

Diplomacy in Fiber:
A Dialogue on Craft, Textiles, and Identity

Tara Murali

Contemporary Art - ARTH-701-01

Professor Holly Goldstein

November 4 2025

Textile art has been a big part of the practice of contemporary art in many different ways, whether it was the use of a certain material or the process by which art was created. Textile can be defined as textile products consisting of yarns, fabrics and miscellaneous made-up goods ¹. Textile art on the other hand be described as a collection of critical and creative writings about textile which covers craft, art, design and theory. Fiber and fabric have the ability of being creatively used to explore meaning, memory, identity and touch. It transforms materials traditionally seen as domestic or decorative into carriers of narrative, critique, and emotion ²

Through my work, I explore the contrasting techniques of fiber art – corsetry and machine knitting. Corsets represent structure, containment and historical weight. The corset was not just clothing — it was a social instrument that controlled posture, movement, and even breathing. Through the years, corsets and tight fitted garments became a symbol of erotic desire and submission. The human body thus became a kind of canvas that “artists” painted ³. On the other hand, Machine Knitting embodies fluidity, movement and emotions. There is a deep conceptual meaning behind this duality, that reflect broader tensions like freedom (through knitting) and constraint (corsetry).

Of course there are methods to incorporate machine knitting in corsetry; you could develop the base fabric and then attach the panels in the way you would a corset. I believe the purpose is defeated – the whole point of a corset is the incorporation of history and fitting. I argue the

¹ Pelzman, Joseph. “The Textile Industry.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 460 (1982): 92–100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1044601>.

² Hemmings, Jessica. (2023). *The Textile Reader* (second edition).

³ Kunzle, David. *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-Lacing and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004.

“diplomacy” – which is essentially a negotiation between two contrasting forces that eventually reveal textile’s capacity to hold multiple truths at the same time.

My work/experience in corsetry as seen in “Alt Punk” (*Images 1 to 4*) as well as “Sirens of the Heart” (*Images 5 to 9*) is a direct representation of the most controversial garment in the history of fashion ⁴. Through the years, the corset has been an instrument of patriarchal oppression and a tool of feminine power. There have been waves of the corset that can also be interpreted as a sexual agency.

During the Victorian England period, the corset was an example of a fashionable dress. It shaped women’s bodies and restricted their movement and breathing, but it also “served as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body” ⁵. The construction process of a corset itself is a very precise practice and has no room for error. There is precise pattern making, boning channels and engineering that is absolutely required to hold the body within itself. When I make corsets today, I deliberately work under these instructions. I engage with these techniques that make me, the female designer, visible to the public. Skilled work in the past was devalued and gendered “feminine” and Textile Crafts have been systematically dismissed for being “women’s work” ⁶

There has been a recent reclamation of the corset especially in the queer community. The wearer feels empowered, or erotic, but based on their personal comfort, thus entirely breaking down gender constraints. This evokes some emotion in the wearer, which is central to my theme of

⁴ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001

⁵ King, Angela (2004) "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 4.

⁶ Parker, Rozsika. 1984. *The subversive stitch : embroidery and the making of the feminine*. London: Women's Press.

garment construction. In my hands, the corset becomes a site of new possibilities for some kind of presentation of the body. There are elements of femininity but through the use of gender non-conforming colours such as black and red, the corset can be interpreted as a site for exploration.

Gender is performative ⁷ and as such is a social construct created through a stylized, repeated series of acts, gestures and stylisations over time.

My work also includes a critique of its own name – corsetry. In my work “Alt Punk” I incorporate the use of contemporary elements, unconventional fabrics, visible construction details such as boning panels, and the styling itself which references subcultural resistance. I use unconventional fabrics – knits that have different drape. I show the details and the structure rather than hiding the channels of boning. The corset is a cage, yes, but also a structure that supports, shapes and presents the body in particular ways.

I personally enjoy making corsets. It is definitely a very precise artform. The whole purpose of a corset is to be form fitting and tight. If even one of the pattern pieces isn't exact and to the T, the corset is loose fitting and poorly constructed. There is something so calming and therapeutic about draping and working with material and conforming the material to the body. That's what excites me. How adaptable fabric is – the moldability of the fabric to the body and the ability to conform it to your liking.

