

## *Unbound*

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### Design Statement

*Unbound* 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 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 symbolize. This is a contribution by a woman designer toward rewriting what it means to be a woman and dress as a woman. *Unbound* 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, Beauvoir attempted to describe the experience 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, incompetent, and worst of all, completely absent (Rodrigues 2016) because women had never been portrayed with authority and autonomy. Beauvoir introduced the 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 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" (p. 48), the designer believes that the situations that women had to endure (e.g., discrimination, suppression, exclusion, etc.) are realized through women's bodies and clothing. Ioan P.

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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; Clark 1971; Culianu 1995; Rodrigues 2016). When it comes to feminine sexuality, historically, women suffered from various forms of social control over and negative perceptions of their bodies, particularly after Christianity became a dominant ideology in western civilization. They were trapped by their physical conditions perceived as evidence of their intrinsic inferiority by society. The female body is sexually provocative; therefore, women become a "potential danger" to men (Rodrigues 2016, p. 64). While feminine sexuality was degraded and feared by men, ironically it was sought explicitly or implicitly. For example, women's dress made the body immobile and powerless and feminine sexuality ambiguous (e.g., corset, panier, crinoline, and high heels). Simultaneously and ironically, however, it increased women's sexuality by accentuating their curvaceous bodies. The dressed women's body has displayed the ambivalent and paradoxical aesthetics of feminine sexuality required of women throughout history.

Through the design of *Unbound*, the designer aimed to represent the ambivalent symbolization of the female body and feminine sexuality. What has been an erotic object of men's sexual desire and a symbol of physical/psychological entrapment has been reimagined from a woman's point of view. Red and black were chosen as the main colors for this project in order to reflect various symbolic meanings that these two colors are commonly known to connote: red symbolizes lust, erotic, love, and sexual desire, and black a feeling of entrapment and suppressed desire for women. The shiny metallic surfaces of the silk crinkled brocade and faux knit chainmail create a feeling of lust and seduction. The layering of the red brocade and black chainmail is intended to symbolize that women's vanity and desire embedded in their sexuality has never been veiled or inhibited. Around the hip, the wide cross-overlapped bands made of Korean traditional ramie not only emphasize the sensual beauty (i.e., the symbolic body part for fertility) but also symbolize the limited physical and psychological space allowed for women. The silhouette of the lower part of the garment resembles the 18<sup>th</sup>-century hoop skirt *panier*, horizontally extended and flattened at the front and back. The bodice, made of continuous horizontal bands, represents the social confinement that paralyzed a woman's body and her sexuality. With just a glimpse of the garment, the viewers can see that the entire body appears to be bound with bands of various widths from the top (i.e., the tall standing collar band) to bottom, which partially reveal and conceal the body's contours. The entire garment consists of three layers (e.g., strapless dress, long sleeveless tunic, and pleated skirts), all joined together with vertical seams creating a body-fitting silhouette.

Whenever possible, the designer tried to eliminate fabric waste by maximizing the use of materials. Korean traditional fabrics come in a relatively narrow width (12 inches for black ramie and 22 inches for patterned silk gauze). The ramie was folded half in lengthwise to create 6-inch-wide bands and the red silk gauze was cut to the desired length and pleated to create fullness, then sandwiched between the ramie bands. The designer used the clean selvages of both fabrics for the finished hems.

Made by a woman designer, *Unbound* is intended to remind women that they have always owned their bodies and sexuality, despite the social norms that have entrapped them within their own bodies.

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