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Clothing Signifiers – A Visual Narrative of Differences and Commonalities Constructing Identities.

Abstract

In today's world differences are omnipresent and enacted in day-to-day situations through our actions and choices. We live amidst them and consume them. Fashion, as one of several choices, enjoys the political position of challenging and maintaining these differences between various human groupings. The dominant groups, in opposition to the subordinate, are always in a position to maintain prevailing identities and positions while subordinate groups are more likely to contest and challenge entrenched positions. Any interaction - whether it is with an individual, or society, culture or material - works to construct and deconstruct the differences in human identities. Whether we seek distinctness or strike commonalities, it is the interaction with the other which helps one to find one's own identity. An artist constructs his/her identity in response to multiple experiences. These experiences retrospectively transform into memories. We are created and constructed through our memories and as they are processed they remake and unmake us. One's identity and its manifestations in art/design become points of contact for the observer to unravel his/her own identity and for interaction with

it from his/her own position. This paper examines how elements such as memories, cultures and identities can be contextualised and materialised through clothing signifiers. While similar contexts become the basis for interaction, differences in contexts facilitate dynamic negotiations between relationships. In line with this idea, my paper discusses my studio work actuated in a multicultural environment. My practice results from the mixing of the familiar with the unfamiliar, the past with the present, the known with the unknown. My work is born out of lived differences examined and expressed through a narrative of identity.

Introduction:

Today the meaning of fashion is constructed through differences and supplemented with continuous changes, layering one over the other. This palimpsest of meaning is embedded in differences and diffusions. Differences are omnipresent and enacted in day-to-day situations through our actions and choices. Fashion, as one of several choices, enjoys the political position of challenging and maintaining these differences between various human groupings. The dominant groups, in opposition to the subordinate, are always in a position to maintain prevailing identities and positions; while subordinate groups are more likely to contest and challenge entrenched positions.

Seidman elaborates on how postmodern styles in art and architecture are seeking visibility. They are marked by 'the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high art and popular art, an eclectic mixing of aesthetic codes, nostalgia for past and local traditions, and a playful and ironic attitude instead of the moral seriousness of the modern aesthetic.... Signs of postmodernity are visible in processes of "de-differentiation" (the breakdown of boundaries between social institutions and cultural spheres.' (Seidman, 1994: 2)

As a practitioner, decorating textile surfaces with embellishments has been an integral part of my work. In the past, embroideries have been widely used for

decoration purposes on garments. This paper looks at how these historically specific embroideries are now materialised to signify memories. Placed in a wider framework my design practice contextualises decentred, multiple identities. Work springs forth from differences transformed into materialities.

Well Being:

Vinken explains that historically Western fashion has been used to bring one's appearance to the foreground whether it is true or disguised. Vinken, further elaborates on the postfashion model and describes that "in the western topology, fashion is the epitome of (false) beautiful appearance, of the empty vanity of the world." (Vinken, 2005: 102). In the postfashion period some international designers are questioning portrayal of the appearance that hides the true self within the wearer. Fashion designers like Rei Kawakubo are challenging these norms by creating the aesthetic of the ugly. "She does not see fashion as subject to a logic of appearance and disguise, but rather in the sign of a fragile identity. Her clothes let the inner shine through, or at least, make it in general possible that something like inwardness can be communicated. Her clothes serve to heighten one's own well-being, and reflect one's own thinking." (Vinken, 2005: 102). My own work has moved from the superficiality of the surface to an invocation of the inner self, expressing a sense of self-acceptance and autonomy in what I design.

Fashion fantasises through its epitomised/embodied creative nature to lure in fashion victims by bringing out actual desires in them which can be the measure of their subjective wellbeing- a concept discussed by Diener, Suh and Eunkook (2000). However as the race for the next fantasy continues and the subsequent satisfaction from each fantasy starts to diminish, so does subjective wellbeing. Griffin (1986: 12) terms these actual desires as faulty and consumer-driven. Such material desires, when satisfied, will be replaced by another set, without actually fulfilling the desire – in this case for aestheticised appearance. He observes that “yet, notoriously, we mistake our own interests. It is depressingly common that when even some of our strongest and most central desires are fulfilled, we are no better, even worse, off. Since the notion we are after is the ordinary notion of ‘well-being’, what must matter for utility will have to be, not persons’ actual desires, but their desires in some way improved ” (Griffin, 1986: 10-11). Hence should fashion be in some way going beyond satisfying the basic desire for an aestheticised appearance and appeal to the deeper desire for an improved inner self? It is the emotions, memories and sensations that I want to evoke through my designs. Vinken’s understanding of the construction of fashion discourse articulated as the division between being and mere appearance is appropriate in this discussion around faulty desires of selves and how it affects personal well- being (Vinken, 2005: 3-5). What Vinken calls Being, I am naming it as Self, and these two terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Self

