

Article

On the Integration of Artistry and Narrativity in Contemporary Avant-garde Womenswear Design

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Abstract: Contemporary avant-garde womenswear joins experimental form with references to identity, memory, and social experience. However, visual novelty does not by itself establish narrativity. This paper examines how artistic decisions generate narrative possibilities through garment construction, bodily interaction, and photographic presentation. A qualitative comparative study connects fashion and narrative scholarship with three historical precedents and four contemporary photographs presented by Haochen Song. The analysis distinguishes visible design features from contextual evidence and interpretation. It identifies three mechanisms of integration: reconfiguring the relation between body and silhouette, making alteration legible through recognizable components, and staging encounters through gesture and presentation. Contemporary examples show how conspicuous stitching, contrasting garment vocabularies, draped volume, and photographic light distribute meaning differently between clothing and image. They also demonstrate the need to distinguish thematic association from implied or enacted transformation. The paper proposes a design framework linking thematic tension, material operation, embodied encounter, and interpretive openness. Artistry and narrativity become integrated when formal choices give a viewer grounds to connect a recognizable reference with its alteration, while allowing the wearer to participate in the production of meaning.

Keywords: avant-garde womenswear; artistry; narrativity; fashion design; embodied practice; material transformation

1. Introduction

A garment can attract attention through proportion, surface, or construction without telling a story. It can also illustrate a story while leaving the conventions of clothing largely unchanged. The integration of artistry and narrativity requires a closer relationship: the formal organization of a garment must participate in the meaning that its presentation invites. In avant-garde womenswear, this relationship is especially visible when clothing unsettles familiar expectations of the body, transforms recognizable objects, or changes as it is worn and viewed.

The relationship between fashion and art provides a basis for examining such work without assigning every experimental garment the status of an autonomous artwork [1]. Clothing operates through material, bodily, commercial, and representational conditions at once. Its artistry may lie in the organization of folds, the displacement of an expected seam, or the tension between a recognizable garment type and an unfamiliar silhouette. These decisions become narratively productive when they suggest a change of state, a conflict, or a relation between an implied past and a possible future.

Narrativity is used here to mean the capacity to invite an interpretation organized around change and experience. It need not take the form of a complete verbal plot. Work on narrative across media supports examining how different media offer different storytelling possibilities [2]. A dress cannot simply be treated as a novel made of fabric: it may present several features simultaneously, conceal others until the wearer turns, or

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acquire meaning through an event. The analysis must therefore distinguish thematic symbolism from more developed narrative organization.

This paper asks how artistic decisions become narrative mechanisms in avant-garde womenswear and how those mechanisms can inform contemporary design. It develops an interpretive framework through three influential precedents: Rei Kawakubo's *Body Meets Dress-Dress Meets Body*, Alexander McQueen's *No. 13*, and Hussein Chalayan's *Afterwords*. It then examines four contemporary fashion photographs presented by Haochen Song, also known as Jerry Song. The comparison connects the historical precedents to current design questions without treating the late-1990s and 2000 collections as recent work.

The argument is that integration depends on making a thematic tension perceptible through a design operation. Changing a silhouette can disturb a familiar body image; retaining recognizable clothing fragments can imply a material past; and staging a transformation can turn construction into an event. These mechanisms offer a more precise basis for analysis than equating ornament with artistry or treating every evocative image as a narrative.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Artistry as a Relationship among Form Material and Body*

The scholarship assembled in *Fashion and Art* places fashion in relation to artistic practice, visual culture, and performance [1]. This perspective makes it possible to examine artistry as an organization of relationships rather than a checklist of luxurious materials or decorative techniques. An asymmetric volume, for example, matters because it changes the balance among garment, body, and surrounding space. Technical complexity alone does not determine artistic coherence; a simple material operation may be more consequential when it sustains a clear formal question.

Entwistle's account of dress as embodied practice emphasizes that clothing is socially situated and experienced through bodies [3]. This challenges an analysis restricted to a garment's frontal image. A design may look liberating while restricting movement, or appear visually unstable while remaining comfortable to wear. Smelik's new-materialist account extends this relationship to the interaction of bodies, fabrics, garments, and technologies [4]. Her research on Iris van Herpen further shows how digital techniques, new materials, and detailed craft can operate together [5]. These approaches locate artistry in the organization of material relationships. For an image-based study, they direct attention to visible folds, joins, and bodily positioning, while reserving tactile experience for other forms of evidence.

