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BIRDS OF PREY

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

BIRDS OF PREY

By Shauna Kirkland, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Susie Ganch
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As a child growing up, I was always in love with the ritual of “dress up”. Whether it was my dolls, various reluctant pets, or myself, it was always an activity I loved. It is not surprising then that adornment has become the medium through which I express myself and bring my fantasy world to life.

Jewelry and accessory have the potential to lead many lives. One particular piece can change entirely by putting it on one body as opposed to another, or by removing it to see it as an object. In fashion, the body is the canvas and the runway becomes the moment of performance. My work uses the body in much the same way where the wearer becomes performer. Through this act, we construct personal forms of armor, or “power suits”, to

face the battlefield of the outside world. In harnessing this act of adorning and what it encompasses, I am consistently challenged as both designer and maker. Creating alter egos, whether subtly flirtatious or overtly sexual, demure or flamboyant, are some of the many ways in which these “power suits” can be concocted. The stories we project about ourselves daily, through how we adorn our naked bodies, become empowering.

Myths versus reality, ascetic versus sensual, and beautiful versus ugly are some of the concepts from which I draw inspiration. These dualities are conceptually expressed in my work through physical combinations of opposing materials. Mixing mediums, through methods such as collaging, beading, needlepointing, knitting, and sewing, are integral in my designs. With alternative materials, such as feathers, textiles, and yarns, I add softness and new scintillating sensations when juxtaposed with the hard, cold qualities of metal. Through combining such materials, I construct pieces that not only challenge one’s notion of what “pretty” is, but also inspire the way one thinks about body adornment. The objects I create become vessels that actualize the dualities I strive to express. In producing hybrids of materials, my need to explore these dichotomies is satisfied.

{CHAPTER 1 Year 1}

“Beauty is not a need but an ecstasy”

-Kahlil Gibran

Three things that year forever changed my perception of beauty- a Boston terrier, a dirty magazine, and an old pair of high-heeled boots. I was seven, I was impressionable, and I was obsessed with all three of these things.

To begin with, one must understand that, as far as dogs go, Tess, our Boston terrier, was hideous. Biff, her mate, and our other Boston terrier, found Tess to be rather beautiful, and so did I. I believe I first learned what love was by watching Biff and Tess frolic on the hill behind our house in West Gloucester, running and snorting and chewing rocks, and then, afterwards, spooning in patches of sunlight on our braided rugs. Dressing up Tess was one of my favorite activities for months. I would pen her, dress her, watch her escape, then find her and subject her to my ministrations all over again. It was after one of her escapes that I found the dirty magazine. I came upon it while searching under my brother Casey's bed for Tess. I had never seen such a thing before, and I was mesmerized. The

glossy cover beckoned to me from beneath the darkness of Casey's bed. It was the centerfold that the magazine opened to, and she was glorious. She was bathed in a halo of soft light, naked, barring lace ruffled socks and red pumps. She gazed innocently back at me, one finger with a long, tapered red nail pointing to the corner of her pouty, gleaming mouth. I went back to my brother's room everyday to see her.

I went in search of both red pumps and red nail polish. My mother, who did not approve of red anything, owned neither. I searched her closets high and low, and that is when I found them- the most gorgeous pair of shoes I had seen up to that point. In retrospect, they were grossly outdated, the one article of her high school wardrobe that my mother had held on to. Brown scuffed suede, two-inch wooden heels, ruched around the ankles, and about three sizes too big for me, but I did not care. I clomped around in those boots until my mother would notice and make me take them off. I felt so lovely in them, like a living doll.

Later that year, my parents sat my brother and me down. They told us that they were separating and we were moving. Tess died shortly after this news, and we buried her on the hill behind our house. While we were packing to move, I heard my mother scream from my brother's room, and I knew she had found the dirty magazine. I never saw my centerfold again. The boots also conveniently disappeared during the move. The next Christmas, in our new house, in my new room, I wrote Santa a letter kindly requesting two things, that my parents would get back together, and for a makeup palette. I got the makeup palette, though it was fake, with little colored squares of plastic and a cheap sponge applicator. I was okay with that because I could pretend. I believe that I have been

pretending in some way or another ever since. These memories have heavily shaped my views on beauty and affected my studio practices.

It is not surprising that adornment has become the medium through which I express and bring to life my world of “make believe”. A piece of jewelry or accessory has the potential to lead many lives. One particular piece can change entirely just by putting it on the body, or taking it off and seeing it as an object. Bringing a material to life, giving it personality and purpose, is incredibly significant. The concepts of myth versus reality, ascetic versus sensual, and beautiful versus ugly are some of the concepts from which I draw inspiration. Exploring these dualities inspires conceptual thought process while driving my design aesthetic. These ideas are expressed in my work through physical combinations of opposing materials. Mixing mediums, through methods such as collaging, beading, needlepointing, knitting, and sewing, has become integral when I design. Alternative materials, such as feathers, rubbers, textiles, and leathers, have the potential to add softness and new sensations when juxtaposed with the hard, cold qualities of metal. Through combining such materials, I construct pieces that not only challenge one’s notion of what “pretty” is, but also inspire the way one thinks about body adornment. I believe that paper and plastic can be as scintillating as jewels simply by care and craftsmanship, and through allowing the materials to drive the design process. To transform things of culturally low status into objects of great importance is imperative to my designs; there is no hierarchy of materials. Therefore, these objects become vessels that actualize the duality I strive to express. In producing hybrids of materials, my need to explore these dichotomies is satisfied.

