For my thesis in textiles I created a collection of sculptural dress pieces that were constructed from fabrics that incorporate text as a design element. My primary focus was centered on the intersection of fashion and popular culture, specifically the confessional culture of western society. The forms of the dress pieces are determined by the concepts of hiding ones true feelings or camouflaging true intent. I examined the juxtaposition of interior emotions with exterior revelations that are deemed socially acceptable. To create the prints I download several confessions from a variety of web sites. I arranged these quotes into a pattern and used a digital printer to print on chiffon and organza.
CONFESSIONS AND THE SENSE OF SELF

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFESSIONS AND THE SENSE OF SELF</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confessional Culture</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress as Confession</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color Format and Form</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Comme des Garçons</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sucker Punch</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I Feel Great</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. All Tied Up in Knots</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Family and Friends</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Momma Love</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Twisted Sister</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Hold’n It In</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. You Need to Say What’s On Your Mind</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Exhibition A</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Exhibition B</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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CONFESSIONS AND THE SENSE OF SELF

Introduction

“The obligation to confess is now relayed through many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us the truth, lodged in our most secret nature” demanding” only to surface….“(Foucault,1978)

This thesis collection is inspired by the tension created in compulsively sharing private emotions and the inherent feelings of vulnerability that can result. In all relationships, social convention dictates that negative or plainly candid thoughts should be avoided. The level of anxiety that is associated with this repression relates to the level of anger, frustration, intimidation, or fear. My thesis collection consisting of eight unique garments, is concerned with expression of the hidden emotion and how the repression of such thoughts may affect the individual.

Confessional Culture

Confessional culture has become increasingly popular in our society as a way for individuals to expunge guilt, share personal tragedy, or express their secret desires (Davis, 1999). Confessional outlets range in public display from nationally televised talk shows, confessional websites to personal communications and intimate journal writing.
The most publicly notable method of confessing is the flamboyant participation by the general public in television talk shows such as Oprah or Dr. Phil in which featured guests can be a part of a dialogue with themes such as cheating husbands, abused wives or absentee fathers with the host serving as confessor. In the case of talk shows there are many reasons why confessors decide to share their intimate feelings in a public forum (Davis, 1999). Many participants of talk shows that were interviewed stated that a motivation for talking in this context, was the hope that one’s experiences might be shared and help others deal with similar issues; a cathartic altruism (Priest, 1997). Online confessional websites such as truemomconfessions.com, confessions.net or bridezilla.com are available for individuals that want to confess in public but want to avoid personal scrutiny. These outlets allow for the same communal interaction as a talk show, and the communication of personal advice, yet without the possibility of public humiliation. Online participation also helps the confessor get a sense of community by fostering a feeling that “you’re not the only one out there” (Davis, 1999). Within the framework of pop- psychology there is the desire for confessors to get in touch with the “inner-self” or to heal psychic wounds by talking ones problems out (Priest, 1997; Davis, 1999).

Women in particular often communicate personal information about themselves to form a sense of community or bonding and as a way to rationalize or accept the feelings that they have (Felski, 1989). A major portion of the online websites that I have researched, the women contributors are seeking affirmation of their thoughts or simply need to vent frustration, anger or feelings of ineffectiveness. These women often cannot
openly communicate their position due to a sensation of censure in their relationships. There is a strong sense of self doubting by many participants which is often echoed by others that have logged on. The communal feelings that exist serve as a support system which helps to reinforce personal convictions or emotions yet is not intrusive or public.

_Dress as Confession_

Identity and dress are so closely tied that they are often indistinguishable. As fashion writer Davis (1999) states, “… dress frames our embodied self, it seems to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity”. Dress and identity can be divided into formal principles, and conversely, the intangible qualities of individuality. Formal representations are obvious; occupations or societal allegiances to groups define dress by usage. The more elusive component in dress is one in which clothing suggests the mood, feeling or emotion that is present in each individual. The manipulation of these volatile elements in dress and the close proximity of the body is what interest me as an artist and designer.