Merriam – Webster online dictionary defines ‘Self’ as the ‘the union of elements (as body, emotions, thoughts, and sensations) that constitute the individuality and identity of a person’. Searching this definition of ‘Self’ further for my studies, I consider that in creative fields, expression of self finds identity and form intentionally and unintentionally. The more one is aware of the person, of me, the harder is the deliberation to make universal creative connections and the easier to plug into individual associations. One’s imaginative power thrives on memories, histories that make up one’s own past and present. However, a “process of decentering is evident in the social world. Whether we speak of the self or politics Lyotard insists that there is no center, no unifying ground of order, coherence, and purpose. In place of assuming a universal mind or a rational knowing subject, we imagine multiple minds, subjects, and knowledges reflecting different social locations and histories.” (Seidman, 1994: 5)

I consider that if I delete memories from my being, then my self will be fragmented into each moment of living, made and unmade at the same time, all the time. Triggers in the form of stimuli continuously lead to a presentation of our personal memories and experiences in known and unknown contexts. This creates links between the internal and the external physicality of our world. Self cannot be actuated in isolation; it needs an environment filtered through social exchanges. That part of the Self that is actuated in isolation

springs forth from the introspection on how our social encounters affect us. The connections, events, happenings and encounters personal to my Self, inform who I am and will be, today and tomorrow.

I am a nomad moving from one unknown territory to the next until these become clear in conception and understanding, unknown no more. "Gell's notion of a distributed personhood, wherein selfhood is externalised and distributed in space through different material objects" (Gell, 1898 cited in Küchler & Miller, 2005: 22) is relevant for my work. My collection of traditional Indian embroideries speaks of a process, which externalises my selfhood. Experiences of visiting people in Indian villages for the first time; seeing the people's intimate environment and embroideries from the women's wardrobes held strangeness for me. This experience was different from meeting them when they made door to door sales in urban cities which I was familiar with. These embroidered garments were almost worn-out, yet were desirable in the sense of holding a cultural history within them. This cultural experience belongs to the seller and the buyer, the maker and the wearer. While these villagers know the value of their creations, they are also willing to part with them. The exchange of value commercialises the work, however, at the same time, it also grounds both seller and buyer in the history and context of the object. While the seller is giving away her past and the buyer is going to reconstruct it in a different time and space they share a relationship, however fraught with the problematics of identity. In this sense the seller's identity and the buyer's become merged into a united one. It transforms both into a

tension which suggests the power of contact and communication in shaping one's identity. This thread of commonality experienced through an exchange, ties together the cultural, social and identity differences. As Klapp suggests "because we are subject to many of the same conditions of life, a great many of us experience in our persons similar yearnings, tensions, concerns, and discontents, which, regardless of how we apprehend them, seek some form of expression. It is in this sense that our identities can be spoken of as sharing a strong collective component" (Klapp, 1969 cited in Davis, 1992: 16-17).

Embroideries

In the past I have used embellishments grounded in my personal historical specificities as visual and tactile signifiers to aestheticise clothing. Close inspection of the outfit in figure 1, shows how the repertoire of embroidery stitches used by Indian villagers from Gujarat has been interpreted in a Western outfit. Robertson (1992 cited in Barker, 2007: pp. 175) elucidates the concept of glocalization, to theorise 'the global production of the local and the localization of the global'. Here, it is the specificity of local and national signifiers that have been culturally and globally transported into Western fashion. The signifiers used to create the fashioned subject are continuously evolving to represent similarities and differences to others. This outfit from a distance is globally placed but is rooted in particular features that are specific to me.

