

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION ON CONCEPTUAL FASHION TEXTILES

Andrea Short

Every man is the sum total of his reactions to experience. As your experiences differ and multiply, you become a different man, and hence your perspective changes. This goes on and on. Every reaction is a learning process; every significant experience alters your perspective.

Hunter S Thompson¹



Figure 1. Andrea Short, "Klexos" collection, 2016 (detail). Photographer: Ruby Harris.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses recent work completed during the Honours year of my Bachelor of Design (Fashion). This work sought to analyse and reflect on the way in which designers and artists use lived experiences to inform and develop their work. I was specifically concerned with conceptual textiles in fashion, aiming to develop a collection that embodies and reflects my own lived experiences and memories. Incorporating autoethnography as an aspect of my process, I have incorporated extracts of my personal journal within this writing (*in italics*).

In addition to taking an autoethnographic approach, I have also used a combination of reflective practice methods and studio-based research methods. I created an intuitive framework to develop a process and making diagram, which I used for the development of a conceptual textile collection (Figure 1).

The outcome of this project was a four-outfit collection that embodies the themes and emotions discussed within this paper: My collection "Klexos" explores the innocence and vulnerability that one feels after the death of a parent. The materials and textiles used to express these themes are a combination of silk organza and liquid silicone. During this project, I learned of the difficulty that comes with situating your own lived experiences in the centre of your making.

Memory is something that no one person recalls the same as another.

My personal memories of my father are mine to treasure and reflect upon. The importance of reflection is stronger now than ever, following his sudden passing after years of illness. I have a strong uncertainty about myself and my surroundings, often finding it hard to stay connected to spaces and the experiences happening around me. Most often, autobiographers write about 'epiphanies' – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life.² I wrote parts of my dissertation as an autoethnographic account of my childhood and lived experiences involving place and time, while outlining how these aspects of our lives can create strong design ideas and outcomes. Carolyn Ellis identifies autoethnography as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*).³ Not only will this piece of writing be important to my own healing and understanding of grief and reflection, it will also serve as a shared understanding of humanness and the way experiences shape us as individuals.

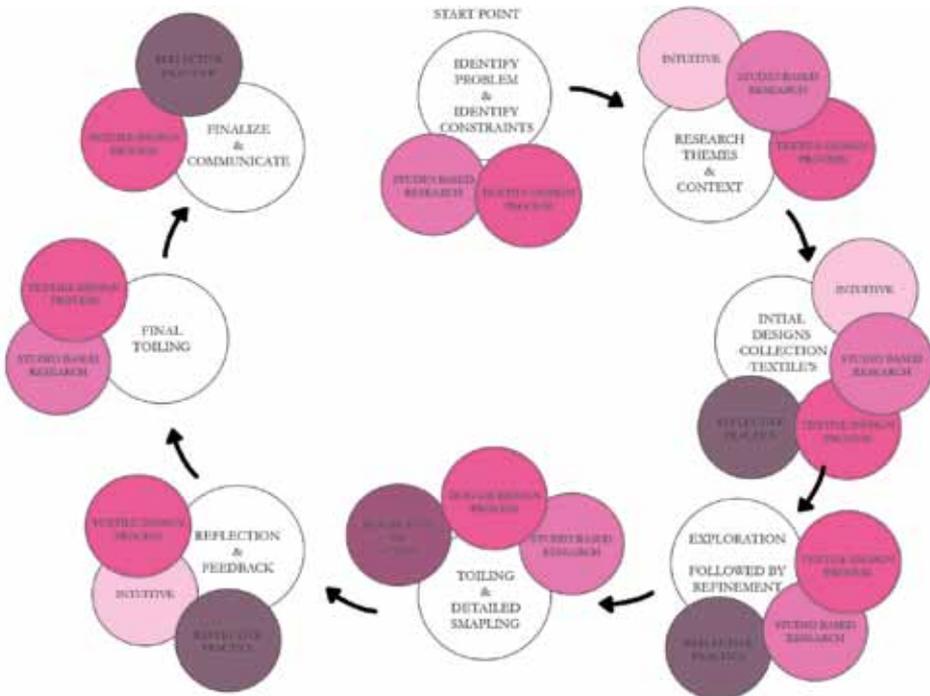


Figure 2. My personal methods and design process diagram, 2016.

