

## *Who Made Your Clothes*

### **Bethia Holton**

Child labour in the fashion industry is a prevalent issue that often goes disregarded in today's society, our buying choices influencing the lives of workers around the globe. I have a passion for buying ethically, and through my artwork I reflected on the retail habits and general ignorance of everyday consumers, and how societal norms influence this. I wanted to draw attention to the vulnerability and poor treatment of millions of labourers, particularly children in third-world countries, which due to our fast-paced and materialistic lifestyles often go unnoticed.

Originally inspired by my mother's mission trip to India in the 1990's, and through research I discovered that India has the largest amount of child labour than any other nation, which provided a basis for my work. Arinze Stanley's hyper-realistic style was key in influencing my approach. I found his fine detail in replicating photographs mesmerising, capturing the emotion and struggle of the subject matter perfectly, in a confronting way. Ruth Blackford's series 'Exploitation in the Garment Industry' opened my eyes to issues workers face, and new media such as thread and fabric, and how this can be applied in an intense and provoking way to communicate a message. Finding a balanced composition with the hands and tags was difficult, with it often seeming heavily one-sided. However, through laying out images and playing with scale I was able to resolve this.

Initially, I was unsure about how to represent the fashion industry in my work, as the child and hands alone did not accurately show my intentions. Through extensive media experiments involving elements of fabric and thread, the inclusion of tags with hidden messages seemed appropriate. These were created using photos and articles from various fashion magazines, posing questions and statements to challenge the viewer's thinking. The thread, buttons and fabric symbolise the fashion industry, leading the viewer's mind to thoughts of clothing and sewing.

The hands represent the ever-increasing demands from the western world, making these vulnerable children feel pressured and helpless. The hand over the mouth demonstrates how the children are silenced, unable to express their unfair treatment. The hand on the side of the face implies manipulation of innocent workers, working long, torturous hours as a result of broken promises. The final hand in the top right corner represents the unrealistic threats and demands on these workers. The use of a female child rather than male was intentional as sewing lends itself as a 'woman's job,' especially in the third-world.

The contrast in skin tones creates tension for the viewer as they instantly recognise that the issue is racial. However, the introduction of tags provides another perspective, challenging their involvement. The negative space leaves the child and hands forefront, allowing a focus on social comment. Attempting a photo-like painting was challenging and very time consuming to achieve convincing detail.

My artwork highlights child labour and how this often goes disregarded in today's society. While the viewer may not have an immediate emotional connection to the work, I believe it will evoke thought and challenge their views on their retail habits.