2.2. *Narrativity Beyond a Collection Theme*

A collection title, cultural motif, and narrative are related but distinct. A motif identifies something that can be recognized; a theme establishes a field of meaning; narrative organization connects states, actions, or experiences. Drawing on the possibility of narrative across different media [2], this paper proposes three levels of narrative potential in clothing: association, implied transformation, and enacted transformation. These levels are analytical distinctions developed for the study, not a universal hierarchy of artistic quality.

Research on wearable interaction also connects narrative design with users, situations, objects, and culturally mediated meaning [6]. Although its technological examples differ from the clothing examined here, it suggests that narrativity can arise through an encounter rather than reside in an isolated motif. Cassar's study of redesigning an identifiable clothing archive offers a related material perspective: traces of use acquire significance through handling and reinterpretation [7]. Such object histories differ from the merely inferred past of a visually fragmented garment.

At the first level, a garment evokes an idea through a sign such as a familiar textile or silhouette. At the second, material differences or structural traces suggest that something has been altered, displaced, or recombined. At the third, a witnessed action

makes change explicit. An open-ended silhouette may be artistically stronger than a literal performance; the distinction concerns how narrative information becomes available, not which design deserves greater recognition.

2.3. Avant-Garde Fashion and the Politics of Presentation

Evans's study of experimental fashion situates runway spectacle and fashion imagery in relation to modernity and cultural anxiety [8]. Its relevance lies in showing that the staged fashion event can carry meanings beyond the display of finished merchandise. The implication for this paper is that clothing, presentation, and photography must be analyzed together while retaining their differences. A dramatic photograph may create tension through lighting or pose that is not built into the garment itself.

Gill's research on deconstruction relates unfinished and reassembled clothing to the exposure of construction and fashion's engagement with its own history [9]. Geczy and Karaminas connect this practice to unstable distinctions between inside and outside, body and clothing, and old and new [10]. These accounts explain why a visible seam or displaced component can carry conceptual weight: it preserves a convention while making its alteration perceptible. They do not make every collage garment a narrative or every unusual silhouette avant-garde.

Martin Margiela is also important to this discussion because his work shows how deconstruction can become more than a visual style. Exposed seams, unfinished edges, displaced garment parts, and reused materials often make the construction process visible rather than hiding it. What makes this especially relevant to narrativity is that the viewer can still recognize what the garment was expected to be, while also seeing how that expectation has been interrupted or changed. In this way, the garment can suggest a previous condition and a new condition at the same time. Margiela's approach is especially useful for contemporary designers because it shows that narrative does not always need to come from an obvious story. Sometimes the evidence of alteration, reconstruction, or incompleteness is enough to create a sense of history and transformation.

The present study uses avant-garde as an operational description of work that questions established relations among garment type, body image, material function, or presentation. It does not use the term as a synonym for expensive, futuristic, or difficult to wear. Womenswear is treated as a design and presentation category rather than an assertion that all women share one body type or aesthetic preference. Jansen's decolonial critique also cautions against universalizing a geographically specific fashion system [11]. The selected precedents therefore provide analytical contrasts rather than an exhaustive genealogy, and the contemporary images are examined for particular experimental operations rather than assigned a uniform avant-garde status.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative Comparative Design

The study uses purposive comparison to examine how artistic operations support different degrees of narrativity. Three documented precedents contrast spatial distortion, live surface transformation, and conversion between domestic object and garment. Museum records establish the identities and relevant presentation details of these works [12,13,14,15]. The contemporary corpus comprises four photographs in the FASHION DESIGN section of Haochen Song's homepage: a gray tailored jacket with image patches; a pink studio composition containing an orange-and-striped hybrid garment; a white draped ensemble with wide trousers in a rooftop scene; and a dark textured garment under colored lighting. Figures 1 and 2 reproduce these photographs with their original framing.

