

DOWNHILL/ASCENT: AN EXPLORATION OF CONCEPTUAL FASHION IN SKI APPAREL

Maia Holder-Monk



Figure 1. Maia Holder-Monk, *Downhill Ascent* collection.
Photography: Chris Motion.

MOUNTAIN/CATHEDRAL

"And how many times have the gods listened, the stars aligned, and wonder of wonders, you found yourself standing on the edge of ecstasy with acres of untracked fluffiness just waiting for your unworthy self?"¹

For me, 'the mountain' (denoting all mountains) is a sacred place of joy and reverence. Throughout my life, I have discovered that engaging with this enormity of nature through skiing holds many similarities to sacred and religious practices: the mountain as cathedral; a humbling of oneself to magnitude, power, volatility. It is a form of communion, and an honouring of the beauty and movement in both the earth and my own body.

The more I reflected on my experience, the more parallels I unearthed. Ecstasy and rapture in the whooping and hollering of swift movement, the awe and reverence of something much bigger than oneself, the echoes and interiority of the immersive mountain, the rituals of preparation in dressing.

Downhill Ascent conceives of a ceremonial skiwear. My brief placed emphasis on disregarding the many (often rigid) conventions of ski apparel and has sought to explore imaginative possibilities of what a sacred or religious experience of skiing might look like in dress. I was curious about what could happen if the structures, values and fabrications of ski apparel became the canvas for conceptual design.

Quoting Hussein Chalayan in her theoretical work on conceptual fashion, Hazel Clark explains how "he employed fashion and art as a device for 'framing something that already exists.'" ² *Downhill Ascent* is a collection which has taken both conceptual fashion and ski apparel as devices to frame my spiritual experience of skiing and the mountain.

Clark also defines conceptual fashion through observing how Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo "[t]ogether and apart ... questioned the conventions of fashion."³ In pursuing a career in women's ski apparel design, it was immensely important for me to challenge and deconstruct the many conventions and formulas of this area of design, so I can enter my future work with a freedom of innovation and bold creativity. My desire to create something new and generative in its disruption of convention connected me to conceptual design. Thus, by applying the critical and transgressive approaches of conceptual fashion, I hope to establish a fertile and critical foundation for future work.

THE RUNWAY/THE SLOPES

Contextualising my collection with other designers and practitioners posed some challenges. The relationship between ski culture and the avant garde is, at present, fairly undeveloped. This did, however, make bridging the gap between the two a more exciting and surprising experience.

As we have seen, ski apparel is an area of design with many conventions and a generally formulaic conceptual scaffold. Within a sport context, the order of priorities is different from everyday fashion. Function comes strictly before form, and comfort, range of movement, aerodynamics and weather protection all sit above aesthetics and expression.

When collaborating with Burton and Vogue, Virgil Abloh of Off-White described their project as marrying "high fashion in its tailoring and fit [and] the element of no-fuss and utilitarianism."⁴ He distinguishes the practical and functional aspects of outdoor apparel as their key signifier and trait.

I found that most engagements between ski apparel and high fashion happened through these kinds of collaborations on off-season drops. Moncler's *Moncler Genius* series involves collaborating high fashion designers creating monthly collections which draw from the design identity and history of the brand.⁵ Designers including Pierpaolo Piccioli, Simone Rocha and Craig Green, whose collection "interpret[s] Moncler's high performance based history,"⁶ bring

their high-fashion sensibility to outerwear materials and conventions and, in doing so, approach the avant garde through mere fusion. The stage for these collections, along with others such as Junya Watanabe Man x The North Face,⁷ remains as the runway, bringing outerwear into the fashion sphere. In keeping the mountain and skiing as the intended context, my practice has done the opposite.

While the way apparel is designed for gendered bodies is something I wish to explore and improve in my future work, for this project I decided to focus on challenging the priorities of ski apparel. What might happen when speed and optimal performance are no longer the primary goals?

I believe there is a space in ski apparel for play and joy, for contemplation and ceremony. The spiritual experience of skiing in which I have immersed myself, when placed as a higher intention, will result in a difference in dress.