In stark contrast, my work in machine knitting is something that explores fluidity and expression of emotion through colour and material. Through the work in Winter Wonderland (*Image 10 to*

⁷ Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, England: Routledge Classics.

14) and Golden Aloha (*Images 15 to 19*), I have used colours that evoke emotion. Yellow is usually associated with warmth and sunshine and happiness. It also depicts joy and vitality which the cool blues evoke introspection and calmness. The fabric knitted on the other hand moves as if it has its own mind. It transforms itself based on how its worn, draped or even based on how it fits on a certain person. For example, during the process of Winter Wonderland, the initial test fit garments were perfect on the size 8 dress form. As we continued on with our work and when the final garment was prepped it didn't fit on a size 8, but had to be pushed on a size 6. However, the garment draped beautifully on the model, who is a mix of size 6 and size 8.

I enjoy machine knitting, what begins as a single long piece of yarn transforms into a beautiful garment through a mechanical process. This obviously requires human intervention and quick decision making. Colour theory is crucial in these scenarios. Faber Birren's work on colour and emotion suggests that humans have deep, and in most occasions a universal reaction to colour. I remember reading something as a child which said that the most soothing colour to paint a baby's room is yellow. It has always been associated with happiness and tranquillity. The first elements while initially learning design was colour emotion and I recall writing in great detail about the different emotions each colour carried. Through use of these colours, I deliberately create knitted garments that communicate the emotional state of being before they are even worn.

While this is applicable even with my work in corsetry, I believe it can be most associated with knitting and fiber relations. There is a reason behind this. Corsetry is rigid. There are certain rules that have to be followed while constructing a corset but knitting allows me to explore. If a

garment doesn't come out the way I want after I program it, I still have the ability to tweak it and call it a different silhouette but that is not the same with corsetry. This is what Elissa Auther refers to as the "craft debate"⁸ This details the ongoing tension between process-based making and the traditional conceptual art practice.

As I like to joke around – corsetry keeps me humble, but machine knitting throws my humility into the mix and knits with it! Both methods are, however, traditional craft practices that at the end of the day, carry meaning through material.

Yinka Shonibare used a perfect mixture of beauty and politics. The signature use of Dutch wax printed fabric is often mistaken as African but has a deep historical connect to Europeans. This post-colonial narrative, clubbed with the interactive emotion-based installations of Chiharu Shiota, as well as the fiber art sculptures of Minalini Mukherjee, I argue that my work is a critique of the social and political systems embedded in fashion history.

All together, these practices create a dialogue about rigidity and fluidity, history and emotion, constraint and expression.

Yinka Shonibare's work is a prime example of how textiles can carry social and political history. His use of Dutch Wax prints is the perfect embodiment of cultural hybridity and those complex legacies of colonialism. For some historical context, Dutch Wax Prints (also known as African Wax Prints or Ankara) is a certain type of material for clothing in West Africa. The designs are a

⁸ Auther, Elissa. 2010. *String, Felt, Thread: Challenging distinctions between art and craft* (27 April). https://youtu.be/gHdhoXJ_7co?si=GO9i6Tv__KHA7y53

direct inspiration of Indonesian Batik Prints (batik is a wax resist-dyeing technique that I had a lot of fun exploring during my undergrad!). Many of Shonibare's works such as *Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms (Image 20)* and *Cake Man (Image 21)* use these Dutch Wax Fabrics to create Victorian-era silhouettes. The layered-hooped skirt, the corset like top are such elements that usually relate back to the Victorian era.

This is what I refer to as “fabric diplomacy”. Textiles converse between cultures and time periods. Dutch Wax Prints are neither African, nor European, yet Shonibare has perfectly captured the essence of the culture and the intertwining of identity.

I think this deeply resonates with my work as corsets have some historical elements to it but in recent contemporary reclamations, and the incorporation of these designs into subcultures means that it becomes something else altogether. A garment can also mean different things based on how it is styled and what the social scene is at that specific moment. Machine knitting process along similar lines; the machines as such are based from the European industrialization, but the designer and wearer give them a personal, and emotional connection.

Shonibare's work also address the body, or rather the lack of it. In most of his installations, the heads are replaced by globe heads to symbolize “global identity”. He removes the clear racial, gender and cultural identifiers and focuses on the idea more than the medium, making it a form of conceptual art. Globes also touch a little on humour while also emphasising the real world problems of race, class and culture. I feel like this has been reflected in my work as well, the

duality of garments. I make garments for the individual but I aim to speak at broader themes like identity and cultural history.

