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Fashion Design Process

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What is most meaningful stage of designing for you and what happens at that moment?

When I can finally move to getting garments on the body. You are 99 per cent sure the garment is going to breathe the life you envisioned, but until it is on the body you built it for; you won't know for certain. You get to make all the refinements that can now become concrete and explore choices that can push your design with great confidence.

Sarah Oliver



What 2D / 3D methods or techniques do you use to explore ideas (e.g., photography, models, drawing/sketching, reading, reflection) and how do these work together?

I use design renderings as a tool for communication with the production team and the costume shop. I do work digitally to make 'roughs,' but I still love the feel of the brush hitting the watercolour paper when I make final renderings. But when I am working out a garment, I almost always do so on a mannequin, as I prefer to drape a garment in 3D. I work more creatively and find I design something that is not limited by what came before when I work in 3D.

What fuels your design ideas?

Anything, and I think that is key. A seed pod on an evening walk. A crochet jumper at the discount store. Seeing an object and reevaluating it for its use and potential.

Who are the practitioners who you feel have influenced your design processes – mentors, teachers, colleagues, designers, and writers?

I teach, and my students keep me on my mental toes, bringing in a fresh perspective of learning, exploring and growing to my daily practice. But one artist who deeply influenced me early in my career and helped fuse my fibre-arts making process with garment making was the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz.

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How do you describe the 'research' that you do as part of your design process?

I tend to become almost like a black hole, sucking in any research or seeking inspiration or having conversations with everyone close by. As a costume designer, a significant amount of my work is supported by in-depth and highly specific research about historical garment artifacts and society. Sometimes you may never 'see' that research in the work, but it underpins and informs almost all my designs.

How do you select or adapt your environment to best suit your modes of designing? (space/ external environment/community/tools/routine)

I make my skin as thin, highly sensitive and receptive to my surroundings as possible, and evaluate everything around me as an element that could be incorporated as a solution to my current design puzzle. I start grouping and collecting elements together that resonate, that feel like a new solution to the design I am working on. I make piles of items that feel related to my current project in my shop, always fitting them together to see if they need to be adjusted or refined. It starts off really messy and large in my physical space and broad in my research routine and then coalesces quite tightly the closer to the finish line I get.

What role does collaboration have in your designing? When you need to work with others, how do you go about the approach and working together?

As a costume designer, I quite often work creatively with directors to help shape the overall design vision. I came from the traditional arts world of fibre arts and fashion design so, in the beginning, this directorial overlay of vision felt at odds with the independent studio artist's mentality I was trained for. All these years later I have come to thrive on solving the creative puzzle presented and the challenge to create within the collaborative vision, in most cases developing something that could have never reached that point if it had lived solely within my personal design aesthetic.



What is the most enjoyable part of designing for you?

It is the 'eureka' moment in the process, especially if I have been wandering around in my creative design maze for a very long time before I think I have solved it. I listen to that internal alarm that says I have solved the problem and can now move forward into fabric. I feel like that euphoric feeling of 'eureka' is what sustains me through what can be a very laborious making process.

Do you have sources of inspiration that you always revisit?

Well, the computer and platforms like Pinterest are amazing wells of information that are so quick and easy to access now – but I use that for mostly surface research or quick visual inspiration. When I want a deeper connection or place to begin, I usually seek out the fabric store to touch textiles. I was trained as a weaver; and the hand and drape of fabric will always inspire me when I am 'stuck' or not sure where to go with a design. The perfect cloth will speak to me and inform my design choices.

Sarah Oliver is Assistant Professor of Costume Technology and Design, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Oliver has designed and built costumes in the US for theatres from the Los Angeles Opera to the New York City Opera. With a professional career in costuming, her first love is textiles and weaving.



If you live outside New Zealand – how do you work with the different cultures that are part of your communities?

You can't sample or lift something that feels exotic. I believe it is about rich, deep and thoughtful research, first and foremost. And then hopefully connecting with someone from the culture or community you are working from to honour and work with sensitivity.