ELEVATION/HUMILITY

Through my investigation of sacred practices, specifically sacred reading practices,⁸ I came to understand that a thing, place or act, becomes and remains sacred through our treatment of it. Dress plays a significant part in this, as an “active participant in human lives.”⁹ When entering a sacred space, our dress changes to reflect or respect this change of context. We may take off our shoes on entering a marae, or cover our heads on entering a mosque. Ceremonies and rituals are marked further by specifics of dress, in colour, embellishment and style.

Through *Downhill Ascent*, I sought to ask how it might look if we treated dressing for the sacred space of the mountain, and a sacred practice of skiing, in the same way as we do for other spaces and practices. What would a ceremonial skiwear look like?

My approach to finding an answer to this question (not *the* answer, but an answer) through design began with research into the visual tropes and meaningful purposes of religious dress. It was key for me to look deeper into the designs and contexts to see what defined and shaped religious dress. Like the skifield, sacred spaces and places of worship have a unique set of values and intentions for clothing that differ from fashion.

I found that the purposes, and subsequent designs, of religious dress mostly fell into two categories: Humbling and Elevating.

The ‘elevating’ garments were highly embellished and dense with symbolism and narrative imagery. They acted as visual stimuli to prompt pious reflection, communicate morals non-verbally, or functioned as an addition to the beauty of a holy space – beauty as an offering and a way to ascend closer to God. These garments also acted to visibly demonstrate hierarchy, status and power.¹⁰

In deep contrast to the opulence of this ceremonial wear, other religious wear, ranging from monastic garments to ihram – the Islamic dress worn on pilgrimage to Mecca so as to “appear in the holy places in the guise of a beggar”¹¹ – works to bring the wearer closer to the earth in “community, simplicity and humility.”¹² These vestments often feature dark, muted colours or monotonal ensembles, hoods and head coverings, and encourage conformity in their lack of personal identification.

RITUAL/PRACTICE

One of the tasks I set myself in conceiving a ceremonial dress for the mountain was creating a symbology for this context. In traditional religious garments, the highly decorated pieces were often embellished with a language of symbols and references in terms of colour, imagery and materials. If we understand religion as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols,”¹³ then the importance of a distinct visual language is clear:

To begin my conceptual process, I explored the imagery and language I associated with ski culture, the mountain, my own experience and apparel conventions through brainstorming sessions, often using poetic language – the wavy lines cut through the snow by skis, the layers of snow with floral life waiting beneath, eloquent descriptions of fresh snow.

One of the core concepts that underlay this project was the idea of skiing as a ritual. Journeying up, then skiing down, over and over until the day ended, only to be repeated again tomorrow. I drew this repetition of movement in a zigzag, an ascent and descent with no completion. This pattern held not only the simplified shape of mountain peaks and valleys, but also the symbolism of ritual, of sacred practice.

"Look at the zig zag of the blanket. Mountains and valleys, mountains and valleys."¹⁴

I was connected back to a book I loved in my childhood, *Esperanza Rising*. In it, a grandmother teaches her granddaughter how to crochet the zigzag stitch, describing the many mountains and valleys of life. This became the link between my concept and my experience of design process.

Beginning the making and experimenting stage of this project was an immense challenge for me. My personal expectations of perfection – exceeding all my previous achievements – had grown exponentially, so the pressure of choosing the right thing to create, the right tangent to follow, was too intimidating for me to even begin.

When I came to this zigzag pattern, I saw parallels in the way I could view my design practice. There would be many mountains and valleys in my process, not just one mountain to climb and conquer. In an attitude very reflective of a capitalist, individualist societal structure, I had been imagining my design career as a ladder, where I had to keep outdoing myself, fuelled by a constant fear of descent.

Exploring ritual, and indulging in imagination and recollection of my skiing as a sacred practice, I noted how it was neither the journey nor the destination, not the ascent or the descent, which was my purpose. It was the doing again and again, the skiing, the ritual.

Partway through this project, I shifted my experience or understanding of design to this same pattern. Like the crochet zigzag, each stitch builds on the last, not upwards but rather creating a lateral web. Like skiing, it is a practice.

MAKING/MATERIALS

Following my new understanding of my design as a practice, and releasing myself from the stresses of continuous ascent, my process became a lot freer and more hands-on. I moved away from sketching and did most of my ideation on full- and half-size mannequins in drape. Working with my hands and giving myself the liberty to spend time stepped back and squinting at the scraps of fabric I had pieced together was very generative. My previous design process had often been strictly demarcated: design through sketching followed by construction and execution. For this project, the designing went on throughout and inside the making process, continuing right up until the last days of work.

