

RLSD INTERNATIONAL — APPAREL 2026

Faces in Shift

*A modular vegetable-tanned leather garment inspired by Paiwan Indigenous culture
and the hundred-pace snake mythology*

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ABOUT

About Me

I'm Fu-Ling Kuo, a costume designer and interdisciplinary artist based in Taiwan. I earned my MFA from Taipei National University of the Arts and my MA in Costume Design for Performance from London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London.

In addition to my studio work, I've designed costumes for theatre, explored material research, practised leather craft, and created performances and installations. My projects range from making adaptive costumes for live shows to developing original leather pieces inspired by post-colonial identity and Indigenous culture. In 2022, I was honoured with a Gold Award at World Stage Design.

Design isn't just my job; it shapes how I see the world. I'm interested in questions about identity, migration, and cultural layering, as well as materials and crafts that hold history. In my work, I keep asking: how can a face, a garment, or a piece of leather show who we are? I'm especially drawn to slow, labour-intensive craft. My work often brings together techniques from different cultural traditions — Japanese kaki-shibu dyeing, Indigenous Taiwanese motifs, hand-prepared natural dyes — combining old methods with new forms. I'm strongly drawn to working with leather: a material that ages, scars and remembers.

To me, leather is more than just a surface. It's timeless, natural, and durable. Unlike disposable materials, leather keeps a personal history in every mark it holds.



Photo by Miyaw, 2024

01 PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Summary

Faces in Shift started with a question I could not answer: what happens to a garment when its wearer has already changed? That question led to the modular structure. Panels can be taken off and replaced. The garment is not discarded when the wearer changes, because it is made for the person inside.

This piece is a modular garment, with about 80% made from vegetable-tanned cattle leather. The remaining 20% uses ten-year-old chrome-tanned sheepskin deadstock, which I rescued from storage to reduce waste. The leather is finished with persimmon tannin (kaki-shibu), iron-mordant botanical printing, and wax-resist (batik) dyeing, using a mixture of wood wax and white wax. The techniques are more than decoration. Both kakishibu dyeing and iron-mordant botanical printing face a challenge: vegetable-tanned hides lack the minerals that help mordants bind, unlike chrome-tanned leather. Most makers avoid this, but I chose to work with it because that tension is part of the design.

MATERIAL

80% vegetable-tanned cattle leather

20% chrome-tanned sheepskin (10-year aged stock)

TECHNIQUE

Persimmon tannin

Iron mordant

Wax-resist (batik)