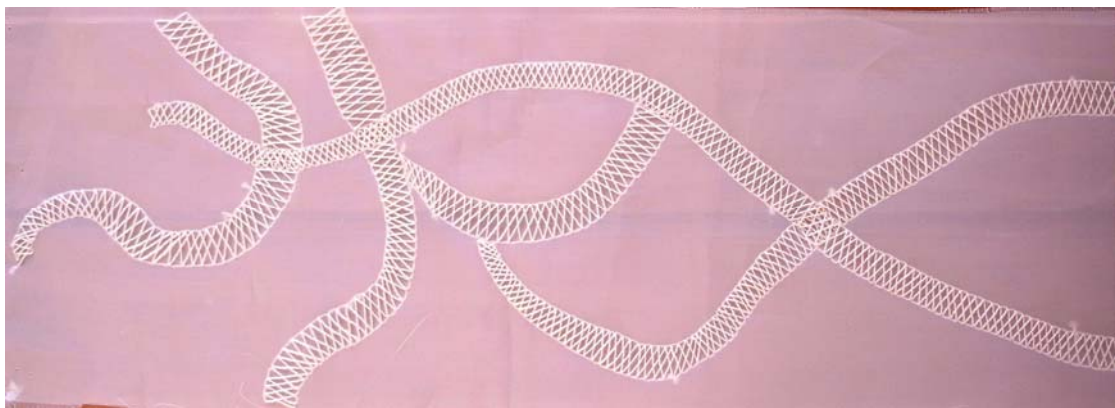


[Figure 1](#)

casual street-wear outfit with sweatshirt printed and embroidered, tartan semi circular skirt with embroidered suspenders (the author).

While clothing elements can construct cultural meanings, these can also constitute fashion when they signify a sufficient level of change as sought after by fashionistas. However, in my practice this quest for significant appreciation by fashionistas has given way to an exploration of identity created through the dialogue between internal and external worlds. This dialogue involves both differences and similarities as both are important in our being.

My studio practice while working towards a Master of Fine Arts degree has once again led me to the art of embroidery. Embroideries have lived with me since childhood and more recently as past memories have surfaced again in my present practice. The embroideries in Fig 2 and 4 were created with herringbone stitch. The linear pattern is worked in a specific way on sheer fabric and forms the boundary of the design on one side of the fabric, and a criss-cross pattern on the other side. The sheer fabric allows the crossed yarn to show through on the surface as its shadow. In an Indian context this type of stitch is termed 'shadow work'. In this piece, the stitches travel between the inward and outward curved lines, expanding and contracting to fit them, reflecting the crossing over of various journeys I have taken so far in my life. Even though each journey has been bordered between the curved lines, the entire piece is not seeking any borders/boundaries. Its trajectories are fluid, feeding into each other and changing with no finality of meaning.



[Figure 2](#)

Journey of life. 116cms x 16.5cms,
synthetic screen mesh

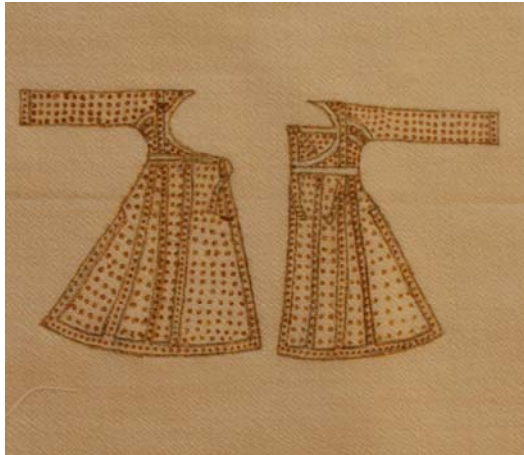
embroidered with off-white Pearle yarn using
herringbone/shadow work. (the author).

Flusser (2003: 25) describes human beings as more restless than other animals and explains “not only are they constantly on the move, but they gather and transmit experience”. The longest curve that passes through all other curves in the embroidered work, evoke the first 27 years of my life lived in India, when I was single. This was the time when I felt most rooted and settled. Since then I have not felt settled, as I have been on the move, like a restless animal.

This piece of embroidery became the sample which informed the creation of other textile works and also my method of working. I work to bring together cultures and to transform individual identities, using national signifiers like Kurtas or Kameez in creative work and blending past memories with the present.

In my embroideries and embellished work - situated within a palimpsest of cultural encounters - the neutral colours have replaced the bright colours. There is now a strangeness I feel in using colour as it has become exotic, the other, for me in my current cultural context, living with mostly European people in New Zealand. What colour brings out; black and white diffuses and softens. The use of neutral colours has provided me with the possibility to explore the form, shape, shadows and the occupied space of the embroideries without being distracted by colour. As my work progressed, the

word 'shadow' started to appear to an increasing extent as well as in my thinking. While shadow needs a physical form – object, person, form – to cast it, I wanted to 'cast' shadows of my past memories and experiences, thereby materialising them.