My need to adorn the body has led me to question why this desire overwhelms my art practice. According to Tilmann Habermas, in his article, “‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’ The Psychology of Jewellery as Beloved Objects”, jewelry acts on many levels. It creates social distinction, it is a communicator, it can be a mnemonic device, it can promote awareness of the self and self esteem, it can be seen as good luck charms; the list is innumerable. Jewelry literally can be “experienced as part of oneself.” (Habermas, 104) According to Marjan Unger’s article, “Temptation”, jewelry also “fulfills the basic human need of ornamentation and of establishing a social position relating to others rather than setting them apart.” (Unger 307) As with jewelry, clothing can also act in grandiose ways. In Robin Givhan’s article, “Am I Dressed Appropriately?” she states, “Personality and attire are inextricably linked...Clothing becomes a way of signifying respect, sorrow, sexual desire and power. As a culture, we try to deny the importance of clothing. We hate the idea that something so superficial could hold any importance. But instinctively we know it does.”

I believe that wearable objects can transcend the function of protecting or covering the body. For instance, adornment can be used to empower the wearer. Throughout history, many women have used their ways of adorning to achieve power. The ancient Egyptian ruler, Hatshepsut, would dress as a man, wearing a royal male headdress, kilt, and a false beard. Trieu Au, known as the Vietnamese Joan of Arc, and Ridiyya Iltutmish, the first female Moslem ruler of Northern India, both opted for male attire as well (Wikipedia). In the United States during the 1980’s, the term “Power Suit” was born, women’s suits were styled to emulate male suits by broadening the shoulders to create a more masculine

silhouette so that woman would be more visible in the work place.



Figure 1

As such, the shoulders became the place on the body that resonated with my concept of empowerment the most. From the down-filled structures worn under women's attire in the 1830's, to the peaked shoulder pads of Thierry Mugler's suits in the 1990's, this is a look that has continually come back in style in some form. Regardless of what may be fashionable at the time for body shapes, the wide shoulder always gives the wearer a strong and dramatic air (Koda, 36-38). *Power Suit* series and *Stories I tell Myself* series focused on this idea, along with visually referencing war regalia and armor, particularly that of Native American and Japanese kimono origin.



Figure 2

Power Suit series also used techniques and materials new to my personal skill set. I incorporated needlepointing, fur, and leather, combining fiber elements with more traditional forms of jewelry making. The *Power Suit* series was comprised of three pieces, in monochromatic white, grey, and black. This series created a gradient, both in color and placement on the body, as each piece ascended higher than the last. The first piece, in white, balanced on both shoulders, white fox fur tufting from curved needlepointed shoulder epaulets, with ermine tails dangling from its closure. The second piece, in grey, shifted to one shoulder, operating like a singular epaulet of needlepoint and fox fur. Double the size of the first piece's epaulets, it encased the side of the wearer's head, while leather fringe draped from the front of the piece. The third piece, in black, completed the series' ascension up the body as a head piece. Fox fur, leather, and arrowheads dangle from the side of the hat, like a militaristic tassel. In this series, the pieces were less representative of an active warrior, having a more regal or royal air to them. The person wearing these pieces was perhaps not active in battle, but still respected as a leader. All three pieces I then wore in a photo shoot in which I alluded to the feel of fashion photography, creating a "look book" for the pieces. This series was the beginning of explorations into what was to become my thesis. I was starting to explore the idea of empowerment through adornment.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

In traditional Japanese male attire, the kamishimo creates “a masculinized breadth that contrasts with the round shouldered effect of the everyday kimono.” (Koda, 48) This silhouette was an inspiration for my pieces, as it gave the wearer more prominence. The Zuni Native American tribe believed that animal powers could be harnessed within an object through likenesses in fetishes, which “came to have tribal significance through their link with animals that protected the tribe... feathers or arrowheads attached to the fetish were felt to empower it.”(Bancroft-Hunt, 136) I used fur, leather, and feathers to infuse my work with the power of the animal spirit, as well as giving the pieces a sensual and luxurious feel. Beads, arrowheads, and painted metals all blend together to create my own personal talismans of power. These materials mixed with knits and needlepointed forms, both traditionally considered base “women’s work” forms of craft, create a material duality. Both of my *Stories I Tell Myself* pieces are monochromatic, one entirely in red and

