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SUZI WEBSTER INTERVIEWED BY KATRINA SARK

SUZI WEBSTER

What inspired you to be an artist and fashion designer, and your interest in fashion and technology?

S·W·: As a little kid, I used to spend hours making dresses for paper dolls. My mother was a dressmaker for a while and I think I learned to sew just by being around her, a little bit like osmosis. My path to becoming an artist was very circuitous, as I first got a joint law and literature degree, and I had to overcome a lot of limiting beliefs about what art could be, or what I could be. When I first went to art school, I just wanted to learn to paint like Rembrandt, because I thought that that is what real art was. I have always loved fashion, clothing, and its relation to performance, identity, and the body. I find that there is a lightness to fashion that is refreshing after an art world that takes itself very seriously, that can allow for more playfulness. Fashion and technology have an intrinsic relationship to the new that I find interesting as well as problematic. I enjoy some of the relationships and juxtapositions between ancient technologies like weaving and webs to the more current technologies, and I feel that as an artist living at this time of massive technological change that it must impact the work that I make.

Was your approach to fashion—through art and through technology—unusual at the time when you were a student? What were some of the challenges you faced in your journey?

Yes and yes—the challenges have been many! I was lucky to have done some research on

wearable technologies while an undergrad student at Emily Carr, and so when I went to London to the Slade, I was right in the centre of what was going on in London at the time, related to fashion, technology, smart materials, and more. Even though wearable technology was not related in any way to the Slade, the art school there was very open and unrestricted, and I had access to the Dana Centre for science, all sorts of interesting talks put on by Central St Martins College of Fashion, and I could meet all sorts of other curators, artists, and designers working in similar arenas. As someone working at the intersection of art, fashion, technology, and science, I have often been told that I am not a real artist, or a real designer, or a real tech person, so that is frustrating—for example my work is often shown in science museums or fashion museums rather than art museums. I have also found that it can be expensive and unwieldy to find interdisciplinary teams to work on poorly funded art projects, and so I feel very grateful to people like Dr. Walter Karlen, who donated some of his programming and research on heart sensors to help me create Electric Heart. When I first began in this field of wearable technologies, I was excited by the possibilities of technology that could be soft, woven, responsive to the body rather than rigid and hard, tethered to a screen. I have always seen that the best technology has a strong relationship to magic, as does fashion and art, but often the best visions become compromised by the limitations of the engineering, or the materials, or of current understanding. I think that that is why I've always been inspired by people like Buckminster Fuller and Nicholas Tesla.

What do you find most rewarding and inspiring about your work?

I love the freedom of being an artist. I feel that it is a great privilege, and the very best part of that is getting to share what I have made with the world and engaging in dialogue around the ideas that are generated. I also really love the opportunity to work with envisioning things that have never existed before and bringing them into reality.

Do you identify more as a multimedia artist or a designer, and how do you distinguish between the two?

I love this question! I feel that currently the boundaries between art and design are quite blurred, particularly with conceptual design and the way retail fashion mimics the aesthetics of the art gallery, but I would say that I identify more as an artist because I am not setting out to solve a design problem for a client or to create a line of reproducible garments. In the past I might have said that art asks questions, and design provides solutions, but this line has also become more complex.

Can you please describe your design process?

One of my very first sculptural pieces as a young art student was an “enlightenment machine.” The idea of turning breath into light is not so far from that notion, and I have long been interested in the elisions and intersections between magic, consciousness, and technology. One of the biggest hurdles to overcome in the piece was the means to turn breath into light. The breath sensor required a bit of a hacker approach to repurpose existing technologies for a different function, and I was lucky enough to find elumin⁸. LED technology is very advanced and

affordable today, but elumin⁸ was the closest to providing a flexible matrix with their silkscreen processes. The company was also very supportive of young artists and designers, which was amazing.

Can you please describe how you conceptualized the Electric Heart?

Electric Skin was the first in the series, followed by *Electric Dreams* that looked at turning thought into light. This was both technically and aesthetically way too far ahead of its time to fully realize. When I started on *Electric Heart*, I was thinking not only about the relationship between the wearer and the garment, but about how a garment might reflect the relationship between two individuals. This was just before the advent of the smart phone, and I think that if we look now at how this technology has impacted how we interact this was part of the impetus behind the creation of *Electric Heart*. I have become increasingly concerned about the ways in which technologies are becoming more and more disembodied, more and more isolated/isolating, which is a strong counterpoint to the evolution of the garment. With this piece I was completing the trilogy.