Chiharu Shiota's immersive thread installations create environments where the viewer becomes invested emotionally and psychologically. Her works make use of miles of black and red thread to create intricate web like structures that express the intangible – memories, anxiety, dreams, silence and more.⁹ Her work is often a reflection of her own experience especially with her struggles of being diagnosed with cancer. Shiota's works like *Uncertain Journey* (*Image 22*) and *The Key in the Hand* (*Image 23*) shows the intangible which in turns interacts with the psyche of the human brain.

Shiota's approach to fiber vastly differs from traditional textile practices. She does not create fabric, instead she uses thread to draw parallels and in a 3 dimensional space, she creates "drawings". These installations are immersive and viewers are required to navigate around, sometimes even through them to become a part of Shiota's visions.

One thing to consider in great detail is the use of colour in Shiota's installations. Red symbolises passion, anxiety and parallels can be drawn between the colour red and the life force that binds us together. On the other hand, black represents the darkness, and the subconscious thoughts that are essentially intangible. This is a strong message that I try to convey through my projects in machine knitting. In these projects, I have shown the psychological states and the mood of the projects through the use of colours like yellow and blue. Yellow represents joy while blue shows comfort and contemplation.

⁹ (Mori Art Museum 2021) <https://www.mori.art.museum/en/exhibitions/shiotachiharu/02/index.html>

Shiota's work is closely linked with process than result. Each immersive exhibition of hers requires hours of repetitive threading and knotting which is quite similar to the practice of machine knitting. Once the program is fed to the machine, it can take anywhere between 5 minutes to 6 hours to knit the garment. The physical labour of the work is thus an integral part of the garment/end result.

Mrinalini Mukherjee (*Image 24*), an Indian, challenges the historical Western art hierarchies which look down on craft and position craft below fine art. Many of her works, *Jamuni* (*Image 25*) for example, uses traditional Indian crafting techniques such as knitting, resist dyeing, weaving, braiding, etc. She is able to create ethereal forms that have a wide range of references; from sacred sculptures to organic growth to female bodies.

I personally connect deeply with Mukherjee's insistence on using fiber to create sculptures. Each piece of hers used to take years to complete. She believed sculpture was a more intuitive and spontaneous means of expression due to her lack of formal training in the field ¹⁰. During an interview, Mukherjee stated that people may find similarities between the process oriented art, however, she sees sculpture as an organic unfolding and thus explains her choice of materials.

During her time as a fiber artist, Mukerjee explored the divide between figure and abstract. Her primary source for inspiration was nature and her interest in Indian historic sculpture and modern design propelled her more towards local crafts and textile traditions (*Image 26 and 27, stills from*

¹⁰ (Lesso 2023) <https://blog.fabrics-store.com/2023/08/06/anthropomorphic-deities-the-textile-sculptures-of-mrinalini-mukherjee/>

the – Phenomenal Nature exhibit)¹¹ Her sculptures often reference Hindu iconography and temple structures, and through the use of creative power, Mukherjee was able to transform these reference to show elements of contemporary feminism, and environmental issues.

This balance between heritage and innovation is reflected in my work of corsetry. The corset itself has historical and cultural roots that originated in Europe, but have been contemporised by other artists and myself in recent times. I have worked with some elements of traditional Victorian corset constructions with a new twist.

Mukherjee also challenges material hierarchies. There have art historians who have noted how Mukherjee's work in fiber was deliberately chose since it was already undervalued in the fine art contexts. This is a strategy that I believe I can incorporate in my work and perfect the strategy in coming years as a hone my skills as a designer.

My practice in fiber art has some roots in conversations about craft, gender and political resistance that was solidified in the feminist art movement from the 1970s. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party (Image 28)* used needlework like embroidery and quilting. This project highlighted the achievements of women and made a strong political statement about the people whose labour counted the most.