one entirely in black, colors of blood and death, and representative of assertive and aggressive characters. In *Stories I Tell Myself, Black*, feathers project outward from the shoulders, sandwiched between metal and needlepointed pendants. Some feathers are coated in rubber, giving them an added layer of protection. In *Stories I Tell Myself, Red*, feathers and stainless steel nails project outward, though the neck area of the wearer is safe from the sharp points as they are incased in soft needlepointed forms. The gem form pendants in both pieces are coated in leather, the animal skin serving as armor for the gems. The knit cowl necks on both of my *Stories I Tell Myself* pieces also became a soft armor, covering the vulnerable neck area. All of the elements in each piece were carefully considered, protected or protecting amongst layers of materials. These pieces also fit like armor, being heavy and tightly conformed to the body, which creates a strong physical awareness when worn. These were the first objects I had created that caused this hyper-awareness of the body. They control the wearer's posturing, "The concern, of mapping the distinguishing marks of an individual, is of defining what is one and not another. Objects that affect or control the body's movement interfere with the wearer's autonomy, and therefore with their definition as a person." (Broadhead, 35) These pieces were the first in which I began to question both who my audience was and how they affected the wearer on both a physical and mental level. The objects were starting to be more autobiographical and were becoming outlets for my personal need to transcend and transform. I started creating pieces that were empowering on a personal level, making my own "fetish" objects.



Figure 9

Figure 10

In addition to referencing men's wear, the spectacle of adornment can in itself become empowering. For Marie Antoinette, France's notoriously decadent queen, her empowerment was achieved through the lavish gowns, furs, and bouffant hairstyles, replete with extreme hats. In current day, the late Iris Apfel was a woman who used excess in adornment, as well as pop cultural icons such as Lady Gaga and Daphne Guinness. This is one aspect of empowerment, flamboyance, that also infuses my work. Using these examples as precedents to inform my work, I am looking to answer, can women today be feminine in dress and still achieve power? Furthermore, can sexuality not detract from authority but rather increase it? I believe so.

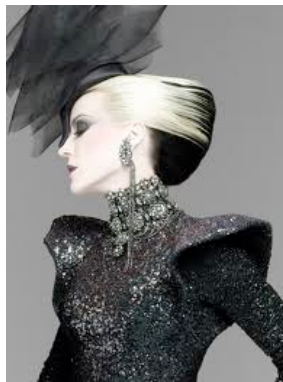


Figure 11



Figure 12

Within this notion of empowerment through adornment, beauty is always an underlying factor. I have always been desperately seeking beauty. The question of whether or not a piece is pretty or ugly always comes to mind while I design and create. I strive to create pieces that not only challenge one's notion of what "pretty" is, but also to inspire the way one thinks about body adornment. In fashion, the body is the canvas and the runway becomes the moment of performance. My work uses the body in much the same way while also referencing the activity of adorning, where the wearer becomes performer. Through this act, we construct personal forms of armor, or "power suits", to face the battlefield of the outside world. Creating alter egos, whether subtly flirtatious or overtly sexual, demure or flamboyant, are some of the many ways in which these "power suits" can be concocted. The stories we project about ourselves daily, through how we adorn our naked bodies, become empowering.

Fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, Gareth Pugh, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Iris van Herpen all challenge the norm of conventional clothing to the point where one questions the wearability of the pieces. Whether the clothes or accessories contort the body, beautify, or sexualize the wearer, all of the designers are pushing boundaries. In the words of Alexander McQueen, "I think there has to be an underlying sexuality. There has to be a perverseness... I think everyone has a deep sexuality, and sometimes it's good to use a little of it...like a masquerade." (Bolton, 80)



Figure 13



Figure 14

In *Stories I Tell Myself*, while documenting the pieces through photos, I examined the inherent sexuality in the pieces. In doing so, I am commenting on the use of sexuality as power. Sexuality infuses television, advertising, and magazines to which we as a society are constantly exposed to. In the photos, I am crouched in heels, in a stance similar to that of a super hero about to pounce.



Figure 15

While wearing the pieces, I focused on positioning my body in a way that felt physically powerful, yet seductive. I stare directly at the camera as well, showing the character as assertive and aware of the viewer's presence. These pieces were the first to take on the role of a costume, allowing me to become something other than myself.