The photographs were selected for differences in visible construction and presentation. Two foreground seams, components, and familiar garment codes; two foreground bodily gesture, volume, and lighting. The analytical unit is the relation among a visible operation, its context, and the interpretation it permits. The corpus supports

explanatory comparison, not estimates of how frequently a mechanism occurs across contemporary womenswear.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The procedure draws on the distinction among compositional interpretation, contextual analysis, and audience research in visual methodology [16]. The analysis proceeded through description, contextualization, and comparison. First, each work was described in terms of visible silhouette, recognizable garment elements, surface contrast, and presentation. Second, documented context was separated from interpretation: a museum's account of a production event or a designer's stated theme was not treated as evidence of audience response. Third, the cases were compared for the relationship between artistic operation, temporal implication, and bodily involvement. Table 1 summarizes the questions used in the readings.

Table 1. Dimensions Used in the Comparative Analysis.

Dimension	Analytical question	Relevant evidence
Formal organization	What expectation of shape or garment type is changed?	Proportion, asymmetry, repeated elements, silhouette
Material organization	What differences or traces make change perceptible?	Contrasting surfaces, joins, retained recognizable components
Temporal organization	Is change implied or directly enacted?	Multiple views, documented actions, before-and-after states
Embodied encounter	How do pose, gesture, and use organize the garment?	Draped contours, bodily positioning, documented actions
Interpretive framing	Which meaning is documented and which is proposed?	Museum accounts, photographic settings, alternative readings

An interpretation was retained when it could be linked to a described feature or documented action. Alternative explanations were considered where a reading depended heavily on photographic styling or thematic language. No wearer interviews, audience measurements, or physical material tests were conducted. Claims about comfort, environmental performance, emotional impact, and designer intention are consequently distinguished from the visual and documentary evidence.

Because the contemporary works were designed by the author, personal knowledge of the design process is used only when it helps clarify a documented construction or conceptual decision. These reflections are identified separately from visual interpretation so that the designer's intended meaning is not treated as the only possible reading of the work.

4. Results and Case Analysis

4.1. Reconfiguring the Body through Silhouette

Kawakubo's spring/summer 1997 *Body Meets Dress-Dress Meets Body* placed asymmetrical padded volumes within stretch garments, including gingham designs. The Metropolitan Museum of Art interprets the collection through unstable boundaries between body and clothing [12]. Its importance here is the displacement of an expected bodily contour. The eye recognizes a clothed figure yet encounters volumes that do not simply follow conventional shaping at the bust, waist, and hip.

This creates a tension between familiarity and estrangement. The garment does not provide an explicit beginning and ending, but it invites the viewer to revise an initial understanding of the figure. Narrativity operates as a potential transformation in perception: a seemingly familiar body becomes difficult to separate from the constructed volume surrounding it. Such a reading depends on the interaction of garment and viewing body, not on the assumption that unusual padding contains a predetermined story. This reading suggests that spatial ambiguity can generate narrative possibility while remaining resistant to a single plot.

4.2. Turning Surface Production into an Event

In McQueen's No. 13, spring/summer 1999, Shalom Harlow stood on a rotating platform while two industrial robots applied black and yellow paint to a white dress. The museum record identifies the dress as cotton muslin with a synthetic-tulle underskirt and relates the finale to Rebecca Horn's work [13]. Here the transition from an unmarked to a painted surface was part of the presentation itself.

The narrative mechanism is more explicit than in the Kawakubo example. The audience could witness a sequence in which a garment acquired marks through interaction among a body, machines, and time. The finished surface retained evidence of the event, although a static photograph could not reproduce its duration. An interpretation centered on authorship or human-machine relations is thus grounded in the production arrangement. It remains an interpretation, rather than proof that every spectator understood the event in that way. Artistry and narrativity converge because surface-making becomes the action through which meaning is produced.

4.3. Transforming Function and the Meaning of Home

Chalayan's autumn/winter 2000 *Afterwords* transformed elements of a domestic setting into wearable objects. The Design Museum connects the collection with displacement, while a British Fashion Council record identifies its Table Dress [14,15]. The design operation crosses a boundary between furniture and clothing: something associated with a stable interior becomes something that can accompany a moving person.

This conversion supplies both an observable action and a contextual frame. Domestic objects imply location and settlement; wearing them introduces portability. The narrative reading follows from that change in relation rather than from decoration applied to a conventional dress. Compared with McQueen's surface event, the artistic intervention concerns function and category. Compared with Kawakubo's bodily ambiguity, it offers a clearer temporal transition. The comparison suggests that the form of narrativity should be identified through what a design changes: appearance, material state, practical function, or the viewer's understanding of a body.