Kay Lawrence responds to the question "Is your art therapeutic?" by stating: "I see my art and writing as a way of making sense of my experience, making sense of who I am, constructing my 'self' in fact. It is therapeutic in the sense that making and writing opens up a space for reflection, enabling me to come to terms with loss and cope with the unpredictability of life."⁴ This writing also helps establish a theoretical framework for my making process.

This project became an unpacking of my experiences, and in particular my most recent experience of loss and absence, with an emphasis on memories and nostalgia. My aims and objectives for this project were to establish my design philosophy through a deeper understanding and theorising of my design practice.

NEW REALITIES

On 18 March 2016, my father Richard passed away quietly at home. During this project, I experienced moments that helped me reflect on how I felt; and during a moment of intense emotion, I was able to understand a little bit more about my design outcomes for this project. I began working with materials such as silicone and latex, observing the structures they created on their own and when applied to different surfaces of fabric.

Some things happen for a reason, others not so much. September 21st is my father's birthday. I had not thought too much about it, but as I left my studio in the early hours ready for my bed, my taxi driver took an unusual route home.

We drove past the railway station and the spot where I first found out my father had passed away. I was instantly overwhelmed with the memories from that night, the surreal feeling I experienced as I tried to run away from my new reality.

Through the lived experience of demarcating my inside and outside worlds, I was able to contextualise my design process. My textile work with silicone as a coating or an embellishment had become a protective layer for the real fabric underneath. The transparency shows the surface, but does not allow you to touch and experience the material. The fabrics and silicone blend together to merge these two worlds, creating a sensory experience different from the intended outcome of the original fabric. This could be understood as something that is unnatural, yet the tactile experience of an unpredictable form, an untouchable feeling; I experienced both during my grieving for my dad's passing.

"There is a layer between us now," whether it is physical, spiritual or metaphorical. It is during periods of strong emotion that we learn to create.

The theme of layers was now informing my work as I played with sheer fabric, layered with other types of materials. Inspiration to explore the possibilities of silicone and fabric materials came from researching Andreea Mandrescu and her collection of versatile surfaces or fabrics,⁵ where she explored and pushed the boundaries of craft materials to reinvent and create a new kind of tactile surface. Mandrescu found a unique way of combining silicone and fur to create not only fashion accessories, but also large-scale fabrics and interior pieces.

RESTING PLACE AND MEMORIES

Many people spend a lifetime in the same places, while many others travel to discover something new. It is human nature to seek a home for protection and escape.

I spent most of my teenage years out of home, looking for somewhere I felt I belonged. Nevertheless, I always return to my parents' bed; it has a comfort to it which no other space can provide.

We all have a special place we cherish that holds stories and memories for us as individuals. I found that capturing the spirit and memory of a place was an interesting concept.

I extended the idea of capturing moments in time to incorporate buildings. A building's history is fascinating for me, as I find the most enjoyable and important parts of design involves holding onto the essence of a time. Armed with a bottle of liquid latex and an old paintbrush, I coated the areas of my family home that held a memory of my dad – our home, his glasshouse, his shed. While I was applying the coats, I became aware that everything was exactly how he had left it – every rusted nail, every open draw and every little note. I was struck by the silence of the places where I stood.

There was a loud noise in my head, but it was not something anyone else could hear or understand. On bad days, I can hear it as a low hum and a weight builds on my chest. I feel removed from my surroundings. As though I am outside observing rather than participating.



Figure 3: Liquid latex applied to shed floor:
Photograph: Andrea Short.



Figure 4: Latex casting from shed floor; showing years of accumulated dust and dirt. Photograph: Andrea Short.