Moodboard

the hundred-face snake

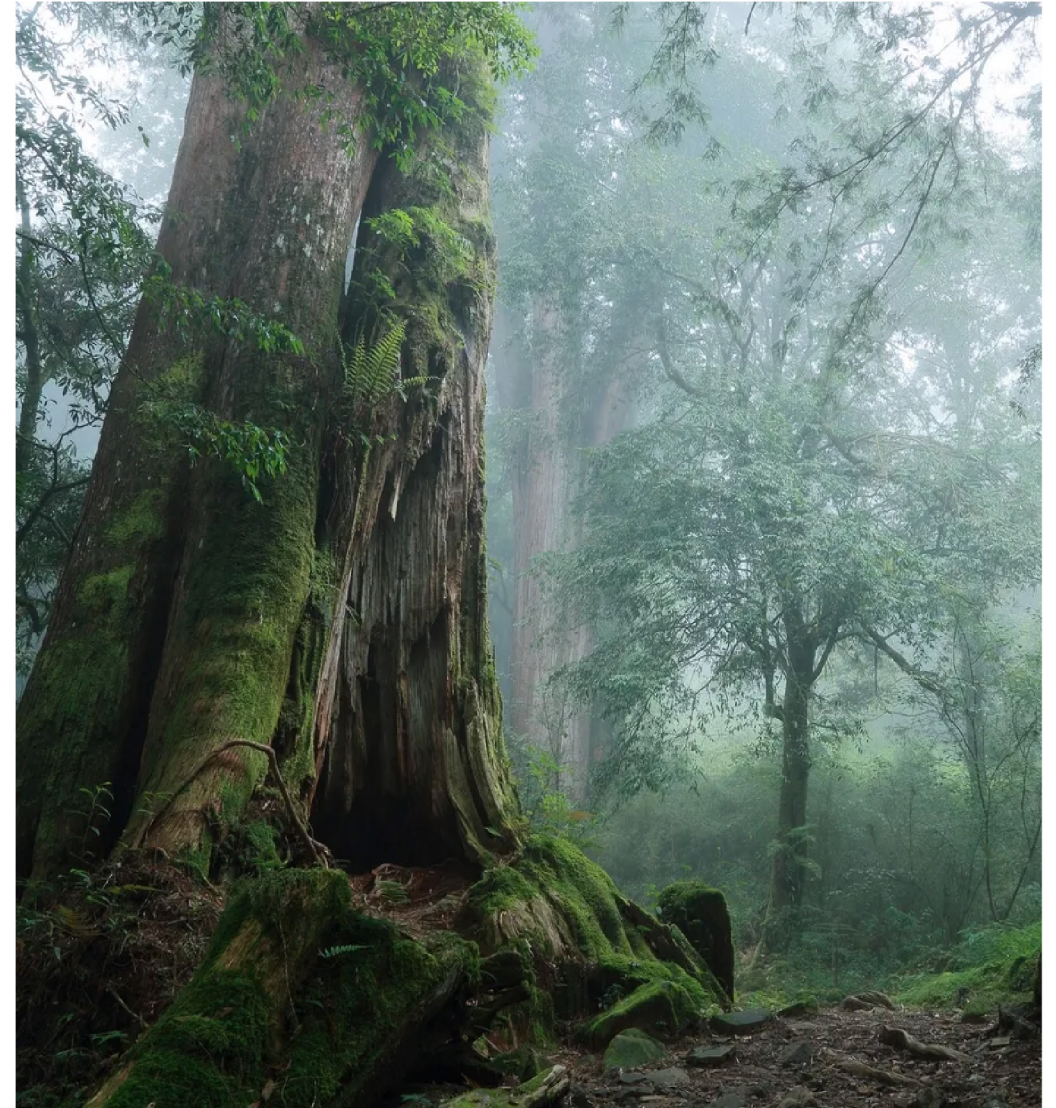


For the indigenous peoples in southern Taiwan, the hundred-face snake is regarded as an ancestor rather than a predator. They give it names like elder, companion, the true one, and serpent king. In their stories, the snake appears as a guardian, a nobleman, or a husband. It is patient unless wronged and becomes protective once a bond is formed.



<https://digicoll.nmns.edu.tw/zh-Hant/stories/herp-story-5>

Taiwanese Forest



<https://www.greenforcare.eu/news/yu-ntu-professor/>

02 MOODBOARD



Taiwan Indigenous People Tattoo
<https://picryl.com/media/pd-japan-oldphoto>



Face Tattoo of
the Atayal tribe

The snake's back shows a repeating pattern of diamonds and triangles, which became the main symbol of chiefly lineage. This pattern is carved into house posts, woven into ceremonial cloth, and tattooed on warriors' arms. Only nobles could wear this pattern. Carrying it was a way to show your ancestry.

In this tradition, tattooing was not about self-expression. It was something inherited and earned, marked on the body as a lasting sign of who you were and your place in society. Faces in Shift begins by asking a different question: what happens to identity when it cannot be fixed? The panels of this garment work like the hundred-pace snake pattern once did, serving as visible signs of who the wearer is. Unlike that pattern, however, these panels can be removed. They can be swapped, replaced, or worn in new ways as the person changes. The garment becomes a face you can choose.

pattern carved into house posts



<https://alilin.cip.gov.tw/ebook/> <https://pu3228ck.blogspot.com/2009/05/why.html>

