

## *Woman as the Other*

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*Woman as the Other* 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. *Woman as the Other* is part of a solo exhibition of the designer's 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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) and 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.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

– Simone de Beauvoir

If, according to Beauvoir, "the woman's body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world," then the situations women had to endure (e.g., discrimination, suppression, and exclusion) are realized through women's bodies and femininity. Ioan P. Culianu (1995) also suggested that women's bodies are "the most spoken of because they have the most to tell" (p. 1). A woman's body is a manifestation of socially and culturally constructed notions written by the patriarchal society. The dominant discourses of femininity have also played a critical role in how women perceive their bodies and femininity. Coates (1996) argued that society teaches women to see themselves "in relation to men" (cited in Williams 2012, p. 16). Therefore, femininity or the intrinsic attributes of women have been stereotypically and traditionally defined as passivity, fragility, kindness and gentleness, modesty, humility, emotionality, docility, submissiveness, and all negatively perceived within the patriarchal society. After the second wave of the feminist movement, the qualities commonly associated with masculinity, such as

independence, assertiveness, strength, powerfulness, control, and rationality, were promoted as resistant femininity (Williams, 2012, p. 5). Women of today endeavor to expand the definition of femininity and even dismantle the idea of how women are supposed to enact to fit the social norms. A dichotomy that reinforces stereotypical ideas and ideals of femininity persists.

The design of *Woman as the Other* is intended to reimagine femininity or the intrinsic attributes of women 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).

Furthermore, 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 elements that express women's vibrant energy and invincible strength (e.g., soft and curvaceous silhouettes and shapes, unique textural contrast, and colors).

I created a bodice with wing-like faux sleeves inspired by one of the symbolic meanings of wings: protection. In Ancient Egypt, the winged gods and goddesses protected every creature with wings (Carrillo de Albornoz & Fernández, 2014). The closed wing-shaped faux sleeves represent the physical and psychological protection women secure for themselves and others (Fig. 1). The high-necked bodice references a warrior's armor (Fig. 2). The red metallic burnout brocade with firework-flower motifs used for the faux sleeves and high-waisted pants represents women's powerful and explosive energy, making women invincible (Fig. 3). To avoid interrupting the daring and dazzling floral motifs, I cut each pant pattern to align them along the French seams. I used black wool felt and traditional Korean quilted silk for the bodice and the side panel of the sleeves for more structured silhouettes and shapes. By playing with the orientation of the quilt's stitch lines (vertical or horizontal), I converted an intrinsic element of the fabric into a design element (Fig. 2). The gathered tulle pieces were added to each side of the pant leg to create a trompe-l'œil effect of the continuous side panel from shoulder to floor. I chose these materials purposefully because the unique qualities of each fabric visually represent the theme. Red in this design symbolizes vibrant energy and hard-earned triumphs from endless battles against injustice and discrimination, while black represents strength, protection, and self-empowerment.

Through the design of *Woman as the Other*, I want to shed light on how a woman empowers herself by presenting an image that aligns with her own sense of femininity and strength to the world and to present broader and more diverse perspectives to define what it means to be a woman today and in the future.

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