You are based in Vancouver and have worked and taught at several art schools there. How would you describe the Vancouver fashion scene, its fashion schools, and the cutting-edge design that is produced there in terms of eco-fashion and innovative technology?

I was instrumental in assisting Emily Carr University to set up its wearable and interactive products lab, and taught the first interactive wearables class there for a few years, but that was more through the lens of art than fashion. There are a number of institutes in Vancouver offering

diplomas in fashion design, but to the best of my knowledge the only four-year fashion degree program is offered through Kwantlen's Wilson School of design. Despite the prevalence of yoga wear, there is a keen interest in fashion in Vancouver, particularly in alternatives to mainstream fashion, with events like Vancouver's Alternative Fashion week and Indigenous Fashion Week that showcases First Nations' designs and models.

How would you describe the emerging fashion scholarship and fashion communities in Canada?

As a member of the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network, I have been really interested in the diversity of people coming together around fashion, whether as fashion scholars from a range of disciplines from literature to sociology, to artists and designers, to curators. I think that many regional fashion conversations are fairly well established, particularly in Toronto and Montreal, but a national dialogue is still very nascent, and I see it as a field where there is still lots of opportunity.

What advice would you give to young fashion designers?

My best advice is to stay true to your own vision, to unearth your own voice. Get the best training you can, whether at Ryerson or KPU, travel as much as possible to see what is going on in the rest of the world, and don't be afraid to try for things like the Toronto Fashion Incubator, which hosts an annual competition with a prize valued at \$90,000, Re\Set Fashion, FashionCan, and the Canadian Arts and Fashion Awards, which help to recognize, nurture, and mentor Canadian talent.

And what advice would you give to young fashion scholars?

Follow your passion, your curiosity, and your critical analysis; find that place or question where those three intersect and start to mine your ideas there. Even if we are living in a time awash with information, wisdom and original thought are in as short supply as ever.

What are you currently working on?

For the last year and a half, I have been working on two commissions for the permanent collection of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago and for an upcoming exhibition on the future of wearable technologies. The museum was interested in *Barking Mad*, which is an urban survival coat that helps shy, stressed people deal with situations of urban overcrowding. Proximity sensors respond to infringements on personal space with the sound of barking dogs. The coat barks like a small poodle if the space infringement is not too severe, if a rottweiler or someone gets too close. This piece was first shown in Vancouver for the 2010 Olympics. It has been an interesting experience to revisit this work ten years later and to see the improvements in technologies that are now available, such as laser sensors and much faster micro-processing capacity. Of particular excitement to me is the possibility to finally fully realize *Electric Dreams* with the assistance of the Museum. When I first created this work, the technology was not yet available for me to do what I wanted to do, but it seems that it is now within reach. *Electric Dreams* is a hand-molded felt headdress and garment that makes the relationship between light and thought tangible and visible. EEG electrodes monitor the dreamer's brainwaves and the private and fleeting daydreams of the dreamer are transformed into a

shifting and ephemeral display of light and colour. Side-lit fibre optics carry these light impulses into the body of the garment to emphasize the distributed and networked nature of the nervous system throughout the skin of the body, not just the head.

My piece *Distributed Networks* was featured in the “Coded Threads” exhibition at the Western Gallery in Bellingham, curated by Seiko Purdue. It’s a departure from the technological aspects of my work and a response to some of the challenges I experienced in realizing *Electric Heart*. Weary of disembodied hours spent on the computer, and the growing technological alienation that I see all around us, I wanted to visualize the complex web of information architecture and data flow of the internet in a tangible, tactile way. The work draws from the diagram of a distributed network designed by Paul Baran as

a communication network that would survive a nuclear attack, and that formed the schematic for the internet. The network was assumed to be unreliable at all times and to operate while in tatters. The work uses upcycled textile waste to weave a complex web of physical engagement with the space and invites the viewer to enter and play with notions of tension and release, connection and disconnection, entrapment and motion. This installation was a visual meditation on the relationships between bodies, technologies, and the potentials and responsibilities of interconnection.

If you could collaborate with anyone in the world, who would you like to work with?

Alexander McQueen, Nep Siddhu, and Husseyn Chalayan.