_Process_

Research was gathered from confessional websites, noting running themes such as what type of concerns, complaints or feelings might surface in “blogged” conversations. From this exploration a central aim surfaced and suggested the form of a variety of silhouettes, each created around the same theme, yet expressed in various expressions. Print designs were created using Adobe Illustrator utilizing quotes from these different sources and then printed on fabric using a Mimaki digital fabric printer
with fiber reactive dyes. The digital prints are on sheer fabrics such as silk chiffon or organza. The weave and the weight of the fabric are used to highlight the blurring of the exterior and the interior self by exposing those parts of the body that are usually hidden by clothing. The voyeuristic characteristics of these sheer fabrics is also to draw attention to the sense of intimacy, protection or privacy (or lack there of). The prints are made up of text that is present yet not easily readable, much in the same way that a suppressed emotion such as anger, frustration, or feelings of inadequacy can be detectable yet not easily discernable by an external viewer.

A mixture of aesthetic concerns and symbolic representations help to create the silhouettes and print fabrics. The aesthetic aspects of the collection, such as elements of color, letter font, proportion, and silhouette are meant to reinforce what is being communicated in text. The medium of sheer textiles is essential since the fabric suggests intimacy and vulnerability. This collection is based on similar aesthetic and philosophical considerations that designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Victor and Rolf, Junya Wantanabe and Rei Kawakubo exhibit in their collections. These designers engage in an intellective approach to fashion design, communicating a more conceptual, abstract and artful idea that is not beholden to traditional ideas of clothing.

Clothing has always been pivotal in a socio-psychological sense; defining the individual, relaying information regarding economic status and group affiliations. Clothing and the body are representations of the self since clothing serves as a protective layer both figuratively and literally and can be manipulated to project any number of
identities. The manipulation of style or image is where the artfulness emerges as it is a reflection of deeper and more meaningful ideas.

An example of this artfulness can be seen in the work of Comme des Garçons and her refusal to acknowledge Western ideals of beauty, focusing instead on the notion of non-traditional ideas of attractiveness and what it means to be a woman in contemporary society (see Fig. 1).

*Color, Format and Form*

The elucidation of abstract ideas in dress can often be expressed by how the clothing is worn or how it makes the wearer feel. The form of the dresses in the collection evokes a sense of vulnerability, disconnection, or constraint by manipulating the connection between the fabric and the body underneath. The dresses for *Sucker Punch*, (Fig. 2) and *I Feel Great!* (Fig. 3) are essentially a sack; and therefore a natural refutation of the figure.

The symbolism expressed in the dresses is a tension between personal emotions, much in the same way the dress and the body underneath are disengaged. *You Need to Say What’s On Your Mind! Hold’n It In, Mother Love* and *Twisted Sister* are closer to the figure but are created by the twisting or bunching of fabric. The correct grain of the fabric is ignored so that the fabric hangs awkwardly on the figure. The irregular grain expresses the confusion, vulnerability or indecision that can result in the act of confessing a secret or the suppression of emotion.

*All Tied Up in Knots* (Fig. 4) and *Family and Friends* (Fig. 5) are loose around the body but are constrained by a part of the garment that is meant to look like armor.
Figure 1. Comme des Garçons

Figure 2. Sucker Punch

Figure 3. I Feel Great!
Figure 4. All Tied Up in Knots

Figure 5. Family and Friends
The pieces suggest armor but have obvious weaknesses in how they might protect the wearer. There are slits or openings in the sides that expose the vulnerable parts of the human anatomy suggesting the dichotomy between feelings one may try to hide and emotions that escape. The armor-like components are used on top of the dress to describe suppression. Conversely the act of confession can prove to be hurtful or embarrassing which would trigger a self-protective feeling.

Certain colors and images are thought to have emotional, physical and behavioral values that influence perceptions and disposition (Baurley, 2004). Two different types of color groups were used to influence the perceptions expressed in the communication or suppression of feelings. The first color group made up of *Mother Love* (Fig. 6), *All Tied Up in Knots* (Fig. 4), and *Family and Friends* (Fig. 5) is a group of soft pastels in prints that are meant to look like a floral arrangement.