02 MOODBOARD



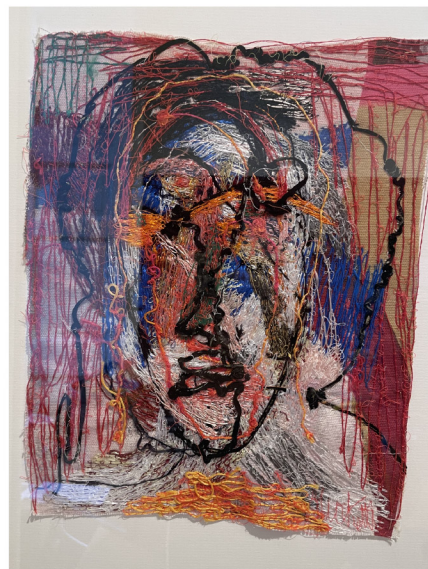
Face Tattoo of the Atayal tribe

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B7ORHMON-cj/>

Picasso, Pablo, Self portrait, 1955



Alice Kettle, Stanley, 2025
Artworks - Candida Stevens Gallery



My work inspired by
Self-Portrait of Francis Bacon, 2025

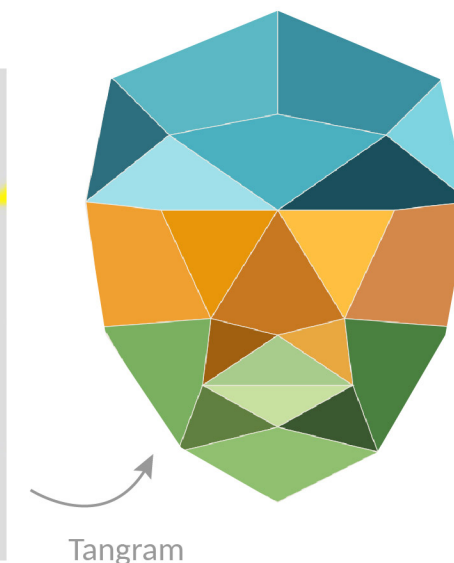
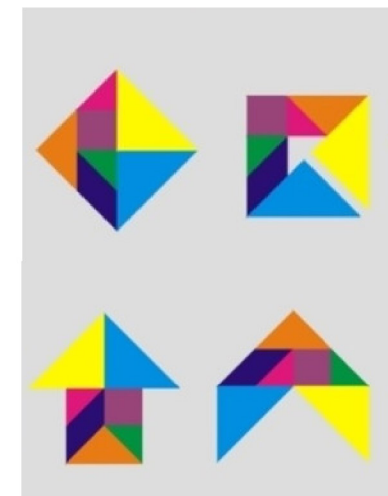


Jenny Saville, Red Stare Head II, 2007

National Portrait Gallery, London



Sociologist Erving Goffman described the face not as a physical surface but as the identity a person shows in social situations, formed by both inner feelings and others' expectations. A garment can work similarly. While Paiwan tattoos make that identity permanent on the body, Faces in Shift asks what happens when identity must change. The panels can be detached, replaced, rearranged, or worn differently as the person changes. The garment becomes a face that can be chosen.



Design Narrative

Identity in London

Living in London changes you. I noticed this over time, as my language shifted and things that once felt strange became normal, only to seem unusual again years later. Seeing other Taiwanese people who had lived here longer and changed from their roots made me wonder where the line was. London forces you to face this question. It is a city shaped by people dealing with these changes every day, in every neighbourhood.

When I felt lost, I looked back at my roots. Over the past four hundred years, Taiwan has been ruled by the Dutch, the Spanish, the Zheng dynasty, the Qing dynasty, and Japan. Each brought new people, languages, and cultures. Because of this, many Taiwanese people today struggle to define who they are. Identity here is not fixed; it grows and changes over time. Scholars call this a diaspora or post-colonial identity crisis: after colonial rule, historical ruptures, or migration, identity is fractured and reconstructed.