Once the latex coats had dried, I peeled them away, removing areas of sawdust and paint at the same time. Kay Lawrence describes how not everything you create needs to be on display: "the value for me was in the process of making them and not in their public exhibition."⁶ I created these latex castings to help me further consider memories of my past and childhood, growing up in these spaces made by my father. These samples are an embodiment of the important places where I created memories with my dad.

I was constantly picking sawdust out of his beard and white paint from his shirts. These samples now carry traces of time and memories.

My father was unwell for most of my life and, being the youngest in my family, I would often find myself alone and having to entertain myself. Being alone in the claim was not always so bad; I had developed a habit from Richard of talking to myself. I would spend hours talking out loud, creating imaginary stories. Even now, I find myself talking aloud when I am designing or when I am feeling alone.

When he first died I found myself talking aloud more often; I thought if I kept mindlessly talking, I could interrupt the thoughts and emotions that were slowly seeping in. After someone dies, it can be hard to clear away the layer of fog that clouds your mind. Even now, months afterwards, I still have moments where nothing seems clear; every day and moment melts into itself.



Figure 5. Andrea Short, "Remnants of Retrospection" collection, 2015 (detail). Photograph: Emily Hlavac Green.

EPIPHANY

The process of designing and making can be an isolating experience. It draws on many different and conflicting emotions and feelings. During periods of this project, I found myself isolated, and questioning my intentions and myself. I felt very trapped and confined by my patternmaking skills, drawings and shapes. The project had become a very meaningful process for self-expression; it had become a memento of my past. My intentions were to create a body of work that encompassed raw emotion and functioned as an outlet for me to share my lived experience and the emotions that come with loss.

Since childhood, daydreaming and creating objects has always been something I have enjoyed; but I never created alone, I always had my father there to bounce ideas off. One of the first things I remember making with him was a rubber-band gun. No sooner was it made, it was hidden away by my mother, but the excitement of turning a block of wood into something different was so intriguing to me. As the years went on, I would bring home new project ideas and we would brainstorm how something might work.

Today was another moment of reflection about how much I truly learnt from him.

I never realised how much my father taught me about design. I believe my interest in using unconventional materials comes from growing up designing and building different projects with him. He always strived for perfection, and I believe that has influenced how I develop and reach my outcomes.

The process of intuitive designing has allowed me fluidity within my work, giving me an organic path; in theory, this creative process allows me freedom to create on a personal level. However, there are also personal restrictions I have placed on myself without realising it. While working on an earlier collection, "Remnants of Retrospection," I became aware that my desire for perfect outcomes was holding me back from fully developing or even resolving my designs. Designing for perfection does not allow a designer to experiment and make mistakes. Again, I became so wrapped up in creating the perfect textile, for the perfect collection, that I upset myself by my shortcomings. I was not allowing myself to work within the intuitive design process for fear of failure and the unknown.



Figure 6. Andrea Short, "Klexos" collection, 2016, cream organza dress. Photograph: Ruby Harris.



Figure 7. Andrea Short, "Klexos" collection, 2016, ruffled top with silicone lace detail.
Photograph: Ruby Harris.

TRANSPARENCY

'Transparent' often refers to a material allowing light to pass through so objects behind can be distinctly seen, while 'translucent' is seen as a significant diffusion or distortion.

High-quality transparent and translucent materials such as silk organza were used to express feelings of vulnerability, and how exposed I felt to those around me after my dad's passing. I want people to be able to look through the outer layer and see what we hide underneath. Transparency and translucency allow the viewer to observe the feeling of vulnerability and the intimacy that both this paper and my collection explore. The colour palette in these pieces is a combination of pastels and muted tones, chosen to evoke the feeling of an innocence that is fading. A strong theme that has carried over from past collections relates to the use of an innocent and youthful aesthetic that heightens the sense of vulnerability. The silhouettes used are simple with minimal shaping, designed to enhance and draw attention to the childlike nature of each garment.