In my hat series, *Female Female*, the hat becomes, as Martha Sliter states, "...a

flag, a shield, a bit of armor, and the badge of femininity.” (Sliter, 1) In the *Female Female* series, the pieces are all monochromatic, in white, gold, and black. The white hat is representative of the bride, or the more loving side of a female, using gothic church architecture, bridal attire, and bridal cake construction as visual references. The gold hat is representative of the nurse or caretaker, and I looked to nurse’s uniforms, the caduceus, and other Greek symbolism, such as the god Hermes, as aesthetic inspiration. The black hat is representative of the more assertive female, and I looked to military and police uniforms, as well as riding habit regalia for inspiration. Within each piece, the gem form is my “badge of femininity”, the symbol of belonging to someone and being loved. Each piece represents a different female “role.” I photographed myself in each piece, focusing each image from the neck up, as in more traditional portraiture. In each image, I wear entirely flesh tone makeup, giving my skin the appearance of a mannequin, which acts as the blank canvas for the display of the hats. All three pieces within the series use veiling as a means of withholding information from the viewer, thereby empowering the wearer. Historically, veiling has been used throughout religions to show a woman’s status, to offer modesty or protection, or to show respect (Wikipedia). I investigate in my *Female Female* series the possibility that veiling is empowering. The veiling of the eyes in *Female Female, Black* and in *Female Female, White* leads one to focus on the mouth, whereas the veiling of the lips in *Female Female, Gold* draws attention to the eyes, fetishizing and sexualizing areas of the face. This act of controlling what one sees is in itself empowering. What is revealed or concealed intrigues the viewer, causing the wearer to remain in control, and therefore empowered.



Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18

In current art, Matthew Barney combines wearable objects in conjunction with performance documented through video or photographs. In Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* video, he uses costuming to the point where his objects of adornment become characters unto themselves. In looking at these works, I started to question how my own work could be activated. Whether my pieces existed alone, or if they are completed through image making, is a question I started investigating. The activation of the objects I create occurs when they are worn, and especially by who wears them, which can drastically change the reading of the pieces. I started believing that, "Objects framed and presented in installation or photographic/video contexts enable new possibilities of visual perception and subsequently interpretation and understanding... objects acquire heightened theatricality and performativity; a powerful strategy giving more artistic control over the interpretive reading of the work." (Derrez, 20) At the close of my first year, I was exploring the language of personal adornment, how it affected both wearer and viewer, and how one could transcend and transform through adornment.



Figure 19

“ ‘Come, let us dress you up like your other sisters’, and she put a wreath of white lilies in her hair, and each flower petal was a half pearl. And the older woman ordered eight big oysters to nip tight onto the princess’s tail to show her high rank. “Ow! That hurts,” said the little mermaid. ‘Yes, beauty has its price,’ the grandmother replied.”

-Hans Christian Anderson, “The Little Mermaid”

{CHAPTER 2 Year 2}

“To be alive-is Power-
Existence- in itself-
Without a further function-
Omnipotence- Enough-

To be alive- and will!
‘Tis able as a God-
The Maker- of Ourselves- be what-
Such being Finitude!”

-Emily Dickinson

When I was a child, watching television was strongly rationed. Every week however, my brother and I would be taken to the local Videosmith where we were each allowed to take turns in choosing and renting movies. My brother's choices were rather consistently different, whereas I wanted to rent the same movies over and over again: *The Last Unicorn*, *The Great Chipmunk Adventure*, and *Swan Lake*. On even more rare occasions, we would be taken to the movie theater. I remember going to see *The Little Mermaid*, and crying at the end when she marries Prince Eric. I think this is the first time I can remember crying not from sadness, but joy. This movie had a profound and lasting impact on my imagination. I wholeheartedly believed in "Once upon a time..." and "They lived happily ever after..." I spent countless hours pretending to be the little mermaid. The tub was the best place, as the water added an element of authenticity to my imaginings. I would swish my legs, holding them together like a fish's tail under the water. I was her reverse, desiring to be a mermaid while Ariel desired to be human. After discovering two discarded shoulder pads from one of my mother's old blazers I used some shoelaces to fashion a makeshift "seashell" brassiere and colored it purple to create my very own mermaid attire. I would not let my mother cut my hair because I wanted it to be long, like all respectable Disney princesses wore their hair. I turned the area under my bed into a grotto, hoarding my own dingle hoppars and snarflats, dangling a sparkling blue scarf from the slats of the bed to simulate an under water feel. Whenever my mother came upon me playing, she would discover me in a "get up", as she called it. Many photos of me as a child show me in full regalia, as a bride, a princess, a ballerina, or any of my other favorites. And so began my obsession with transformation. This carried on through my

high school years, which I fondly refer to as my Madonna period, in which my style changed with the seasons. Punk, riot girl, Goth, and hippie, I tried them all on for size. During this phase, I worshipped the likes of Ani Difranco, Joni Mitchell, Walt Whitman, and Frida Kahlo. Kahlo sparked my interest in self-portraiture; to quote her, “I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best.” (Kettenmann, 18) And so, I often sat in my room, alone, painting myself nude, dancing around violently to Ani, and smearing my eyeliner that seemed to grow darker and thicker as my high school years progressed. I wanted to be crazy, different, in on the most secret of secrets to life, but I was not really at all. I was just another teenage girl grasping for attention.