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker argues theorists who claimed that the embroidery and needlework were feminine and amateur as they were women's work, despite requiring tremendous skill and patience. Yet, women have been using these crafts as a subversion and

¹¹ (Art 2019) <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/mrinalini-mukherjee-phenomenal-nature>

often incorporating political messages in work that often resembled decoration. In recent times, contemporary fiber artists have kept this legacy alive while expanding the scope of the meaning behind their works. Lacey Jane Roberts (LJR), a genderqueer textile artist explicitly explores and challenges gender binaries in their works. Roberts uses craft materials and techniques (like the Barbie Knitting Machine TM) which are often associated with undesirable feminine traits (*Image 29 and 30*). Their work entails large-scale, politically charged installation and challenge traditional hierarchies in the world. This is how fiber becomes a malleable artform that is a perfect metaphor for gender and fluidity, both of which can be shaped, reshaped, ravelled and unravelled.

Fashion has been operating as both oppression and resistance. Foucault's "disciplined body" shows us how dress codes were used as a social controller. Bodies are disciplined to conform to gender and narrow-minded ideals. If "femininity" is showcased through clothing, then this performance can be exaggerated, it can be incorporated in queer scenarios and it can be refused altogether.

I strongly believe my practice engages in these histories directly. My decision to work in corsetry and knitting is intertwined with the gendered media and the layered meaning behind these garments. The fluidity juxtaposed with the rigidity creates a "push/pull" effect on the body which shows the control that fashion has on the body and identity. This is a diplomatic approach to the fiber art; a mediating force creates an engaging dialogue between constraint and freedom, historical consciousness and recent contemporary resistance.

Fiber art is a critical medium that honours the rich history of skilled labour while simultaneously critiquing the power that has nudged its way through.

The corset has taken on the role of a critical archive that helps preserve the history of European cultures while engaging with recent times and trends. There is praise for the makers of such intricate garments but a critique of the people who deemed the caging of bodies necessary. Machine knitting on the other hand has offered a different critique – it uses industrial technology to say that identity and gender, like the end knitting fabric, is malleable and can be shaped and transformed.

Together, these practices demonstrate the tension between textile art's feminine associations and the freedom for political critique which I make shown in my work.

From Shonibare's post-colonial fabric critique to the feminist art movements, it is obvious that fashion and fiber arts hide deeper meanings and offer more possibilities for resistance.

I have a central question that I ask myself before any project – how can I honour historical makers' skilled labour while critiquing the systems that constrained them. This is the relationship between rigidity, fluidity and the diplomacy in fiber. There is negotiation between opposing forces and in recent moments where fashion is becoming increasingly globalised, and commercialised, textile practices offer critical ways of thinking that can help solve problems materially.

Bibliography

Hemmings, Jessica. 2023. The Textile Reader. Bloomsbury.

*Kunzle, David. 2004. Fashion & fetishism : corsets, tight-lacing & other forms of
body-sculpture. Stroud : Sutton.*

Steele, Valerie. 2001. The Corset: A Cultural History. New Haven: Yale University Press.

*King, Angela. 2004. "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female
Body." Journal of International Women's Studies Vol 5: Iss. 2, Article 4.*

Parker, Rozsika. 1984. The subversive stitch : embroidery and the making of the feminine. London: Women's Press.

Butler, Judith. 2006. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London, England: Routledge Classics.

Auther, Elissa. 2010. String, Felt, Thread: Challenging distinctions between art and craft (27 April).

Pelzman, Joseph. Mar., 1982. "The Textile Industry." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 92-100.

2021. Mori Art Museum.

<https://www.mori.art.museum/en/exhibitions/shiotachiharu/02/index.html>.

Lesso, Rosie. 2023. The Thread. 6 August.

<https://blog.fabrics-store.com/2023/08/06/anthropomorphic-deities-the-textile-sculptures-of-mrinalini-mukherjee/>.

Art, The Metropolitan Museum Of. 2019. Phenomenal Nature. New York City , 4 - 29 June - September.

Image References

Images 1-4: Alt Punk





Images 5 – 9: Sirens of the Heart



Image 10 – 14: Winter Wonderland



Images 15 – 19: Golden Aloha





Image 20: Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms



Image 21: Cake Man



Image 22: Uncertain Journey



Image 23: Key in the Hand



Image 24: Mrinalini Mukherjee



Image 25: Jamuni



Image 26 and 27: Stills from Phenomenal Nature



Image 28: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party



Image 29 and 30: Works of Lacey Jane Roberts