FASHION PROJECTS
On Fashion and Memory

Shelley Fox
Cooper-Hewitt Textiles Collection
Tanya Marcuse
Judith Clark
The work of New York-based British designer Shelley Fox came to prominence shortly after her graduation from the famed Central Saint Martins MA in 1996. Her beautifully-crafted “scorched felt” pieces, which made up her graduation collection, were promptly acquired by Liberty, the London department store known for championing independent designers. Initially known for her textile experimentation and innovative pattern-cutting techniques, Fox eventually began to expand her practice into installation and film, at first in conjunction with her fashion presentations and later—as she became a research fellow at Central Saint Martins and ceased to produce seasonal collections—as stand-alone research projects.

What characterizes the various permutations of her work is an attention to the materiality of the fabric and garments she creates. This often leads her to explore the connections between clothes, memory and history—an exploration which is backed by extensive research in archives and collections. Perhaps counterintuitively, she combines this interest in the physicality of the clothes with an engagement with a variety of media. Partially thanks to her numerous collaborations, she has expanded her practice into film, sound installations, photography and, through a project she produced together with SHOWstudio in 2002, digital media. This multimedia aspect of her work is matched by a multi-sensorial one, as the sound and smell of the clothes and the fabric often play an important role in her work.

Fox has recently been appointed Donna Karan Professor of Fashion and chair of the soon-to-be-launched MFA program in Fashion Design and Society at Parsons. This has prompted her move to New York, where she plans to convey this expansive idea of what it means to be a fashion designer to her students. I met with Fox at a West Village coffee shop to discuss her past and present work.

**Fashion Projects: Were you trained in fashion or textile design?**

Shelley Fox: My training originated in fashion from the very beginning, even back to the point that I learned to sew by making my own clothes. I learned through old dressmaking patterns, and it helped me understand construction and the order in which a garment goes together. So I was trained in fashion, making and cutting and I jumped around a bit in the way I went through my education.

Eventually, I went to Central Saint Martins, where I pursued a textiles design degree. I specialized in knitwear, and from there I had a year out, where I went to worked for a designer, Joe Casely-Hayford. Then I went back to do the MA program at Saint Martins,
which was womenswear/knitwear.

FP: Was it already a well-known program?

SF: Yes, Alexander McQueen had graduated from the program in 1992. New people were coming out and it was building a crescendo...

As soon as I left Central Saint Martins, Liberty (in London) wanted to buy my collection. I had already been offered a job in Italy in Rimini to work in knitwear, but I was in my late 20s by that point and didn’t want to live in a seaside town in the middle of nowhere, so I decided to go with Liberty and do my own thing in the way I knew how with very little experience. From there I started my own label, but I didn’t start presenting to the public in terms of a catwalk show or installation until my fourth and fifth collection, which was in ‘98/’99.

FP: A couple of years ago, I was teaching at Goldsmiths in what was then the textiles BA, and the students were the first ones to explain to me in detail the techniques that you used in your work. Your work seems to have a patina. It seems to be artificially aged insofar that you “torch sequins” and “scorch felt.” How did you come to these techniques?

SF: I used to teach textile students at Goldsmiths. The scorching of the felt came about in my first collection, which was the MA graduation collection in 1996. I was working with a lot of John Smedley yarn and it was knitted on an industrial circle knitting machine and felted through a domestic washing machine. And then I would have it pressed. What happened is that one day it got stuck in the machine and started to scorch. I realized there was a way of controlling the heat, so that’s how I developed that collection. It was almost by accident. But when that happened, it changed the entire collection in terms of pattern cutting ideas as well as the physical fabric, because I could engineer and highlight where darting and construction lines were by partially locking out a specific section from the heat so that an exact shape would be left, almost like an X-ray. I could create patterns on the fabric by scorching it in and burning it in and there was a way of controlling that.

FP: Was there something in particular that attracted you to the process?

SF: There was a particular smell to the collection, which was really interesting. I used to get told off by the technicians because of the smell it used to create in the print studio, but I had to keep doing it to get the whole collection done. It wasn’t really burning, it was more of a fine scorch—it looked beautiful and there was something about the smell that I really enjoyed.

FP: Were “the torched sequins” developed in the same collection or was it later?

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Was it important to you that both gave an idea of the passage of time?

