

La Source

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Design Statement

La Source is one of the creative outcomes of a research project that explores the social notions of “woman” and the construct of women’s bodies in the western civilization throughout history. The project aims to visually represent the concepts, some ambivalent (e.g., life/birth vs. death, salvation vs. damnation, earth vs. sea) and some paradoxical (i.e., a woman is a regenerator but not a creator), that a women’s bodies embody. This is a contribution by a woman designer toward rewriting what it means to be a woman and dress as a woman. *La Source* will be part of a solo exhibition of the designer’s creative works resulting from this research.

At the inception of this creative research project, the designer chose *The Second Sex* written by Simone de Beauvoir as a source of 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 women's point of view. One of the fundamental questions she asked was “what is a woman?” She also 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 not only objectified but also 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, and incompetent, and worst of all, completely absent (Rodrigues 2016) because women had never been portrayed with authority and autonomy. Beauvoir introduced a concept that woman was not perceived as a creator even when she symbolized “Mother Nature.” Even Nature had to be what men wanted to possess and exploit throughout history. Women as the Other were robbed of the opportunity to actively participate in the positive construction of history. Despite the oppression and exclusion that weakened women, Beauvoir asserted that they were “dangerous competitors” to men (p. 12) and argued that the fundamental reasoning behind the systematic

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suppression and devaluation of women and their place in the history could lie in the fear and horror of men toward women.

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 that women had to endure (e.g., discrimination, suppression, exclusion, etc.) are realized through women’s bodies and clothing. Ioan P. Culianu (1995) also suggested with an assertion that women’s bodies are “the most spoken of because they have the most to tell” (p. 1). The human body is not simply a physical entity independent of social and cultural forces. Therefore, it is not surprising that the woman’s body is translated into a variety of metaphors, such as sea, moon, tide, birth/life, Mother Earth, Nature, a fountain of life, fertility, reproduction, death, conduit or vessel, evil, ignorance, darkness, lust, erotic object, physical entrapment and confinement, the sinner, adulteress, and the immaculate, etc. (Beauvoir 2011; Culianu 1995; Rodrigues 2016). Some of the ambivalent metaphors exhibit that woman and her body symbolize a continuum, in other words, a passage through constant changes. Beauvoir (2011) empowered women as a creator and destroyer because they “weave human destiny, but they also cut the threads” (p. 166). Life is integrated with death on a continuum, just as good and evil are, love to hate, hope to failure and vice versa (Beauvoir 2011). “Neither can exist without the other and neither is more potent or dominant than the other” (Hahm, p. 71).

The design of *La Source* is the visual story the designer felt compelled to conjure among the multitude of concepts woman embodies and metaphors she symbolizes; a woman as a source of life and death and her body as a passage through the endless interactions and dynamics between life and death. First, the life-death dichotomy was achieved by various design principles; red and black were chosen as the main colors in order to reflect the various symbolic meanings that these two colors are commonly known to connote (e.g., blood, life, birth, darkness, and death); the textual contrast between the smooth surface and textured surface emphasized the dichotomy; and the combination of fixed forms and free shapes heightened the ambivalent feeling of the co-existence of life and death within a woman’s body. Second, the dynamics generated from the life-death interactions (i.e., a passage from life to death or/and from death to life), whether predictable or unpredictable, were visually represented with the linear elements (e.g., lines created by tucks or pleats) carefully calculated and planned, symbolizing the path all humans takes to the end of their life; and the irregular drapery created with no pre-planning or rules, symbolizing the vicissitude of life. The designer employed

sustainable design methods not only to minimize fabric waste by using the full width of the textiles and no-waste cutting but also to benefit from the intrinsic qualities of the chosen textiles. This garment was made of two rectangular pieces of textiles, black Korean traditional ramie, and red/black yarn-embroidered mesh. The right side was made of narrow-width ramie with clean selvages (12 inches wide) cut to the desired length (108 inches), folded in half crosswise, twisted at the bottom to create the pant-leg shape and fit to the upper body by using tucks. The left side of this garment was constructed with yarn-embroidered mesh cut in the shape of a large rectangle (96 inches x 54 inches) and stitched to the base of netting for more body-fitting silhouette and better support (Fig. 1). The designer found that this specific mesh fabric had intrinsic decorative edging resulting from the embroidery and used it as a design element (Fig. 2). The selvages as-is became the hem and neckline. Practically, zero waste was achieved except a small oval shape that had to be cut out for the armhole. The red and black abstract motifs embroidered on mesh inspired the designer because they resembled human cells (at least to her/his eye). As the fundamental units of life, cells grow, reproduce, and die, just like the cycle of human life. Circular motifs are in different shades of red ranging from bright to dark and some are covered with black yarns as if the colors denote the life cycle from birth to death. Intertwined red and black yarns could represent unbreakable connections and endless interactions between life and death.



Figure 1. The base/underlayer skirt made of black netting.



Figure 2. The use of the selvages as the finished and decorative edges.

*Note: I apologize for the background of the figures because these images were taken at home.

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