Because of the garments' transparent nature, the seams and internal details can be observed when viewed closely. From a distance, the baby locking and seams give the appearance of different tones and textures. It is common practice when constructing garments to hide and disguise these finishes; my intention is to reveal what holds these delicate garments together:



Figure 8. Andrea Short, "Klexos" collection, 2016, apron dress. Photograph: Ruby Harris.



Figure 9. Andrea Short, "Klexos" collection, 2016, oversized silicone drip jacket. Photograph: Ruby Harris.

SILICONE LACE

I have juxtaposed lightweight, gauzy fabrics with heavy silicone embellishments, affecting the way in which the fabric drapes. Although the ruffled silk crepe top is light and flowing, it is restricted by the heavy burden of the lace textile. It is a mix of beauty and tension. The physical weight of the garment is a manifestation of the emotional stress and weight that bereavement and loss can have on an individual. To develop the lace effect, I prototyped rastering different images into thin plywood using a laser cutter. This created an embellished surface, to which the latex was applied in thin layers. I faced a number of problems when it came to removing the latex once it had dried. Latex is a self-adhesive material, which is hard to pull away from itself. Here I tested applying a variety of fabrics as backings, and noted the contrast between the hard and heavy latex and the sheer silk. I continued my explorations by testing clear silicone, which was aesthetically superior to the latex. I believe the choice to use it as a trim was important, as it is a subtle detail hard to see from afar, but on closer inspection the viewer sees something delicate and intricate.

SILICONE DRIPS

I also tested the effect of dripping the liquid silicone down lengths of fabric. This technique gave me minimal control over the outcome, as the silicone chooses the path of least resistance. This need for organic textiles was part of encouraging myself to embrace imperfection. By using delicate fabric such as the organza and juxtaposing it with the heavy texture of the silicone, a tension was created between the two mediums. The delicate fabric, that lends itself to ripping, becomes integral to the structure of these garments. While areas of the dress are weakened due to stress, this can be seen as a reflection of the burden of grief. The silicone soaks into the fabric and becomes one with the garment. It is impossible to remove the silicone once it has left its mark. Although the fabric has been affected by the silicone, it is not damaged or broken; it now takes on a new life and a new appearance of beauty.

"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to."

CONCLUSION

This paper allowed me to connect with both my personal world and my act of making through the practice of autoethnography. I found I was often overwhelmed with strong emotions, and could easily lose track of what I wanted to achieve. Keeping a reflective journal allowed me to be mindful and notice patterns within my work and my thought process. I believe that using reflective practice when designing allowed me to become aware of different aspects of creating and to understand myself as a designer. I believe that there is no boundary between myself as a person and myself as a designer – this method offers a great opportunity to bring these two aspects together.

My pieces embody a story of their own, a journey that cannot always be replicated. Each textile is a part of an organic process.

The methods discussed in this autoethnographic paper have helped me to rethink what a creative textile design process can look like when it connects with a personal journey. My collection "Klexos" was created from a need to understand and reflect on my personal experiences and my life with and without my father, Richard.

Although he is physically gone, his essence remains within these creative spaces.

Andrea Short graduated Bachelor of Design (Honours) from Otago Polytechnic School of Design, majoring in Fashion, in 2016. This is her second *Scope* article.

- 1 Hunter S Thompson, "A man has to BE something; he has to matter," in *Letters of Note: An Eclectic Collection of Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, comp. S Usher (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 64-7.
- 2 See, for example, Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, "Personal Narrative as a Social Approach to Interpersonal Communication," *Communication Theory*, 2:2 (1992), 165-72; G Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life-writing* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1997).
- 3 C Ellis, TE Adams and AP Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12:1 (2011), 273-90.
- 4 K Lawrence and L Obermeyer, "Voyage: Home is where we Start from," in J Jefferies, *Reinventing Textiles: Gender and Identity* (Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 2001), 71.
- 5 S Pakhchyan, "Crafting 'Inlaid Skin': An Interview with Andreea Mandrescu," *Fashioning Tech*, 3 Oct. 2011, <http://fashioningtech.com/?s=andreea+mandrescu>.
- 6 Lawrence and Obermeyer, "Voyage," 71.
- 7 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2005), 230.