4.4. Recombination and Staged Encounters in Contemporary Womenswear

The gray jacket in Figure 1a retains the recognizable organization of tailored clothing: lapels, a breast pocket, lower pockets, and a front fastening. Image patches on the sleeves interrupt that organization, and conspicuous pale stitching frames their edges. The garment brings a relatively continuous tailored surface into contact with separately legible visual fragments. Its artistry lies in how those interruptions are located and bounded, rather than in the presence of printed imagery alone.



Figure 1. Selected Fashion Images Presented by Haochen Song. (A) Gray Tailored Jacket with Image Patches and Conspicuous Stitching. (B) Pink Studio Composition Including an Orange-And-Striped Hybrid Garment at Left.

This operation has an affinity with Gill's account of construction becoming visible in deconstructive fashion [9]. The jacket permits a reading of alteration because the patch boundaries preserve the distinction between an existing garment convention and an added visual layer. The visible magazine-derived imagery also introduces a different field of associations from the jacket's tailoring. These relationships can support a narrative of appropriation or recontextualization, but that interpretation does not establish a particular maker's intention. The photograph records the arrangement, not the sequence in which it was made or the previous use of its components.

This relationship also connects the jacket to a broader deconstructive design language associated with designers such as Martin Margiela. The similarity is not based on copying a particular garment, but on the idea of allowing construction and alteration to remain visible. The traditional tailored jacket is still recognizable, while the added imagery, exposed stitching, and patch boundaries interrupt its expected surface. For my own design approach, this kind of contrast is important because I am interested in keeping part of the original clothing language visible while introducing something that changes how the piece is read.

The left-hand garment in Figure 1b juxtaposes an orange graphic upper section, pronounced shoulder ties, and striped fabric. This places the familiarity of a printed casual top alongside a contrasting textile vocabulary. The adjoining black top, pale loose trousers, and sneakers belong to the studio composition's broader styling context. The analytical focus is the orange-and-striped combination: its components remain differentiated, allowing the viewer to read both their separate associations and their new relation. This is a plausible instance of implied recombination. Without a documented before-and-after process, it is not evidence of a particular upcycling procedure.

The white ensemble in Figure 2a works primarily through volume and gesture. A broad draped outer layer extends around the upper body, while wide trousers continue the downward fall of the silhouette. A raised arm and the connection between the two figures create an arch that redirects attention across the garments. The drapery visually responds to the body's position, making the relationship among fold, arm, and surrounding space more consequential than a frontal outline alone. The rooftop setting places the ensemble within an interpersonal scene rather than an isolated product display.

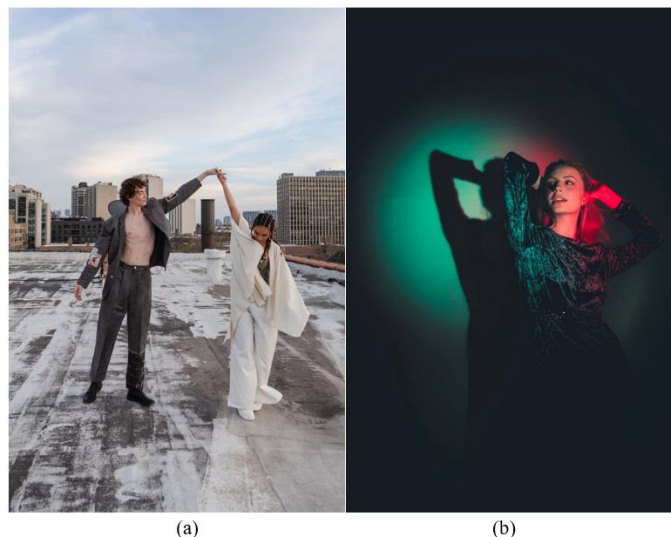


Figure 2. Selected Fashion Images Presented by Haochen Song. (A) White Draped Ensemble with Wide Trousers in a Rooftop Composition. (B) Dark Textured Garment under Colored Lighting with a Pronounced Cast Shadow.

The pose suggests an action, such as turning or dancing, whose preceding and subsequent moments remain outside the frame. That suggestion is the photograph's narrative affordance. It does not demonstrate the garment's motion over time or its

comfort in use. The design contribution is visible in the draped contour; the staging contribution lies in the raised arms, paired bodies, and setting. Separating these contributions helps explain how artistry and narrativity can reinforce each other without assigning all meaning to the garment.