While draping, I worked with both fabric and paper. I found that draping in firm paper allowed me to explore more extreme silhouettes and structures which would distinguish my garments from conventional skiwear. In flat patternmaking, I experimented with chevron lines with inserted flare and volume to create the structural train piece. For the base jackets and pants, I worked with spreading and inserting ease into articulated seams around knees, elbows and back, to both allow for movement and to create the signature ski posture and form I desired to accentuate.

Beyond bringing symbolism and visual languages to the ski field, I also wanted the silhouette, fit and features of the garments to be rooted there. Through research and analysis I found that the 'humbling' kinds of religious dress often worked phenomenologically to incite a certain mood of repentance, reverence and humility.¹⁵ Hoods and head

coverings encourage the wearer to gently bow their head and aid concentration in prayer; long robes connect one firmly to the earth.

I also reflected on my physicality while skiing, especially the muscle memory of slightly bent knees and hunched shoulders, relaxed yet engaged, ready for movement and impact. I emulated this S-bend shape – which occurs naturally when standing in ski boots – in my articulations of base jackets and pants. The tucking of one's chin behind collars and buffs was reflected in a high foam-structured collar and a gold chevron buff, and the security of steady pressure against the collarbones was suggested in feature backpack straps.

In devising the base pieces, my intention was to create garments that were fully wearable and functional for skiing. Though I designed the outer decorative garments to also be appropriate for skiing, I took the creation of these pieces as an opportunity to learn conventional ski apparel techniques. In making a fully waterproof garment, I had to find a way of sealing the seams to prevent water leaking through needle holes. I established a connection with Elco Apparel, who specialise in seam-sealed outdoor apparel. While this added some limitations and requisites to my construction methods, through analysis of a variety of garments borrowed from industry professionals at Product Design and Earth Sea Sky, and discussion with machinists at Elco, I was able to create waterproof garments which were fully seam-sealed.

This project has required me to seek out resources and knowledge from the wider industry and community. Facing challenges in sourcing appropriate waterproof outerwear fabric, I undertook workroom visits to Kathmandu and Cactus Outdoor. Not only did this let me engage with industry professionals, but it also enabled me to create relationships of support and collaboration. The team at Cactus Outdoor offered me access to materials and fastenings from their stock. The 2-layer and 3-layer Goretex I chose gave me options for both lined and unlined garments.

Although my range of choices for fabrics and colourways created some limitations, I feel that these boundaries actually helped to keep the collection contextually accurate and grounded. My use of 'lace' was a crucial example of this. I used a light sport mesh, embellished with a chevron pattern in heat-applied vinyl. When seen on the reverse side, this manipulation gave the impression of lace, a craft used widely for ceremonial garments (such as christening gowns and veils in marriage or mourning rites) due to its precious and narrative-rich character; while also retaining its materiality and identity as outerwear.

Quoting Martin Margiela, Susannah Frankel describes an approach to conceptual fashion which is simply "to take an existing form and to rework it."¹⁶ By utilising the materials and techniques of ski apparel in alternative and narratively referential ways, I have been reworking the form, as Margiela puts it. This is one contributing methodology to my overarching aim of challenging conventions in ski apparel.

ASCEND/DESCEND

I decided to explore the forms of religious/ceremonial dress that I had distinguished in my research, with two distinct ski-wear layers in each outfit. The base pieces – fully waterproof technical outerwear – draw on the 'humbling' side of religious vestments, visually referencing these monotonal garments as well as (explored here through a posture-based silhouette) working to ground the wearer. Worn over the top of these humble bases are the 'elevating' pieces. These garments express and embody the celebratory, opulent and sanctified aspects of religious dress through embellishment, movement and bold forms.

To follow the style of downhill movement of skiing versus snowboarding, I kept asymmetry for the snowboard look. The lace petticoat pieces add softness to the structural outerwear and will create dramatic movement when flowing behind the skier in motion. Over-sized side-release buckles feature throughout the collection, along with silicon-grip elastic, backpack straps and waterproof zips. Alongside the distinctive protective fabrics, these features tie the collection to its outdoor space.

