

Maternal Dress

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Keywords: layers, confession, words, mother

First in a series of work addressing motherhood and my experience with cultural expectations of women as mothers, *Maternal Dress* is part confessional and part commentary. The purpose of the series is to express through garment design my feelings around my identity as a mother.

The dress style is inspired by the dresses of iconic television moms set in the 1950's and 1960's like June Cleaver and Marion Cunningham. Those characters, along with my own stay-at-home mother, shaped my view as a young girl of what mothers did and how they acted. Growing up, I did not think I was destined to become a mother or a wife. Later in life, though, I became both a wife and a mother. What is hidden in the under layers of this dress are confessions about the joys and frustrations relating to both those parts of my current self.

The pattern and silhouette were inspired by a vintage Advance dress pattern 4906. Modifications were made to the back bodice and front neckline. The surface design was handwritten with black ball point pens while the fabric was stretched and pinned over lined paper.



Clothing has carried verbal messages throughout history.

The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art celebrated the link between textiles and text in the exhibition, *Wordrobe* (Martin, 1997). Most recently, pinstriped suits designed by Kerby-Jean Raymond for Pyer Moss worn to the Met Gala in 2019 had bold messages embroidered across the jacket backs; additionally, the “pinstripes” were printed lyrics from songs rich with meaning to the wearers (Petarca, 2019).

Similar to the Pyer Moss suits, this layered silk organza dress appears to be made of a simple dual stripe windowpane plaid. However, closer inspection reveals that the stripes are formed from handwritten words.

The subjects of the words are separated by the waist seam. Above the waist statements relate to marriage while the skirt statements relate to parenting. The top layer of organza on the bodice has traditional Protestant wedding vows repeated across the stripes: *I take you to be my wedded*

Page 1 of 3

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ITAA Proceedings, #76 - <https://itaonline.org>

husband, to have and to hold (Traditional wedding vows for your ceremony, 2017). The vows visually intersect and obstruct personal statements written on gray organza below. Those personal statements are difficult to read well because of the layering; this is intentional. Statements range from “I miss the freedom for us to get away for a weekend,” to “how hard is it to pick out a gift for me?” to even deeper frustrations. The skirt, then, has similar personal statements about my role as a mother on the gray organza: “the morning ritual used to be one of my favorites because they’d crawl into bed with me and watch the weather channel before breakfast,” and “I wonder if we’re crazy with the amount of money and time we spend on soccer...” The top layer on the skirt has parenting tips repeating over and over and over. The tips, sourced from two web sites, range from sensible sounding “pick your battles” and “talk about what it means to be a good person” to sexist “encourage daddy time” and “trust your mommy gut” (Gillies, n.d.). The layering order serves to visually veil the more personal statements while also symbolically placing the intimate thoughts against the body; the more public wedding vows and parenting tips are on the outer layer of the dress acting as a buffer between what is felt by the wearer and what is portrayed. The outer layers also symbolize cultural expectations of the woman in the role of mother and wife.

Confessions related to motherhood and marriage can be found on Palomo-Lovinski’s *You’ve Come a Long Way Baby* (2015). While Palomo-Lovinski sourced the statements used from anonymous blog posts and digitally printed them, *Maternal Dress* is all handwritten with personal confessions from the designer. The gray layers of the dress served as a sort of journal. Both dresses do contain statements that, as Palomo-Lovinski (2015) stated, “express disillusionment with what these women imagined their life would be like and the way it actually is.”

Maternal Dress serves as a commentary on the complexities of a woman’s identity with layers of meaning, some public and some hidden. The repetition of parenting tips and wedding vows on the white layers represents being overwhelmed by the expectations to be a good spouse and parent. The combination of subject matter for the text stripes “works to ‘glue’ identities,” (Entwistle, 2001, 47) merging woman, wife, and mother.

Finally, *Maternal Dress* bridges the decades between 1960’s housewives and 21st century working mothers. The silhouette is inspired by those worn in the mid-twentieth century while the surface design unites the periods. The plaid is created by written statements from a modern-day mother intertwined with statements shared by both periods such as “let your kids fail” (The only parenting advice you really need, n.d.) and “...in sickness and in health...” from the Protestant wedding vows (Traditional wedding vows for your ceremony, 2017). The combination of textile and text “conveys both a three-dimensional and a two-dimensional rhetoric” (Martin, 1997, 4).

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