Figure 2(b) provides a useful contrast. The dark garment has long sleeves and a visibly textured surface, while raised arms, colored illumination, and a cast shadow organize the image. Much of its drama comes from photographic treatment. The illuminated figure and displaced shadow can invite associations of doubling, concealment, or self-presentation, but the frame contains little evidence of material transformation. Its strongest narrative potential is atmospheric and suggestive. The photograph therefore marks a boundary: an evocative fashion image need not establish a narrative mechanism in garment construction.

Across the four images, integration occurs at different sites. Patch boundaries and contrasting components locate meaning in the garment's organization. Drapery and gesture distribute it between clothing and the posed body. Colored light and shadow locate more of the interpretive work in the image. These distinctions provide a more useful design account than treating the photographs as illustrations of a single predetermined story.

4.5. Comparative Synthesis

The cases identify three mechanisms: spatial reconfiguration of the body, legible alteration of material or function, and sequential revelation through an encounter. Table 2 compares how those mechanisms operate. They are not mutually exclusive. A garment can reorganize bodily space while also retaining traces of reconstruction, and a performance can reveal both surface change and bodily constraint.

Table 2. Comparison of Artistic Operations and Narrative Mechanisms.

Case	Principal artistic operation	Narrative mechanism	Interpretive boundary
Kawakubo, SS1997	Displaced padded volume	Revision of a familiar body image	Spatial ambiguity does not establish a fixed plot
McQueen, SS1999	Painting a dress during presentation	Witnessed change of surface	A finished image cannot reproduce the event's duration
Chalayan, AW2000	Conversion of domestic objects	Functional transition from home to portability	Documented displacement framing does not determine every response
Song, selected homepage images	Visible patching, component contrast, drapery, and staging	Implied alteration and suggested bodily action	A staged image does not verify process or response

Across these selected cases, a common condition is the availability of a recognizable reference. Padding changes an expected contour; painting changes an initially unmarked surface; conversion changes an object's function; and reconstruction rearranges familiar garment elements. Artistic intervention becomes narratively legible when a viewer can perceive both the reference and its alteration. When the reference disappears entirely, the work may remain visually compelling, but the particular transformation becomes harder to infer.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Thematic Statement to Design Operation

The analysis suggests a practical sequence for integrating artistry and narrativity: define a thematic tension, identify a material or structural operation, organize the embodied encounter, and assess what remains open to interpretation. These are connected

design decisions rather than independent stylistic additions. A theme such as displacement becomes more consequential when clothing changes an object's relation to location or portability. A theme of material memory becomes more legible when traces of an earlier garment vocabulary remain perceptible. Cassar's recent work treats aging and fragmentation as active conditions of creative practice [17]. This suggests a productive sequence in which available material can help generate the design question, rather than serve only as a surface for a prewritten story.

The central question is whether the theme survives the removal of explanatory text. This does not mean that a garment must communicate every intended idea without context. Instead, it asks whether its structure gives the viewer grounds for the proposed interpretation. If an account of reconstruction depends entirely on a promotional paragraph while the clothing reveals no relevant differences or traces, the narrative is located mainly in the text. The garment and statement may still function together, but their respective contributions should be acknowledged.

5.2. Artistry as Selective Control

Integration does not require maximal complexity. Too many competing motifs can weaken the relation between a central tension and its formal expression. The patched jacket concentrates its intervention at visible sleeve boundaries, while the white ensemble establishes its main relationship through draped volume and a posed gesture. In both cases, selective organization matters more than the number of techniques or references present.

This idea is also important when considering minimalism in fashion. Narrative fashion does not always need to be visually complicated or filled with symbols. A minimal garment can still suggest change, tension, memory, or identity through one carefully controlled decision. A displaced seam, an unfinished edge, an unexpected proportion, or a single interruption in an otherwise clean surface can become more noticeable because there are fewer competing elements around it. In this sense, narrative density does not require visual density. Minimalism can actually make the narrative operation clearer by giving greater importance to each design decision.

This also creates an important balance between minimalism and avant-garde fashion. Avant-garde design is sometimes associated with extreme volume, unusual materials, or visual complexity, but experimentation can also come through restraint. A garment can question the body, construction, or conventional dress through a very small intervention. What matters is not how much has been added to the design, but whether the intervention changes the viewer's understanding of what the garment is expected to be.