Figure 20

The first year at graduate school, my processes and work progressed linearly, each decision informing the next. From adornment as power or weaponry, to adornment as a means of transformation, my research into the many ways that adornment could function affected my work going into my second year. I realized at this point that my love of ornamenting the body could be boiled down into one basic childhood activity- playing “dress up”. I have, throughout my life, been playing some form of dress up- to be

something different, to tell myself stories and believe them; to pretend, has always been a part of my life. Entering into my second year, I began where my creative process has always started for me since childhood, at the root of my obsession, and I started to tell stories to myself again.

Fiction opens up realms impossible in our world, and good fiction makes these impossibilities believable. When immersed in a fictional story, we not only can believe the unbelievable, but we *want* to. I believe that art and fiction correlate and inform one another in my work, for “art is... a reality beyond now. An imaginative reality that we need. The reality of life is the reality of imagination.” (Winterson, 148) This combination of fantasy and reality lead me to start creating costumes for my alter personas. The Victorian era of fiction became especially intriguing, as there is a particular pattern to the Gothic hero’s characterization that my alter egos related to. There is always the protagonist, often isolated. Then there is a villain, the epitome of evil, usually a result of his or her own fall from grace. The wanderer, found in many Gothic tales, is the epitome of isolation as he or she wanders the earth in perpetual exile, usually a form of divine punishment. From the Gothic novel genre emerged the Female Gothic, started by the works of authors such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte Bronte. These novels started the introduction of feminine societal and sexual desires into Gothic texts. Because of this, women writers of the time were finally given the opportunity to address the suppression of female sexuality as well as challenge the gender hierarchy and values of a male-dominated culture. Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* both addressed these issues in a way that had not been done prior. The Brontes’ fiction explores woman’s domestic

entrapment and subjection to patriarchal authority as well, as the attempts to subvert and escape such restrictions (Wikipedia). Research into the gothic female's role aided in both aesthetic decision-making and informed how my alter egos were grounded in history. I wanted my characters' costumes to feel both modern and arcane as the characters are grounded in the past, the present, and the future. The darkness and romanticism of the Victorian gothic aesthetic, known for its general overabundance and decoration on top of decoration, resonated highly within my work and the way I consider every surface of my pieces.



Figure 21



Figure 22

Transformation through adornment is an action as old as time. “Humans, more than any other creatures on earth, are concerned with transforming things, and from early childhood they do so in a way that is different from any other animals” (Dissanayake, 176). Clothing our naked bodies is the most relevant of these actions and unlike what any other creatures do. Ever since Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, we have covered ourselves. How one does so relates to how they want to be perceived, both as an individual, and as how they can relate to society as a whole. We want to feel like an individual that fits in.

“What is worn is a source of constant fascination and curiosity, demonstrating the continual two-way process of expression by one person and the impression it makes upon others.” (Broadhead, 25) Expressing and impressing, whether we realize it or not, is constantly affecting our daily decisions in how we adorn ourselves.

In my first semester of my second year, I started combining my love of fiction and storytelling with my love of adornment, “To enable your own fantasies and deviant logics and to escape and transform parts of yourself you don’t like.” (Wallace, 196-197) Lady Gaga, musician and pop-culture icon, said it best, “I want people to walk around delusional about how great they can be- and then to fight for it so hard everyday that the lie becomes the truth.” (Good Reads) I wanted my lies to become truths. I started to construct characters based on personal alter egos, creating them in minute detail in my sketchbook through mapping and drawing, to flesh out these characters so that my designs for them would be believable. This became a series titled *Birds of Prey*, resulting in three separate ensembles, as well as correlating imagery and video. Returning again to the idea of dichotomy, these characters were constructed of opposing elements- masculine and feminine, hard and soft, good and evil, the virgin and the harlot. I looked to how costuming in films such as *The Cook the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, *Barry Linden*, *Snow White and The Huntsmen*, and *Sucker Punch*, would transform the actors into very believable characters.



Figure 23

Additionally, I looked to how superheroes such as Catwoman, Batman, and Superman rely on their costumes to disguise and conceal their actual identity from the public. This act of transformation through costuming is not a new concept, yet essential to the believability of the characters, “Not all disguise via dress is deception: in the theater, players deliberately dress to fit a role, choosing costume that helps the audience identify the age, social class, sex, or occupation of the character being portrayed...the dress is intended to transform the actor temporarily into the stage character and obliterate for the moment the real-life identity of the person playing the part.” (Roach/Eicher, 112)