[Figure 3a](#)



[Figure 3b](#)

Memories of past rooted in today_(work in progress)

90cms x 23cms. beige crepe wool,
burnt out holes to create the pattern with a
soldering iron
(the author).



[Figure 4](#)

Perspective on life, 121cms x 52.5cm,
Off-white silk chiffon,
herringbone stitch with two weights of silver
metallic yarn
(the author).



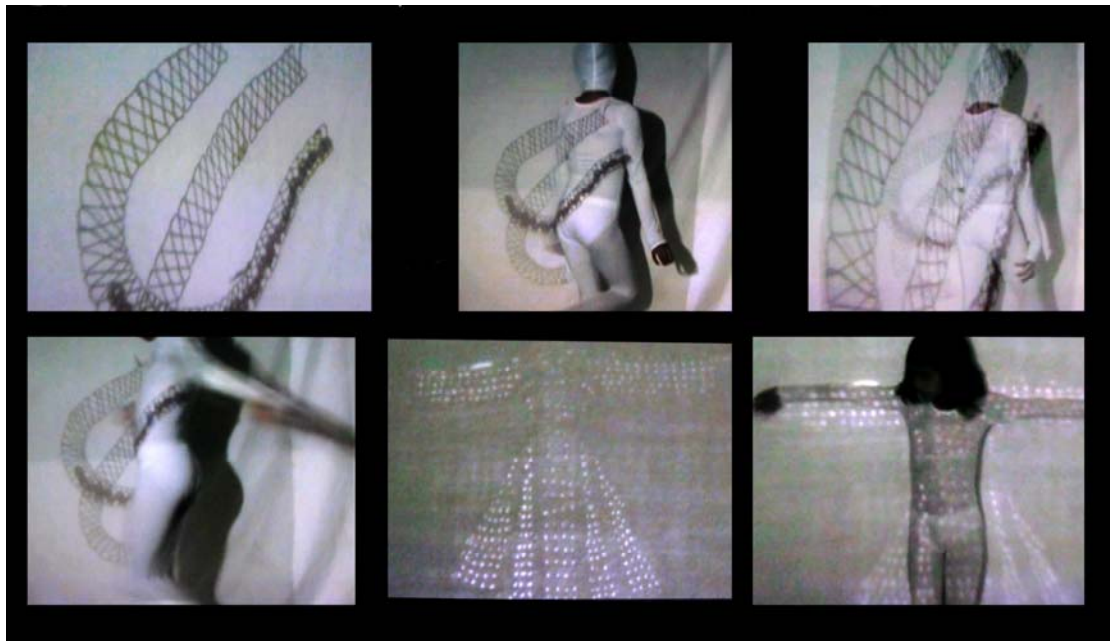
[Figure 5](#)

Interpretation of *Journey of life* pattern,
51cms x 23.5cms, beige crepe wool
burnt out holes to create the pattern with a
soldering iron
(the author).

Shadow play

The textile pieces in fig 3a, 3b and 5 with holes made through the fabric to form patterns, and fig 2 and 4 with embroidery, were mere surfaces but with the capacity to interact with the space surrounding them, with a narrative potential. These miniature embellished pieces were transposed to a huge scale on walls. Their presence was materialised through the play of light

passing through the transparent fabrics and holes created in the fabrics. These were then projected digitally. The narrative of past interacting with present was shaped further as my daughter moved with these projections and as I recorded her movements into digital video captures (Figure 6).



[Figure 6](#)

250cm x 200cm, projections of embroideries with
my daughter interacting with them
(the author).

The metaphoric shadows question the historical status of shadows elaborated by Forgione (1999) as merely being ephemeral, fragile and secondary to the light source. For my work the relative permanency of these captured shadows brought into discussion the essence/endurance of past memories that live in

the subconscious Self, shifting between transient and stable frames of mind. Memories are embedded in associations; they are reminders, awakening our subconscious mind, triggering access to our inner Self. Shadows offer a means to making the past memories of creation more visible for me. The embroideries here are not used to embellish the garment. Instead the garments with their projected embroideries are worn by the performer in a performance which allows for a dialogue between the body of the wearer and the history of the signifiers of garment, embroidery and shadow.