Taiwan under five successive regimes

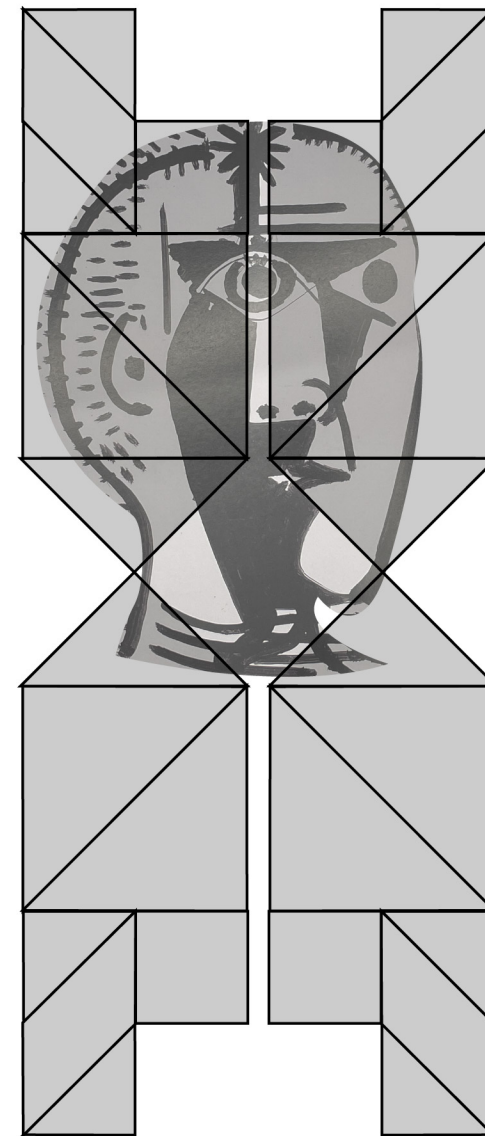
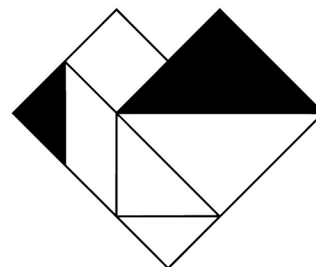
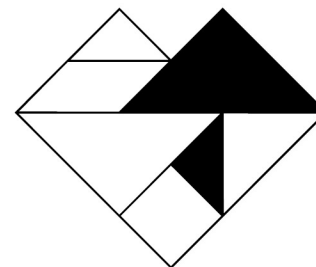
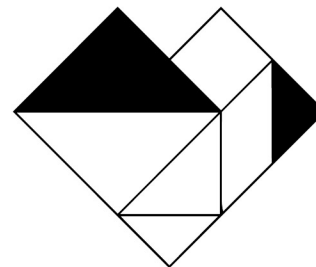
400 years of colonial rule — and a continuous Indigenous presence



02 STORYTELLING

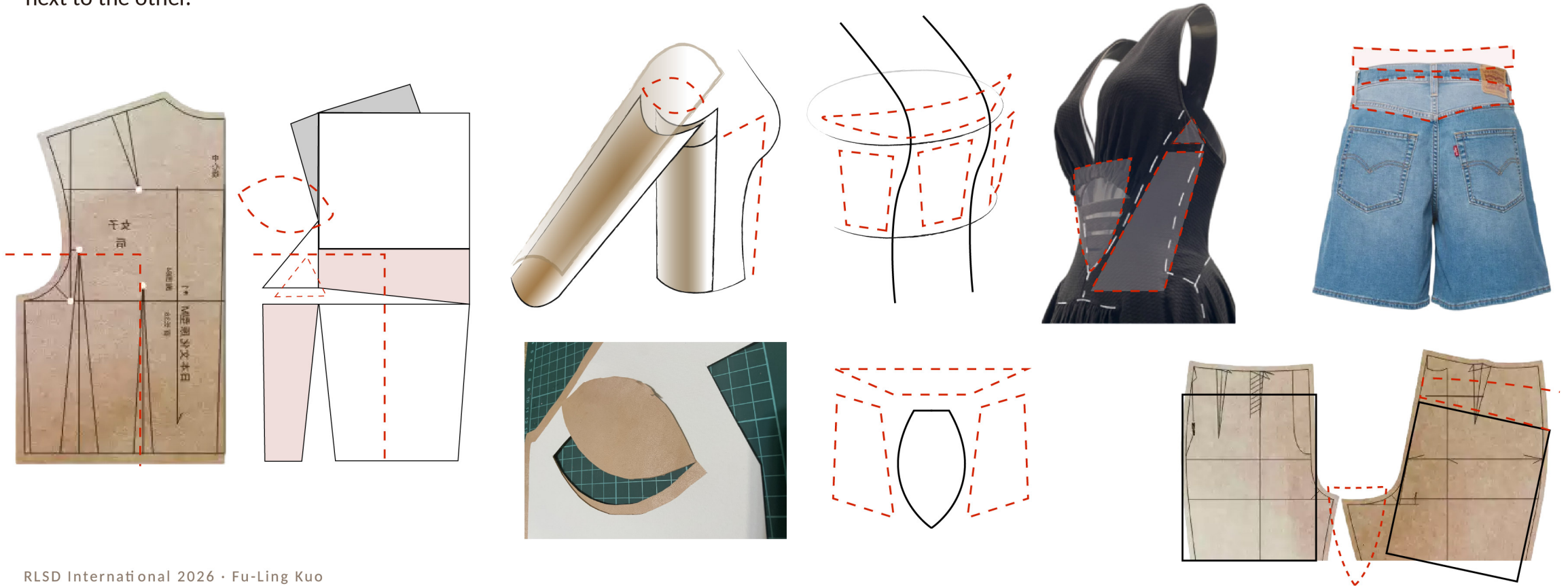
A plant example helps explain this. Korea and Taiwan share some street-tree species, but when a subtropical tree is moved to Korea's cooler climate, it grows differently because of the new weather, soil, and light. Sometimes it almost looks like a different tree. The genetic code and leaf shape stay the same, but the environment changes how it looks. Only by looking closely at the leaves and genetic markers can you tell, on a Seoul street, that it is a Taiwanese tree. People living abroad are similar: their language, habits, and appearance change with their environment, but some deeper traits remain. These are seen only on close inspection, but they are never lost.