I desired to blur the line between my real self and my alter egos, as they essentially both came from me- “I see no conflict between reality and imagination. They are not in fact separate. Our real lives hold within them our royal lives; the inspiration to be more than we are, to find new solutions, to live beyond the moment.” (Winterson, 142-143) I started thinking about creating not just one element of the look, but all of the accessories for these self-portrait pieces I was creating. *Loving You Is Like Loving the Dead* consisted of earrings, a cape, a headpiece, a ring, shoe clips, and talons. In creating all the elements for this character’s adornment, I was controlling her appearance and also controlling how viewers would perceive her. A sad, mournful character, she is a representation of an

engaged widow, swathed entirely in black, which is at first a seemingly unbelievable possibility. This act of clothing oneself entirely in black was reminiscent of the Victorian gothic era, a time where death was heavily respected, and people went into a period of mourning after the death of family members or loved ones. Mourning behavior during this time in England had developed into a strict set of rules. For women, the customs involved wearing concealing black clothing, as well as veils of black crepe. Caps and bonnets, usually in black or other dark colors, went with these ensembles. There was also mourning jewelry, often made of jet and hair of the deceased. Widows were expected to wear special clothes to indicate that they were in mourning for up to four years after the death, although a widow could wear such attire for the rest of her life. To change the attire earlier was considered disrespectful and, if the widow was still young or attractive, suggestive of promiscuity (Swenson, 95-103). The widow of this era influenced both my designing of this costume as well as informing the traits of the alter egos.



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26

Figure 27

The iconography of the engagement ring became a repeating symbol within the accessories for *Loving You Is Like Loving the Dead* as well, “the wedding ring is still a piece of jewelry that performs at the intersection of personal aspirations and beliefs and the demands and expectations of society.” (Broadhead, 30) The gem form continually appears in my work because of its symbolism of love, belonging, or wealth. In this piece, gems encrust gems, creating an overabundance of fake wealth or love. Other ornaments include variations of bow forms, and lace, and a draping cape of sumptuous fox tails- femininity is overtly exaggerated. Yet this is combined with oversized fringed epaulets that harkens to those worn in the military, and an oversized collar, reminiscent of the evil queen in Snow White. Oversized vinyl wrapped rings embellish and trim each element, offering the piece a fetish quality as well, which seems to be asking if this character is trapped by her own adornments. However, the collar is sheathed in knit, while the epaulets are draped in long

strands of sparkling yarn, again harkening back to traditional women's forms of craft. This character teeters on the brink of being a slave to her femininity and embracing it. In the Comme Des Garcons 2012 Spring/Summer collection, Rei Kawakubo, head designer and founder of the label, created a show where the models were barely visible at times, where the garments seemed to engulf them. However, the "women did not seem like victims of defilement- they were victims to their clothes, surrendering to their femininity." (Fury) My *Loving You Is Like Loving the Dead* costume functioned similarly, where the accessories burden the body.



Figure 28

The second piece, a costume for the more evil side of my alter ego, was titled *When I Called Her Evil She Just Laughed*, also brought to mind the idea of the body as burdened. She dons a cape, a hat that also functions as a mask, and a corset-like belt. Like Jacob Marley in *The Christmas Carol*, she wears the "chains" of her sins, although she seems to wear them with pride. This piece, entirely white, takes on a more sinister quality. She is a representation of the Killer Bride, similar to the character of Beatrix Kiddo, or The Bride, in the *Kill Bill* Series by Quentin Terentino.



Figure 29

The “gems” of this piece are fox and marten skulls, representative of the spoils of her many “battles”. Foxes are traditionally the “villain” in folklore, where martens are traditionally depicted as the “hero”, symbols that fit these alter egos, as they have elements of both good and evil. These skulls are coated in rubber and encased in tulle and metal cages, which become the settings for these grotesque “gems”. The combination of real and fake is again present in this piece. Braids of synthetic hair edge the needlepoint of the collar and epaulets, and the same hair creates both fringe on the epaulets and the cape on the back of the piece. Hair again lends a fetish quality to this piece, as well as relating to Victorian mourning jewelry.