Caroline Broadhead, one amongst many artists working with shadow play, draws my attention, as her work delves into issues such as personal identity, memory of a presence, and individual subjectivities. In her work *Double Dress*, which can be seen at the link <http://www.artfund.org/artwork/9517/double-dresses>, two tulle dresses are suspended in space to cast shadows on the wall. These shadows are outlined with pencil thereby making visible an invisible presence to suggest the experiences that a person may seek to conceal. Broadhead's work provides visibility to issues that one wants to hide as these are very much self-perceived as the other, an alien and unnerving. She also gives visibility to emotions that are deeply embedded in memories, and often outside the realm of consciousness. Theophilus (2001) elucidates that "the body of work Caroline Broadhead has produced over the past ten years has been clearly about finding ways to capture and define those elements of the visual that are least definable. She continues to explore the nature of the human presence,

both in its physicality and in its memory, and treads that very fine line between the breath and its absence.”

Creation of one’s identity through its manifestations in art/design becomes a point of contact for the observer to unravel this identity and for interaction with it from his/her own position. An appreciation for clothing signifiers originates from the intangible design process which involve our past memories and emotions as embedded in our cultures and identities. These go deeper into one’s being than might be imagined by the uninitiated as they bring into existence fashion statements that speaks of innate values and not just of the desire for appearance.



[Figure 7](#)

Jacket over sleeveless vest, 1996, Christa de
Carouge
(Blaser, Müller, 2000: 43)

In the garment above the designer has shown both the lining and the outer shell as external to the lining. It brings to me, as an observer, the conceptual connection between the internal and the external together defining an identity. Here both the internal and external are openly presented to the viewer. This garment has the potential to speak to the observers about its provenance beyond its obvious physical appearance.

Narrative of Identities mixing known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar

For many designers, the fashion process comes in contact with the inner self of the designer and is born out of an intangible resource of personal experiences particular to their cultural bank of memories and emotions. As a designer, I have been working with elements of clothing that I have experienced through my Indian culture. An example is *Payajami* – a kind of trouser made from a bias bag or a tube with fabric walls that stretch with the movement of the body - commonly worn as a component of an Indian ensemble. The seams creating the bias bag appear in different areas of the garment with only partial control over their placement. It brings into play the known fit with the unknown placement of the seams in a garment as shown in

figure 8. The bias bag technique is used to create a dress in the garment below.



[Figure 8](#)

Purple dress made from bias bag,
bias bag seams appear in unanticipated areas of
the dress
(the author).

This technique uses elements of sculpture to create forms for which fabric is the main material. Sometimes it is hard to predict the true form of the sculpture before its completion. It is the mixing of known cultural elements with the unknown that reflects not just in the design process but also in one's

everyday living that finds expression in the identity of these clothing objects, involving both the maker and the wearer. Williams (cited in Wise, 2008: 6) was first to bring the adjective 'ordinary' to describe culture. Wise states that "the processes of culture, which were the inheritance of a tradition and also the testing of that inheritance within the context of one's everyday life, did not just occur with certain peoples or works, but were the basic processes of everyone's everyday lives" (Wise, 2008: 6).

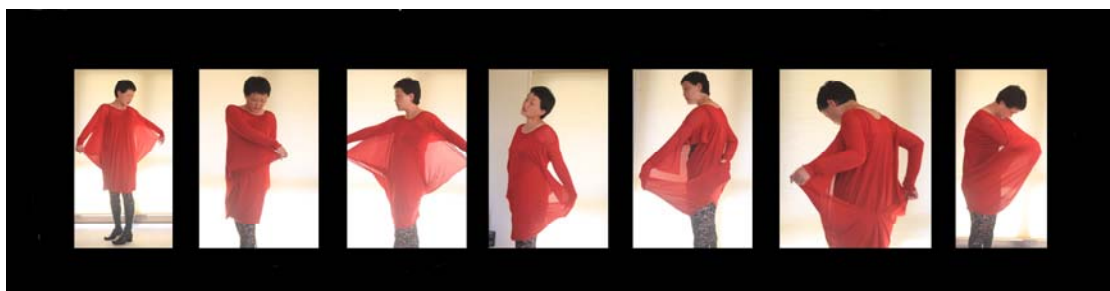
Working with a known body form but also with the unknown sculptural elements of fabric has been explored in the garment below. While the bodice is fitted on the body, the flow of the garment around the abdomen and legs create concealment of actual form within the layers of fabric of the bias bag.