The text is arranged in floral patterns that are created by hearts, knots or a spray of text. The pastel colors and floral motifs are meant to suggest a saccharine and disingenuous personality or demeanor; a personality that outwardly suggests an earnest attitude but an inward negativity. The text that makes up the flower’s meaning and readability are convoluted by the formation of the motif but on close examination are negative and pessimistic.

The second grouping *Twisted Sister* (Fig. 7), *Hold’n It In* (Fig. 8), *Sucker Punch* (Fig. 2), *You Need to Say What’s on Your Mind* (Fig. 9), and *I Feel Great!* (Fig. 3) displays black motif on a white ground. Black, white and grey are meant to reflect indecision and self doubt resulting in a lack of self confidence. Black becomes grey
Figure 6. Momma Love

Figure 7. Twisted Sister

Figure 8. Hold’n It In
Figure 9. You Need to Say What’s On Your Mind!
through the filter of the white fabric, much in the same way raw emotions are filtered through social expectations and surface in a more subdued level.

The text is laid out in each print to reinforce the type of confession being expressed in each dress. With *Twisted Sister* (Fig. 7) and *Hold’n It In* (Fig. 8) the text font and the layout is meant to suggest a journal script.

Personal journal writing is usually about needing to get the emotions out on paper. The result is a continuous narrative that is generally devoid of grammatical considerations or logical thought process. The text printed on fabric was styled to reflect a journal entry by utilizing a font that looks like script and the construction of the dress are meant to convolute the readability, representing the confusion inherent in the emotions that would inspire a journal entry.

In *Sucker Punch* (Fig. 2), and *I Feel Great* (Fig 3), the text is arranged in two layers, denoting the difference between the interior and exterior dialogue of confessions. *What’s on Your Mind* (Fig. 9) displays quotes of critical or judgmental observations that are displayed backwards to the external viewer and are pointed at the wearer. Text that is easily readable and faces the viewer reads: “You need to say what’s on your mind more. Don’t keep everything inside!”. The quote is in red and reflects the frustration as a result of not feeling comfortable in sharing intimate feelings due to those same judgments.

**Exhibition**

The corresponding MFA exhibition was meant to reinforce the primary ideas that were being expressed in the dress pieces. The walls were painted a medium to dark cool grey to reinforce the sentiment of isolation with a random sampling of the quotes in the
garments displayed on the walls in a lighter grey. Key words were enlarged for added emphasis to help convey the undercurrent emotions of the quote. Each figure except for three at the center was on a circular platform. This achieved two goals: one to allow the viewer to attempt to read all the quotes and appreciate all sides of the garment but also to reinforce a sense of segregation. The three at the center were shrouded by two banners on either side of the oval platform. The banners faced the two entrances to the gallery, one with the opening text and the other with the Foucault quote that opens this text (see Figs. 10 and 11).

**Conclusion**

Clothing and image are used to protect the self in a literal and figurative way and help to define the individual. Clothing becomes a sculptural element on the figure that can help to communicate the often indefinable qualities of that individual. Image can be manipulated to camouflage the true feelings or intentions of an individual. Image and form in this thesis collection is used to explore the tension that exists between the basic human desire to share personal experiences and the fear of judgment. Expressing interior thoughts and the act of confession are encouraged by society as cathartic and beneficial. Confession has become integral to our society, creating a satisfaction in being the voyeur as well as the observed. Within society women often feel the need to belong to a larger group or to be understood. The desire to be understood, and therefore judged, suggests that individuals are seeking a sense of affirmation since they have no meaningful measure of worth (Nussbaum, 1989). There is however a contradiction in the practice of sharing intimate ideas of the self since the confession still needs to be in the acceptable
Figure 10. Exhibition A

Figure 11. Exhibition B
parameters of society. A contradiction develops in confessional culture in which cathartic expression is encouraged but only if it meets socially accepted standards. This contradiction results in suppression which can lead to resentment, anger and frustration. These feelings do not go away and manifest themselves in expressive and artistically inspiring ways.
WORKS CITED