LOOK 1

The 'elevating' garment in this look finds its inspiration in the dalmatic, a type of open-sided tunic worn for liturgy. It features foam structuring, buckle fastenings at the sides, bold gold chevrons at the back hem, and gold sealed zip pockets, which are constructed using heat-activated adhesive, making a stitchless pocket. The collar on this piece mimics the drop and curve of a hood against the upper back, dramatising this shape that appears in most ski apparel, as well as connecting it to the upright collars of ecclesiastical uniforms. On the oversized red hoodie beneath, a cut-off hood suspended by a forehead band adds another layer to this striking side view, and draws on various forms of the wimple (a feature of nuns' monastic habits). A ruffle petticoat skirt is worn between this and the articulated knee pants beneath.

LOOK 2

The snowboarder look is for someone who rides goofy, right foot downhill. Working with this feature, the train – featuring a sculptural chevron hip piece and lace ruffle over a voluminous gold emergency blanket – whips out behind the boarder as she descends the mountain. On the 'elevating' garment, more gold chevrons trim the base of a foam structured panel that falls down the front of the body. These long rectangular shapes hanging from the shoulders also reference ecclesiastical garments such as the dalmatic, stole, cope and chasuble. These pieces treat the body almost as an altar, draping flat, highly embellished offerings or artworks across it. A backpack strap appears again, holding the piece on the shoulders, and revealing the low-hemmed, articulated back jacket, which is lined and features waterproof zip pockets and a stormshield. The red pants, when worn with the oversized red hoodie of Look 1, offer an Eastern monastic aesthetic, which favours bright, rich monotonal ensembles.

LOOK 3

Drawing on the lightness and grace of garments such as wedding dresses and veils, this look's 'elevating' piece hangs tiered lace ruffles from a foam-padded backpack harness. It fastens around the waist and across the chest over the articulated sleeve jacket and lined pants. This piece brings softness and elegant movement to the dark base pieces with their utilitarian function designed for mountain use. A gold chevron face mask shields the chin and nose and completes the look.

PEAKS/VALLEYS

Developing this collection has been a challenging, yet highly rewarding and generative experience. The struggle I experienced at the beginning of the project paralleled my interrogation of the motifs of ascent and descent in my experiences in skiing, and led me to challenge my own ideas of high and low. Ups and downs were flipped on their heads – in skiing, 'down' connotes exhilaration, flow, speed and ecstasy, while 'up' connotes the climb, hard work, dedication, commitment and struggle. This experience has been immensely positive for me and the future harmony of my work and wellbeing.

Through it, I have gained crucial and foundational skills and techniques in ski apparel construction, along with new relationships with industry, which will support me in my next ski apparel collection. This experience has given me both a familiarity and confidence with the materials, and also an urge to further challenge and reinvent them.

A key limitation I faced in this project were the restricted options available to me in the area of materials and fastenings. While I believe that I used these limitations in a positive way to stabilise the connection between the idea and the context, in future it will be important for me to undertake extensive sourcing research and create connections to overseas suppliers.



Figure 2. Maia Holder-Monk, *Downhill Ascent* collection, LOOK 1.
Photography: Chris Motion.



Figure 3. Maia Holder-Monk, *Downhill Ascent* collection, LOOK 2.
Photography: Chris Motion.



Figure 4. Maia Holder-Monk, *Downhill Ascent* collection, LOOK 3.
Photography: Chris Motion.

The elements of phenomenological design that emerged in my research are areas that I wish to pursue further in my next work. The way that dress can shape and enhance the embodied experience of skiing is fascinating to me, and could be applied to my designing regardless of concept or idea.

Completing this collection did not resolve my curiosity over how avant garde qualities might impact outdoor apparel – it only increased it. I believe there is vast space for more exploration of these two design contexts.

Whāia e koe te iti kahurangi; Ki te tūoho koe, me mouna teite
If you are to bow your head, let it be to a lofty mountain.

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Maia Holder-Monk is completing her final year of study for a Bachelor of Design (Fashion) at Otago Polytechnic School of Design, focusing on expanding and renegotiating the conventions of women's ski apparel through conceptual design. Her work has a foundation in feminist phenomenology and aims to enable a fully embodied experience for women in motion.

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