This observation also limits claims that narrative makes clothing artistically superior. A garment can sustain an effective composition without implying a story, and an explicit story can be aesthetically literal. The aim is not to maximize narrative content but to make the relationship between concept and formal decision intelligible. Productive ambiguity allows several plausible readings to develop from the same evidence; it does not mean that any explanation can be imposed without reference to the work.

5.3. The Wearer as Participant in Meaning

An embodied perspective requires attention to the wearer as more than a support for a visual statement [3]. Turning, fastening, carrying, adjusting, and restyling can change what a garment reveals and how it is used. These actions offer possibilities for narrative agency because the wearer participates in the sequence of encounters. A design that depends entirely on a prescribed runway pose may lose some of its intended effect in everyday use, while another may acquire new meanings through repeated wear.

Iris van Herpen provides a useful contemporary example of how this relationship between garment, body, and movement can develop further. Her work often combines digital technologies, unconventional materials, handcraft, and sculptural construction in ways that change how the body is perceived in motion. What interests me about this approach is that the narrative does not necessarily depend on a literal storyline. Movement itself can reveal different shapes, shadows, layers, and relationships between

the body and the garment. This creates a form of narrativity that develops through experience rather than through a fixed image or obvious symbolic message.

Her work also shows how technology does not need to replace craftsmanship. Instead, digital processes and hand construction can work together to create forms that would be difficult to achieve through either method alone. For contemporary avant-garde womenswear, this combination expands the possibilities of artistry while keeping the body at the center of the design.

For womenswear, claims of empowerment therefore require more than an assertive pose or unconventional shape. They concern the person's ability to move, choose, and negotiate visibility. Khamisani's study of garments for multiple lives and users incorporates redesigned prototypes and wearer trials [18]. An analogous study of narrativity could examine how fitting, fastening, and restyling change the meanings participants assign to clothing. Here, the photographed poses identify possibilities for inquiry rather than measured psychological outcomes.

5.4. Material Memory and Responsible Interpretation

Reconstruction can make a material past imaginable, but visible fragmentation is not proof of environmental benefit. Cassar's archival work connects interpretation to identifiable objects and the designer's embodied encounter with them [7]. Aus et al. show that industrial upcycling depends on information about available leftovers and design decisions responsive to their characteristics and quantities [19]. Together, these studies indicate what an account of material transformation needs beyond an evocative appearance: object histories, process records, and evidence appropriate to the proposed benefit. None of those environmental outcomes can be transferred to the selected photographs.

Cultural references require similar care. A stated combination of cultural influences does not demonstrate how specific traditions are understood or represented. A stronger design account identifies the particular form, technique, or history involved and explains its transformation. The more precise the reference, the easier it is to examine what the garment retains, changes, or leaves unresolved. This approach supports narrativity through specificity rather than relying on broad claims about a culture, gender, or generation.

5.5. Scope and Further Research

The study offers an interpretive framework rather than a tested model of audience response. Its purposive selection privileges visually and conceptually legible works, and its contemporary close reading concerns one curated homepage. Museum and portfolio presentations are curated representations that shape what can be seen. Static photographs further limit analysis of material behavior, construction interiors, and bodily experience.

Future research can extend the comparison to other designers and presentation settings, test whether viewers distinguish association from transformation, and trace how interpretations change between runway, photograph, and use. Smelik's combination of visual analysis, archival and exhibition research, and atelier interviews offers a relevant example of how different evidence can be brought together [5]. Practice-based prototyping could also compare designs developed from the same theme through different operations. Such work would help assess when the proposed framework clarifies design decisions and when a garment's meanings exceed it.

6. Conclusion

Artistry and narrativity become integrated when the formal organization of womenswear makes a meaningful relation or transformation perceptible. The cases show how this can occur through altered bodily contours, changes of surface or function, and relationships among visible components, bodily gestures, and photographic staging. They also establish an important distinction: evocative styling may suggest a theme without generating a developed narrative. Contemporary design can benefit from connecting thematic tension to a specific material operation while leaving room for the wearer and

viewer to reinterpret the result. The strength of that connection lies in the coherence of concept, construction, and encounter, rather than the complexity of decoration or the certainty of a single story.

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