SF: The sequins were developed four years later, in 2000. To be honest, the passage of time wasn’t necessarily my main concern with those two collections. I did something else which related more directly to that concept in 2004. I did a scarf project which was called “Fashion and Modernity.” I worked really close with the fashion theorist Caroline Evans on it, as she was in charge of the larger project funded by the Arts Humanities Research Council. It started with about 200 scarves, again still loom felted. They were made because I had become obsessed with photography, and in particular carte de vista from the 19th century—those little photographs from when society first started to be photographed. I had found them in a flea market, and was intrigued by the fact that people’s family boxes of photographs end up in the market stands. There was a real fascination with the histories of the people in the photographs. I would keep asking myself: “Who are they? What do they do? I wonder if their granddaughter is still alive. Did they have children or not?”

FP: Did you use the carte de vista in tandem with the scarf for the “Fashion and Modernity” project?

SF: Yes, we had two hundred scarves of about nine or eight different colors. We drew around the scarf for the “Fashion and Modernity” project? the scarf project called Curzon told me later on that a guy had lost his house keys at the cinema, and so he went back to the cinema to the lost and found, where they gave him the key, as well as one of my scarves. From then on, they decided that every first customer of the day who went to lost and found would get a scarf. They started their own stories. Each store started to do its own thing, which was quite interesting.

FP: So in a way you were combining those random people’s memories with the histories of local merchants in Soho…

SF: Yes, or they found a way of choosing them. This great independent cinema in Soho called Curzon told me later on that a guy had lost his house keys at the cinema, and so he went back to the cinema to the lost and found, where they gave him the key, as well as one of my scarves. From then on, they decided that every first customer of the day who went to lost and found would get a scarf. They started their own stories. Each store started to do its own thing, which was quite interesting.

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SF: Yes, and inside the packet we put together a questionnaire for the people to answer, through email or with a pre-stamped envelope, and it would ask questions like: “How would you like to be remembered?” “What do you think of these photo cards being on the scarf?” “What’s your reaction to it?” “Do you carry photographs of friends, family, lovers around with you?”

FP: Did you actually get some of the questionnaires back?

SF: Yes, we got loads. Some people were really upset by the whole situation. They were freaked out by it, “No, I wouldn’t want to be remembered in this way.” And other people went to the other extreme. One girl wrote an entire essay on the characters in the photograph, sort of like a play…

FP: So it became this participatory project in a way! Going back in time a bit, you also did a collection and a presentation at the ICA in 2002, which was based on family portraits, but, in that case, your own family portrait?

SF: That collection (collection no. 14) started with me going into a shop, in Spitalfields, where I found folded napkins which were exquisite. They were second hand and what attracted me to them was the way they were starched and folded, in a very pristine way, suggesting a very upstairs/downstairs old country house linen cupboard. And there were also pillow cases and tablecloths. I bought them all and they sat on my desk for six weeks before I really knew what I was going to do with them. Later, I found out that the napkins were from the Concorde, so they were the exquisite napkins you would have got when you flew on the Concorde. I developed the actual collection based on the napkins and the pillowcases. I used the actual napkins to develop a series of dresses. The way they folded and twisted from the neck informed how the entire collection was developed.

Originally the collection was to be shown in Paris and it never happened because my backer pulled the support four days before the show. We were already working with SHOwStudio, with the idea of live footage from the catwalk, so we opted for a film instead. The starting point for the film were the photographs of Mike Disfarmer—an American photographer who recorded towns around Arkansas in the early ’40s. Many of them were images of families, of brothers and sisters. Everyone in the picture is interconnected and there is always someone who seems like they didn’t want to be in the shot, or in that very family. So we framed the shoot around the idea of Disfarmer’s family photographs and in the beginning of the film we included my family photographs, my partner Ross’ family photographs and those of Scanner—who did the sound—and D-Fuse, who did the projections for the show. We all included our family photographs and built the beginning of the film around that.

FP: Your work also seems to be about materiality as opposed to just images. A lot of fashion companies are very image driven and there is less attention paid to the physicality of the clothes. So I guess your approach is counter to the majority of what fashion is now… To some extent, I relate your approach to the new interest in slow fashion and sustainability. Your work is, of course, limited production and there are countless stories and narratives surrounding these very carefully crafted garments. I was thinking about this in relation to your work overall and your installation at Belsay in particular, where you stuffed the walls of a room with bales and bales of fabric. Those made me think of over-production, they reminded me of mounts of discarded fabric…

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changing of clothing that passed through generations. The idea was based around the changing body, which would be put through an exercise regime and the dresses, as they were too small to fit onto the contemporary standard model-size mannequin. The scan images as an idea and I started to work with the vintage garments. I placed them on really hard to make sure that they would stick to the regime and they didn’t so I ended up using the and I reluctantly did because I was just moving to New York. But it didn’t really work, as it was to work through the project with found vintage clothes. It was suggested that I use volunteers through a six months exercise regime and then be rescanned at intervals throughout the project. I went to upstate New York to buy them.