This design reflects both my experience and that of Miyaw, an indigenous descendant with whom I spoke about her sense of fractured cultural identity. The design invites everyone in London, no matter where they are from, to see themselves in it. The garment is made from vegetable-tanned leather panels, each with its own cultural code, totem, or texture. These panels can be swapped, rearranged, or even given to someone else. The wearer is not limited by a fixed cultural costume; they choose which symbols to show on their body each day. As Miyaw said: 'Isn't the labelling of oneself also something one does to oneself?' This is about giving each wearer the freedom to decide which part of their identity to show.



Design Development

Each curve of the body has a natural grain direction and a type of leather that fits it best. When it comes to curved seams, even small changes in fit are much more noticeable to the wearer, so it is especially important to get the cut line right. The way to solve this is to cut along the right line, then join two panels with a lacing system that lets you adjust the tension as needed. This method creates a construction that does not depend on size. Interestingly, if you break down the curves of the body, they are really just straight lines. As a result, putting the panels together is like working with a tangram, where each piece fits next to the other.



03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



<https://www.instagram.com/p/DRmCkvoEbLk/>



<https://www.taiwanobsessed.com/taiwanese-aboriginal-culture/>



<https://www.xuexuecolors.org.tw/>

Vegetable-tanned
cowhide half
undyed

Vegetable-tanned
cowhide neck
undyed

Vegetable-tanned
cowhide neck
4 layers kakishibu

Vegetable-tanned
cowhide neck



Chrome-tanned
sheepskin deadstock
1 layer kakishibu

3 layers kakishibu
(firmer)

Chrome-tanned
sheepskin deadstock
undyed

3 layers kakishibu
(softer)



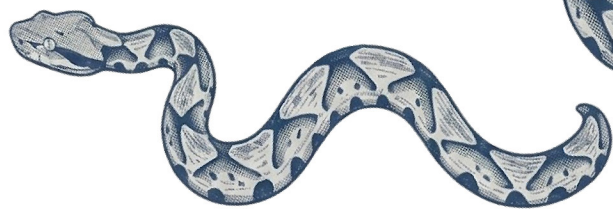
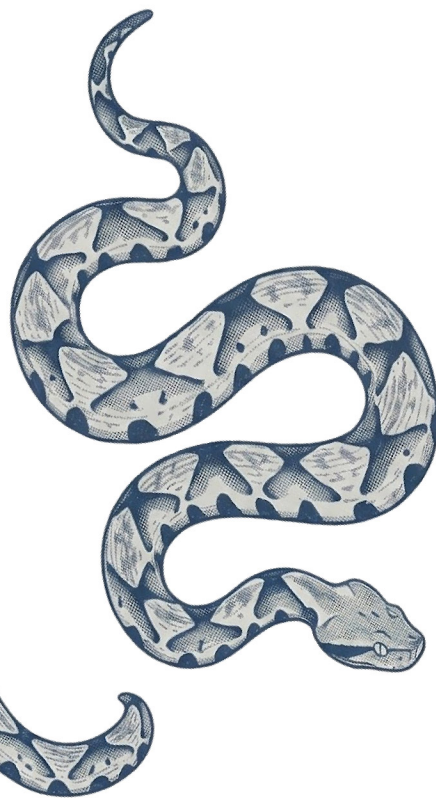
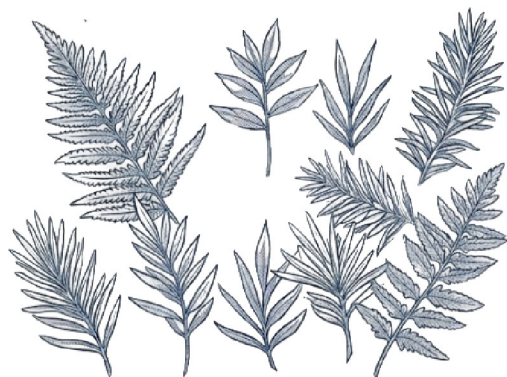
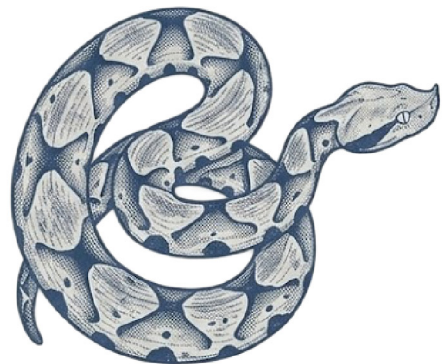
<https://www.xuexuecolors.org.tw/>