Figure 30



Figure 31

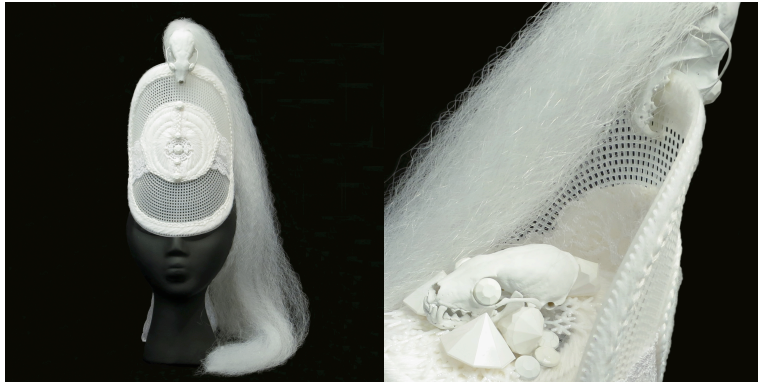


Figure 32

Figure 33

The third and final accessory ensemble created was titled *For Which She's Dressed*. This character rises like a phoenix from the ashes of the other two characters, as she is full of pride and confidence, acknowledging both her good and evil sides. She is the first to wear both white and black at the same time. This alter ego is the militant showgirl, whose ultimate role is that of both performing and leading the other alter egos. This role of performer was the one thread of commonality throughout all three pieces and also the inspiration for my final video, addressed later. Whether performing in public or private, our daily “costumes” allow us to “perform” for the audience of the world. Looking at showgirl costumes from the 1920s, as well as military uniforms of this era, I combined elements of both to create an asymmetrical epaulet and fox fur stole combination, a fox fur and leather muff, and a hat. The skulls incorporated in these pieces clench painted plastic gems in their teeth. The muff serves many functions- protecting, warming, and covering the hands. The hat creates a halo-like affect on the head, giving her the appearance of innocence, while the lace covered skull in its center argues otherwise. The three alter egos, though heavily adorned and burdened by their garb, are all free to perform as separate

beings from me, their creator. The Comme des Garçons collection showed dualities of both entrapping and freeing, as “Kawakubo explored the idea of women being engulfed by these symbolic garments, but they were also loaded with protection. After all, a woman swathed...from head to foot is untouchable, both in the sense that her body cannot be accessed and in the sense that nothing can be permitted to defile the creamy material.” (Fury) My costumes for my alter egos, though cumbersome on the body, enabled me to perform as my alter egos, transcending and liberating my every day identity for my *Birds of Prey* series.



Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36

It was at the completion of *Loving You Is Like Loving The Dead* that I began photographing myself in the pieces, and actually embodying the alter egos when I was wearing the accessories. These photographs then morphed into the idea of creating false realities or worlds for these pieces to exist within. Created entirely in Photoshop, each character had its own world to exist within. The result were images titled *Who's the Fairest?*, *I Shall Kill Them And Eat Them With Salt*, and *Great Show And Splendor*. In *Who's The Fairest?*, animal friends flank the *Loving You is Like Loving The Dead* character. While she stares longingly into a mirror, perched on her vanity, a unicorn prances in the distance and large crystals emerge from the soil around her. In the second image, *I Shall Kill Them And Eat Them With Salt*, the character wearing *When I Called Her Evil She Just Laughed*, is sitting on an ivory throne, laughing. Dead animals, a vulture, and skulls surround her, as if in offering, while crystals emerge from the floor around her. Her marble hall appears to be both an interior and exterior space, as the night sky is the ceiling holding her crystal chandelier. In *Great Show and Splendor*, the character stands on

her own personal stage, animals with and without guns surround her in protection. Flags of victory adorn the stage's curtains, and daylight emerges through the birch trees behind her stage, glistening off her crystal structures that proudly emerge from the ground. She stands erect, embracing the birth of the new day, as though in salute. Reality and fiction collide in these images, creating something similar to a drawing in a fairy tale book, where disbelief can be momentarily suspended as the viewer falls into the space. The images become a place for the objects and alter egos to come to life for the viewer.



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39

Her Footlight Parade, a video, is the climax in which these three pieces take the stage one final time in a display of fantastical reality. All of the alter egos borrow inspiration from people who perform, whether it is the bride or widow appearing in appropriate attire, or the showgirl dancing on stage, all are performing. This video is the culmination of the ultimate fantasy for these alter egos- to perform in their own personal musical or music video.

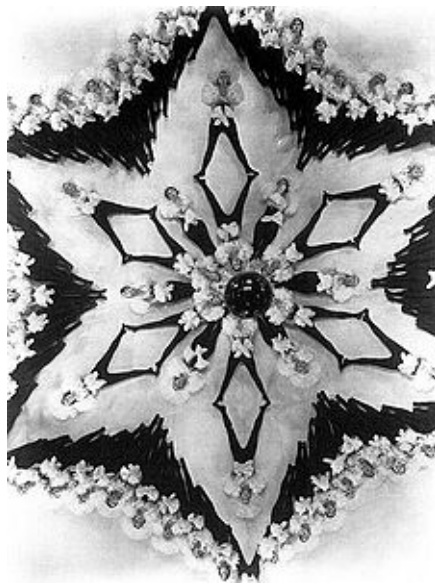


Figure 40

In the film *Dancer in the Dark*, by Lars von Trier, Bjork's character, Selma, imagines her daily life morphing into a musical spectacular- whether it is the drone of the machinery at work or the swishing of rain morphing into musical numbers, it is her form of escapism. In Busby Berkeley choreography, the bodies of multiple women create kaleidoscope imagery. In editing myself to be repeated, I achieve the same effect of having multiples, though they are repeats of the same character, creating a larger than life fantasy of performing with myself. The video *Dancing on Whirling Stages* acts in the same way, becoming the escape

for my alter egos to perform and live out the fantasy of a Busby Berkeley dream. Each character plays out their own version of a dance or movement. When all three characters were spliced together in post-production, the effect achieved was all at once maniacal, sad, and funny. The dichotomies inherent to the costumes became very prevalent once the pieces were seen in motion and in character. Through video, each character was able to come alive in a schizophrenic way, exposing the many dueling layers of each persona.