Adapted to different bodies. It reminded me how I started by making my own clothes. So I was always prove health, as often thin people can have internal fat which is the most dangerous. At the same time, I was looking at images from Walker Evans, from the 1930s, from the Depression. The photos got me thinking about the process of clothes-making and the way people used to make their own clothes as opposed to buying them ready-made, and the way clothes would be passed on and adapted to different bodies. It reminded me how I started by making my own clothes. So I was interested in using found clothes from the ’30s and ’40s as my starting point for the project and went to upstate New York to buy them.

The intention was to use myself as a subject. I would be fat-scanned and then I would be put through a six months exercise regime and then be rescanned at intervals throughout the project. I would work through the project with found vintage clothes. It was suggested that I use volunteers and I reluctantly did because I was just moving to New York. But it didn’t really work, as it was really hard to make sure that they would stick to the regime and they didn’t so I ended up using the scan images as an idea and I started to work with the vintage garments. I placed them on contemporary mannequins and began taking them apart. I removed sections of panels within the dresses, as they were too small to fit onto the contemporary standard model-size mannequin. The idea was based around the changing body, which would be put through an exercise regime and the changing of clothing that passed through generations.

FP: Were they supposed to fit you?
SF: Yes, that was my intention to make it based on me, because there is an emotional way you feel when you wear certain garments. I used to wear clothes from the ’30s and ’40s all the time when I was about 20, because I was smaller then, and they would hang on me in a particular way. Now, if I try and wear them it’s much different: the waistline changes and it has do with the way your body changes when you get older, so I wanted to realign them to my memory of how I remembered wearing them… I hope to re-visit the project again but approaching it differently using my own body scans over a period of time.

FP: You mentioned smell being important to your designs, which is quite unusual. Most people don’t connect fashion with the sense of smell, but rather think of it primarily in visual terms. I also realized that sound seemed central to a number of your presentations and films. Your collaborations with the sound artist Scanner seems really important to you. So I wanted to ask you about the multimedia aspect, or multisensory aspect, of your work...

SF: We first started thinking about sound when we did our first installation, which was a sound installation, at a store called Joseph. It was an empty store and we took it over for fashion week. It was for the Autumn/Winter 1998 collection—the Braille collection which used Braille markings on the wool used to construct the clothes. Three seasons later for Spring/Summer 2000, we produced a collection around the Morse code. We took a quote by Nietzsche and we typed in our Morse code translator which would convert it into dot dash visuals and into the sound it would make, so we used the visuals for the clothing and then we used the sound for the room.

FP: So in a way the clothes carried sound in them via the Morse code...
SF: Yes, but it wasn’t necessarily obvious to people watching them.

Later, I worked with Scanner for the Belsay project. It was a visual and a sound piece. The sound was the interviews of the servants that worked there in the 1930s and ’40s. We did some research with the English heritage and they pulled the sound archives of the interviews they did when they bought this particular house in Belsay. They had bought the house in the early 1980s and it had dry rot, which meant that it would get eaten from the inside and eventually collapse. So they had to go in and save it, which they did. At that point, they started to look at the architecture of the building and began to wonder why certain things like staircases had been moved. The only people who would know these intimate details about the house were the servants who had worked there. So they interviewed them all and they had to do it quickly because they were quite elderly. Some of them lived in the local area—they had been young girls who went into service into these big old houses. Ultimately for the purpose of the project, Scanner worked with the interviews and developed a sound piece which incorporated snippets of their voices telling their personal stories.

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the final outcome to be more inspirational? When you conceptualize an exhibition are you first intrigued by certain objects, or with a specific question and theme?
JC: I am definitely more interested in process, though I care about the final outcome a lot. It is the hit most people like reading about which is why I am keen to document process in the accompanying exhibition catalogues.

In terms of how I work, I think all of the things you mention appear more or less simultaneously: objects, themes and narrative questions. Then you start testing the different assumptions: questions such as, How many objects exist to illustrate a theme, or is it just the one piece you fell in love with? And then there is the important issue of the enfolding space. I have recently both curated and designed exhibitions so the installation evolves as the objects appear. I do a lot of sketching. I am more of an exhibition designer than a dress historian.

FP: I love your statement "Anthropomorphic imagination makes clothes magical." What is it about clothing that can make us instinctually feel an imagined closeness, or parallel existence, as if we somehow understand its previous life?
JC: We dream and imagine stories that are inhabited by clothed people. The stories are powerful because of their associations, not