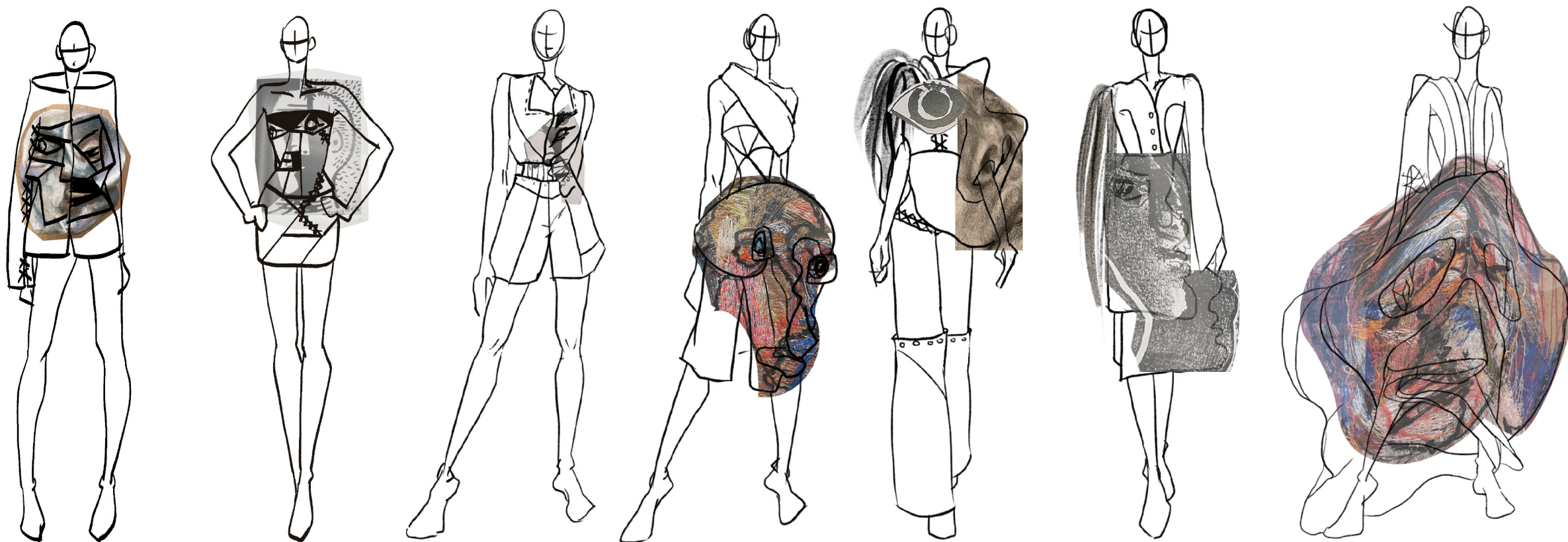
<https://www.wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/indigenous-taiwan/>