Figure 9

Purple dress, layers of fabric around the skirt area
formed with bias bag
(the author).

Reflecting back in time, I can recollect how my mother would stitch garments for us during summer vacations. She worked straight on the fabric, marking key vertical and horizontal measurements for fit, and her scissors never experienced any doubts concerning its trail. I would watch with amazement, trying to understand the art of making. These experiences are part of who I am today. As a designer I want to start with a clean slate for sculptural clothing objects. However, the acquired knowledge underpinning the making of these objects will always inform the results and most of the time my method of working, taking into account the impulses inherited from my early memories. My garments are made not just to clothe a body, but also to communicate a world of experience materialised through them. Again, the design of the garment in figure 10 has been informed by the process of marking and cutting openings for neck and arms as used by my mother in the past.



[Figure 10](#)

The Red Dress transforms and moves with the
wearer.
(the author).

The design works with a fabric tube that the body passes through, thus creating layers of fabric and movement. Such a garment transforms as the body moves and interacts with it, bringing out the mood of the wearer (as shown in the images below). The garment questions the aesthetics of appearance while it connects with an inner felt beauty. These garments (and the one discussed previously) are 'historical' in the sense that they contain traces of my experiences of the past. While they appear simplistic, the processes used to create them are embedded in a complex mix of differences and similarities between cultures that are felt internally and expressed externally. The garments in figure 10, 11 and 12 create a fluid space that allows the wearer to express themselves.



[Figure 11](#)

Purple Dress transforms and moves with the
wearer.
(the author).



[Figure 12](#)

Charcoal Dress with back and front pouch
transforms and moves with the wearer.

(the author).

In the process of connecting to like-minded designers it is important for me to understand how design is born within their own particular contexts. Yohji Yamamoto's designs often embody human elements that are important to me. Vinken provides a marvellous account of his work. She states "that while Kawakubo projects a negative aesthetic, Yamamoto's clothing seems rather to be based on a poetics of memory that has remained untouched by the

shocks and traumas of the modern period. His work mutely collects and registers the affective traces which make up the individual. What is important is the individualized sum of experiences which are collected in its course. For him, the ideal look is that of 'the vagabonds, the gypsies, the travellers, those who carry their life on their back, everything that they possess, their memories, their treasures, their secrets.'" (Vinken, 2005: 110). It is the individualized sum of experiences which has been represented in my design process and output that brings my work closer to other designers such as Yohji Yamamoto.

Conclusion

Vinken (2005: pp 36) talks about the era of 'postfashion', which has arrived after the completion of the 'hundred-year fashion' era where the designers are now not inventing and reinventing woman, instead they are deconstructing this 'woman'. Such a deconstruction seems also to be relevant to a previously unitary notion of Western fashion. My own work challenges this notion as it deconstructs it through the inclusion of elements from my own non-Western past, elements signifying cultural difference albeit now incorporated into my current hybridised culture. Deviations from the aesthetics of my second culture are born from my cultural experiences of the past, from India. Through my work I am deconstructing a woman who is a narrative of my own being created from the lived differences and commonalities, from the coalition of the known with the unknown, the familiar with the unfamiliar, and the past with the

present. My memories of the past partially construct what I am today, and my current context will create future memories. All these memories together will always be constructing my being in the challenging space of being between two cultures. I understand that my two worlds cannot always be reconciled, nor do I want them to, but their encounters can be innovatively presented through creative attempts. Cornel West (cited by Seidman, 1994: 65) claims that 'a new kind of cultural worker is in the making, associated with a new politics of difference.... The new cultural politics of difference consists of creative responses to the precise circumstances of our present moment.' My studio work will be challenging and be challenged by the multiple positions presented through my circumstances.

Embroideries for me are not mere embellishments. Instead they are strong signifiers of my past and present. They represent memories, and scope to signify presence of different materialities. In my design practice, garments are now used to connect to the inner selfhood, and not just to aestheticize the outside appearance. For me postfashion is an era, where designers are conscious of the new space, where fashion is not just for mere gratification of physical appearances, but for evoking and connecting to the inner self, its cultural values, emotions, memories and experiences. The postfashion era validates the complex design processes through which I want to establish a bond between the garment, body and space, to be felt also by the wearer.

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