost directly from the burlesque tradition, transforming itself from a Victorian style trapeze artists dress in to a bizarre beetle like winged contraption (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Mechanical dress Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

Despite my familiarity with the material I had printed for the three dresses, watching the final garments in the finale of Airborne was still a revelation. I had not seen them made up before the show and they had come together in a way I could not have imagined. Two dimensions had become three with all the cleverness of origami. When these dresses became airborne the effect was mesmerizing (Figure 7).

Before our current pessimism in the state of the planet set in, the future and its as yet unveiled technology was often perceived as a magical place where the unimaginable would surely happen. Chalayan's fascination with the future is in no way distracted by technology. For

him, his vision comes first and his craft lies in making the method and its tools irrelevant. A flawless and apparently effortless delivery of a show is part of the spell he casts. The cutting edge aside, Hussein Chalayan suspended belief with his One Hundred and Eleven Spring 2007 Womenswear Collection.



Figure 7. 'Flying' dresses. Autumn/Winter 2007-2008

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