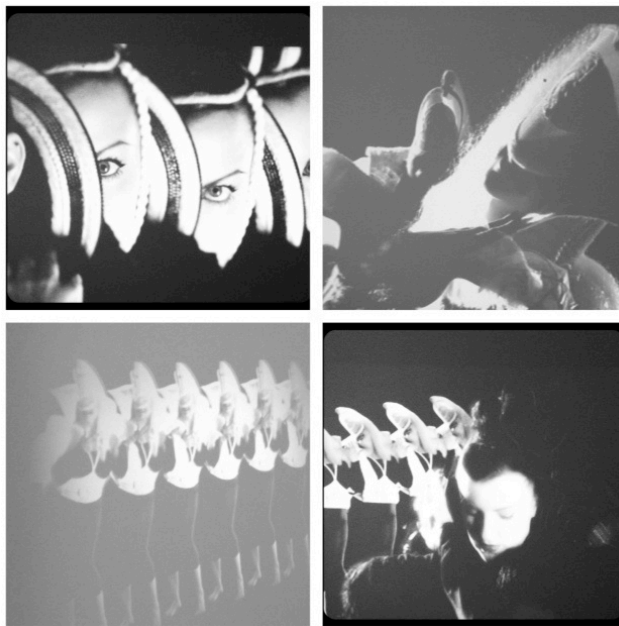


Figure 41

I cannot remember the first time *Cinderella* was read to me, or exactly when I wore my own first pair of high-heeled shoes; however, such things have had a profound impact on me as a maker. The memory of these moments, though vague and perhaps warped with the passage of time, still seeps into my daily life. Part of my mind has always been not entirely present here in this realm, but somewhere distant, in the clouds, seeking out the portals to my own alternate worlds. Clark Kent transformed himself into Superman in phone booths, trying to save the world from evildoers. Perhaps my cause is not nearly so

noble, for through my art I am essentially trying to save myself. But I hope that somewhere, this resonates with another dreamer, with their head in the clouds, and I can cause them to look up for a moment and our worlds can collide, if only for a moment.

“Man- let me offer you a definition- is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting buoys and trail signs of stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right. Even in his last moments, it’s said, in the split second of a fatal fall- or when he’s about to drown- he sees passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.”

-Graham Swift, *Waterland*

And so I’ll begin, again. “Once upon a time...”

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VITA

As a child growing up, Shauna Kirkland was always in love with the ritual of “dress up”. Whether it was her dolls, various reluctant pets, or herself, it was always an activity she found exciting. It is not surprising then that adornment has become the medium through which she expresses herself and brings her fantasy world to life. Born in Kingston, New York, on May 1st, 1984, Shauna Kirkland is currently living in Richmond, VA and will be graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University with a Master of Fine Arts.

While attending Virginia Commonwealth University, she was awarded two Graduate Teaching Assistantship scholarships and a Graduate Thesis Scholarship. During her time at Virginia Commonwealth University, she has shown at Liloveve Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, in the *Art of Ornament* show. Her work was also juried into the Virginia Commonwealth University booth at the American Craft Council in Baltimore, Maryland, and has been a part of two Radical Jewelry Makeover shows in Santa Fe, New

Mexico and Boone, North Carolina. She was also selected to be in a three person juried exhibition titled *On/Off* as well as a five person juried exhibition titled *Alternate Worlds*, both at the FAB Gallery in Richmond, Virginia. As a Niche Awards student winner in the Wearable Fibers Category, her work was shown in Philadelphia at the Buyers Market American Craft wholesale tradeshow. Her work was additionally selected to be in three Society of North American Goldsmith's student shows, *Metamorphosis* and *Fusion*, during their 2012 conference in Scottsdale, AZ and in their exhibition, *Beyond Borders*, at their 2013 conference in Toronto, Canada.

Prior to attending Virginia Commonwealth University, she was employed by Marc Jacobs, where she won a design competition and had her work featured and sold at the flagship Book Marc store in New York, NY. During her employment there she was also commissioned by various clients to create bespoke jewelry.

She completed her undergraduate degree at Rhode Island School of Design, where she received the Mildred Lord Scholarship, the F. Parlette Memorial Scholarship, and a Rhode Island School Of Design Scholarship. She was part of various exhibitions while attending Rhode Island School of Design, including All That Glitters, a Jewelry Benefit Auction at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, a Regional BFA Exhibition in Boston, MA, a Senior Invitational Exhibition, and a Jewelry and Metalsmithing Senior show, both at Rhode Island School of Design galleries. She was a teacher's assistant during her time there, as well as Seung Hea Lee's production assistant. Additionally, she was employed by AAI Foster Grant during the summer after her junior year at Rhode

Island School of Design. There she designed costume jewelry for various companies such as Wal-mart, Pacific Sun, and Chico's.