

'Style of Sound - a Collection by Ellie'

Ellie Gerhardy

The earth is undeniably at risk. Through industrialisation and destruction, it has been estimated that humans have approximately 10 years to save the planet before sea levels begin to rise and animals become extinct. The fashion industry has played an enormous role in the degrading of the earth, producing more than 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. My social conscience led me to explore upcycled materials to create this fashion collection.

'style of sound: a collection by ellie' aims to encapsulate the beauty of an upcycled medium to create a contemporary fashion collection which is completely unique. By using the unexpected material of compact discs, I created a body of work encompassing a dress, cape, headpiece, bag, logo and swing tag with iridescent reflecting qualities of light.

I was influenced by inspirational historic fashion designers including Mary Quant and Paco Rabanne who were both extremely popular in the 1960's. They impacted feminism, female expression and social norms. Paco Rabanne, who created glittering, reflective chain-mail designs, specifically dresses, enhances the female silhouette. His designs, usually iridescent and shiny were created from timeless, simplistic shapes and various metals. Rabanne was ground-breaking in the 1960's due to his slinky, 'space age' garments and armour like suits. To me, Paco Rabanne perfectly captures the beginning of the expression of female sexuality. Seemingly introducing the female body to high fashion in a desexualised way, exhibiting the empowerment fashion can give women. Mary Quant had a similar impact on fashion history, encouraging women's role in the industry and creating the famous 'mini skirt' in 1965. Although her 'scandalous' hem lines caused controversy, Quant paved the way for feminism enabling more freedom in fashion.

A pivotal point in my design journey was viewing Rabanne's fashion garments at The Krystyna Campbell-Pretty Fashion Gift Exhibition, NGV, Melbourne. Viewing his vintage archives, specifically the Metal Mini, 1967, enriched my understanding of Rabanne's work, and sensitivity to materials and techniques. I was particularly impressed by his use of a blowtorch on metal work. This inspired me to explore and experiment with methods, materials and technology.

Numerous problems were encountered and solved in the creation and construction of my collection. From the beginning I knew that working with a hard, plastic and toxic material would be difficult yet rewarding. It was extremely problematic and involved much trial and error. After commencing with vinyl then CDs, in order to get the perfect cut, I researched for hours, watching internet videos and experimenting with many techniques; cutting, punching, drilling, boiling, icing, freezing, and separating. Finally, I discovered that laser-cutting was the most effective method and used an Emblaser 2 Laser Cutter. Along with the difficulty of using an 'indestructible' material, flammable and toxic fumes also challenged me, making the layer separation and curing process even more time consuming and difficult. However, complex this process became, I had unstoppable faith in my concept which I continued to perfect.

The cape was one of the most demanding and testing parts of the construction process comprising a total of 663 pieces, 1300 jump rings and over 70 hours of work as every single 'scale' was treated through boiling, separating, cutting, cleaning, drilling, polishing and connecting. The extreme weight of the garment was another obstacle as I needed to design an ergonomic chain with the strength to hold over 170 CDs weight. I overcame this by separating the weight of the cape into thirds taking advantage of the exponential growth.

I made multiple decisions throughout the design process, by changing my medium from vinyl records to CDs and adding accessories to enhance and unify the collection. The refinement stage was crucial as I could envisage both the dress and the cape together and decided to change from a maxi to a mini dress, with inspiration from Rabanne and Quant. This balanced the extremely large and heavy cape with a simplified silhouette for the dress.

The use of technology was challenging for me as I found Adobe Illustrator quite testing to use in the beginning due to my limited experience. However, I found once I began experimenting with different logos, swing tag and business card designs, my ideas started to flow, making the process much easier. I have learnt a great amount about this program over my design journey and now feel confident using it.

The key colours in my collection change from every angle which becomes the essence of the presentation. By using CDs, I am confident I have captured the tremendous beauty of light which falls and cascades off every single laser-cut segment differently. Furthermore, with simplistic silhouettes, I wanted my audience to view and be mesmerised by the colours and lights before they recognised the unlikely material.

Although my garment began as a collection simply made from reclaimed and upcycled material it has transformed into a symbol of my view of a representation of feminism and female sexuality in modern society. The use of harsh, heavy silver as the dress and translucent CDs as the cape was very purposeful. The dress represents armour around the wearer being unforgiving and cold on skin, however is the lightest and most revealing part of the collection. This signifies that no matter how vulnerable, open, empowered or successful a female can be, she can still feel restricted by society. While the cape is translucent and appears lightweight and transparent, it is the heaviest garment in the collection, mirroring the pressures women have suffered over many years, particularly breaking through the 'glass ceiling'.

My personal aesthetic has transformed throughout this collection while the garment has evolved with me. I feel through the texture, weight, material and shapes, my feelings about contemporary society have been translated through my collection.

Rabanne's quote resonates perfectly with me and aligns with how I aspire my collection to be interpreted;

"The woman of tomorrow will be efficacious, seductive and without contest superior to man. It is for this woman that I conceive my designs." - Paco Rabanne

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