

Women Are Already Strong
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Women are Already Strong is my creative response to the question Simone de Beauvoir asked about a century ago: “What is a woman?” The body of work here is my contribution toward reimagining what it means to be a woman based upon the multitude of concepts “woman” embodies and the numerous metaphors she symbolizes throughout history. I created *Women are Already Strong* as part of a solo exhibition of my creative works.

At the inception of this creative research project, I chose *The Second Sex*, written by Simone de Beauvoir, as a theoretical and philosophical inspiration. Based upon her extensive research and her own experience as a female in the early 20th century, Beauvoir tried to describe the fact of being a woman in the history of humanity from the female point of view and argued that the entire history of women was written by men who defined themselves as One while setting up women as the Other in opposition to themselves. Women are objectified and excluded as the Other (Beauvoir, 2011). Women have been forced into the "systems of oppositions; duality, alternation, opposition and symmetry" (Levi-Strauss 1969 as cited in Beauvoir 2011, p. 7). A hierarchy of the sexes established by men destined women to be subordinated to men, possessed, and exploited by men. In almost every religious and patriarchal context, women and their bodies were described as innately weak, passive, inferior, incompetent, or absent (Rodriguez, 2016; Ha, 2018). Women had never been portrayed with authority and autonomy.

Through the waves of feminist movements in the 20th century, the discourses of femininity have redefined and shifted what femininity is and how it has been perceived by society. Williams (2012) argued that women have struggled to choose between the “competing and sometimes contradictory” traditional femininity characterized by kindness, nurturing, sociable, and beautiful and resistant femininity by “independence, assertiveness, rationality, powerfulness, strength, and control” (pp. 3—5). Such dichotomy reinforces the stereotypes of femininity and confines women to display a particular set of qualities and characteristics to be seen as feminine. A value-laid dichotomy between femininity and masculinity has been another problem that framed women as vulnerable, weak, and inferior to men. Historically, as a result of patriarchy and sexism, femininity has been negatively perceived and experienced in comparison with masculinity. Women had to display masculine characteristics or traits to fit the social and cultural norms and to fight against injustice imposed on them because of their gender.

“Feminism isn’t about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It’s about changing how the world perceives that strength.”
– G.D. Anderson

Through the design of *Women Are Already Strong*, I aspired to shed light on femininity or the intrinsic attributes of women— stereotypically defined as passivity, fragility, kindness and gentleness, modesty, humility, emotionality, docility, submissiveness, all of which are negatively perceived within the patriarchal society— as the driving force of empowerment that enables women to endure and battle against injustice and inequality throughout history. I was intrigued by the discourses and practices of cultural feminism that celebrate femininity as the intrinsic attribute

of women and promote the idea that women and men are essentially different (Ghodsee, 2004; Williams, 2012). Moreover, I wanted not only to dismantle the gendered notions of femininity that devalue women and confine their abilities but also simultaneously break the equation that masculinity means power and authority.

Purposefully, I refused to incorporate elements that traditionally connote masculinity and power into my designs. Instead, I embodied women's self-empowerment and emphasized femininity by exploring diverse design elements that express women's vibrant energy and invincible strength (e.g., soft and curvaceous silhouettes and shapes, unique textural contrast, and colors). First, the silhouette and shape of the dress were inspired by wings that symbolize freedom, justice, and protection in various cultures. I was especially drawn to the symbolic meaning of protection, which originated from the Ancient Egyptian winged gods that protected every creature with their wings (Carrillo de Albornoz & Fernández 2014). The closed wing-shaped silhouette of the dress represents the protective space women create for themselves and others while imitating women's curves. Secondly, I wanted to incorporate motherhood into this design because it embodies a woman's strength rooted in her nurturing and attentive nature (kindness, gentleness, and compassion) and fierceness that comes from being a mother (protectiveness, courage, and determination). The red panel that runs through the body's center from the front to the back represents blood as a source of life, visualizing procreation, endurance of physical pain, joy, and love. Since it is sewn only to the front and down to the hip level, the point where it can be pulled back to form a train is adjustable, allowing the wearer to determine the length of the skirt and train (see the detailed image). The dress is made of wool felt, traditional Korean quilted silk, double-faced glitter mesh, and cotton bobbinet-tulle (Fig. 1). These materials are purposefully chosen because the unique qualities of each fabric visually represent the theme. I designed the garment to highlight the drapery of the layered mesh and tulle (Fig. 2) and, similarly, to create more exciting shapes and silhouettes using the fabrics with a body (e.g., wool felt and quilted silk). In this design, red symbolizes birth, life, and blood, while black represents strength, protection, and self-empowerment.

Women Are Already Strong represents the visual image of the woman who, by embracing her own sense of femininity and strength, empowers herself.

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