

Mola Borealis

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Measurements: Bust 37", Waist 28", Hips 38", Skirt length 19"

Concept

Last year, while visiting the Textiles and Clothing Museum at Iowa State University, I was introduced to the colorful handiwork of *molos*. *Molas* are decorative panels that are sewn into the Kuna women's blouses and they are Panama's most famous native handicraft, dating one hundred twenty-five years ago (Anderson, 1977). They are one of a kind, entirely hand made, and their designs range from nature and geometry to fantasy. I challenged myself to take the craft of *molos* and give it a new updated life in today's fashion arena. The concept behind the look had to be a fantasy, dream like vision of something in nature that maybe Panama people could never see in their lifetime. Further research led me to images of auroras. The fluid dynamic characteristics of the aurora borealis, also known as the northern lights, served as inspiration to poets and artists since its first mention, over 5,000 years ago (Holzworth, 1975). Every Northern culture has legends about the lights and often associates them with life after death. The different shapes of auroras are a mystery that scientists are still trying to unravel. Robert Eather (1980), expert in auroras, once wrote: "Like snowflakes, no two are ever quite the same." However, more than 98% of people living on Earth will never have a chance to see such phenomena, especially people living in countries around Equator. Furthermore, my artistic challenge was to express the beauty and magnetism of aurora borealis into a mola panel, aiming to take a craft that might go extinct or forgotten and giving it a different life after near death.

Process and techniques

The Kuna women have developed the fine craftsmanship of *molos* into a unique art found nowhere else in the world. The technique has been called reverse applique and is created from three to seven layers of different colors of soft cotton cloth. The mostly symmetrical design is drawn on the upper layer, then the colors are revealed by cutting off narrow strips out of each other fabric layer. The edges of the cuts are turned back 1/16" and hand stitched to be invisible. This process is continued until the bottom foundation layer appears and the shapes of the design are completely outlined. In the islands, *molos* do not last very long because of the damaging salty sea air. Currently there are no antique *molos* in the islands, so the existing ones have become collectibles (Anderson, 1977). I decided to not work with cotton fabric, aiming to add something new to the technique and longer lasting. Instead, given the shimmering inspiration of the aurora borealis, I chose to work with silk dupioni, another eco-friendly choice. I bought half of a yard in six different colors, ranging from pink, lavender, chartreuse, to cobalt blue, emerald green and navy. The six layers as well as one thin layer of batting were overlapped and basted around the edges. Unlike the traditional pre-planned design, my approach was exploratory, starting with a random small cut in the upper middle of the panel and building after that into rows resembling the rays of auroras. The process was lengthy, constantly reflective, and the thickness of the layers were challenging for the invisible hand stitches. As the design developed, it lacked textural dimension, so I decided to turn to technology and add rows of machine topstitching that made the batting fill out the colored shapes. A small contrasting dimensional flower motif was also added using the trapunto technique. To not lose the handmade message of the panel, I over embroidered rows of hand chain stitches using variegated embroidery floss. Small pleats were added to reveal some of the colorful under layers. The width of the panel, having the fabric selvages aligned at the ends, made for a perfect wrap around the hips. Angling the rectangular thick panel to slightly overlap was the only shaping solution to substitute for the waist darts. To grade the

six hems, thin strips were cut out from each layer. The waste was worked back into the panels by the applique method, building up a wide waistband. When the piece was finished, to unify the colorful back edges and the hems, the entire panel was dip dyed for just a few inches above the hems.

To balance out the heavy quilt look of the skirt, I decided to add a chunky hand knit sweater with open cable stitches. The dynamic color changes of the aurora borealis inspired me again to experiment with undyed wool. I randomly dropped different color RIT liquid dye drops in the dye bath of each skein of wool yarn. Overall, I have maintained a navy dominant for the color story, but beautiful spots of color accents are visible throughout the entire sweater, making it an eye engaging piece. As the silhouette of the entire look developed, sustainable design choices such as no front or back and invisible magnetic skirt closures were made. Also, in order to give it a more finished garment look, ruffle tape yarns with sequined accents were hand sewn to the selvages of the silk layers, adding flare and movement to the ensemble as well as innovative edge finishing. An under layer skirt was added, longer, with freeform crochet branches hand stitched to a green net hanging below the dupioni layers, emphasizing the six hems by textural contrast and also contributing to the overall unity of the ensemble.

Overall, the ensemble has a circular view, each angle showing different color and texture combinations. The isolating contrast of the waist area suggests fragility and it is meant to overemphasize the embellished molas technique.

Design Contribution and Innovation

The relevance of craft to today's fast fashion world has been questioned many times. The creative exploration of the documented slow hand making process of molas resulted into a serendipitous modern ensemble, challenging the current notions of aesthetics and unique. The interpretation of a physical phenomenon into a rich interplay of colors, textures, materials and techniques serves my personal creative endeavors of connecting science to fashion in innovative ways. Not only preserving the design process, but mixing and transforming the look of the outcome of traditional textiles opens up sustainable alternatives to the vanishing artisanal industry.

References:

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