03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS

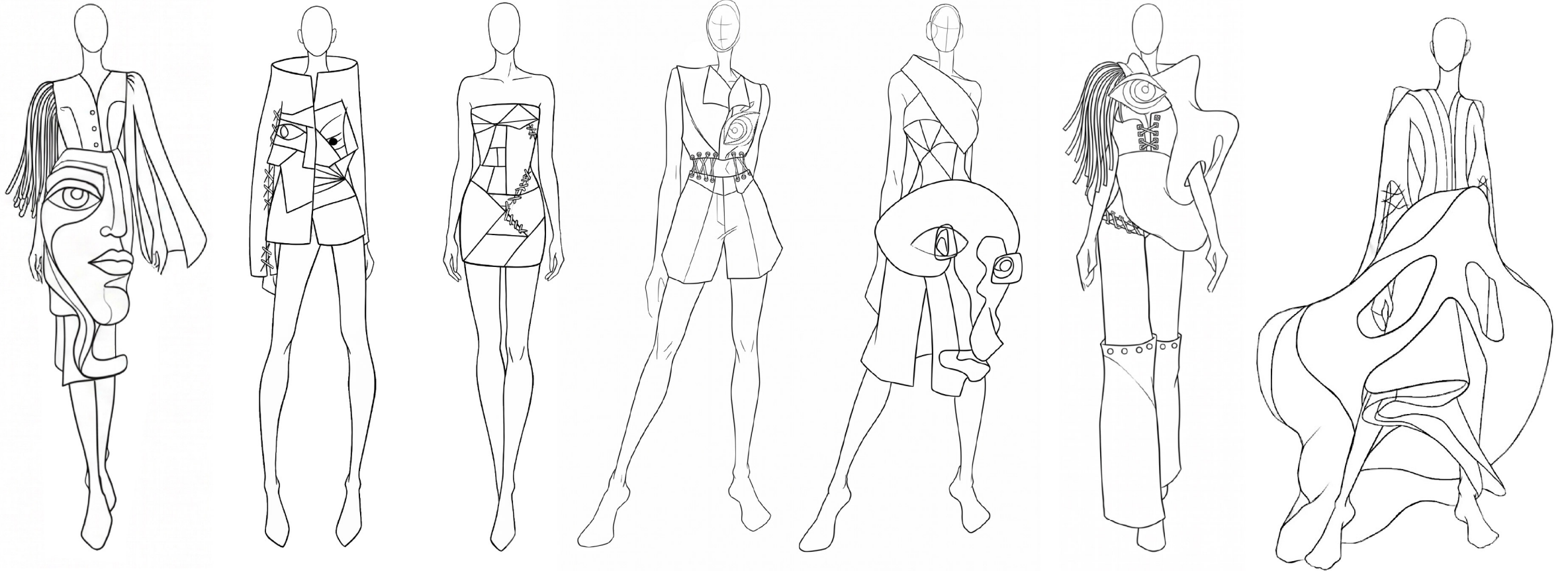
Patterns designed all by me



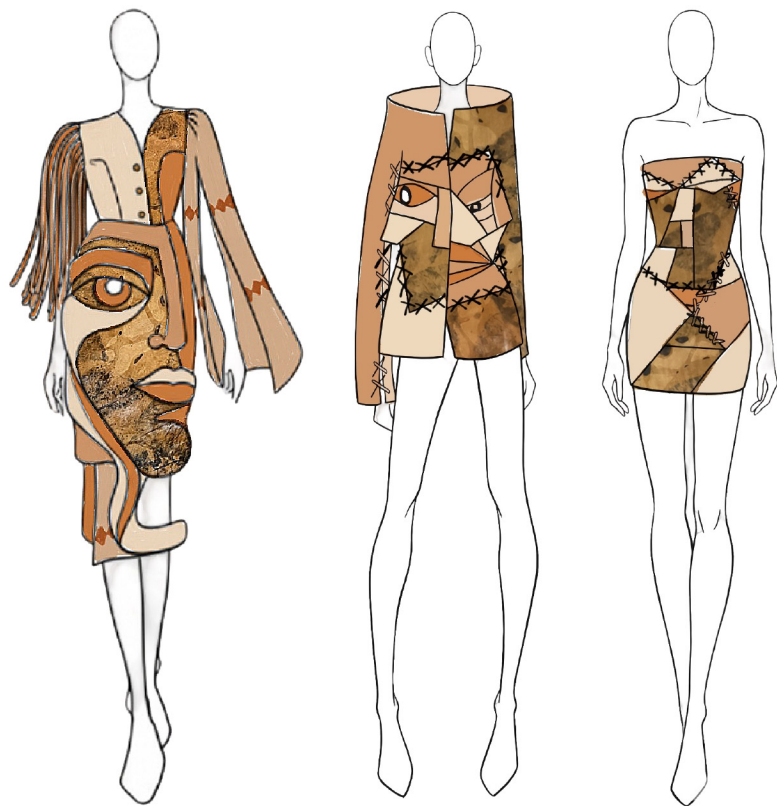
03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



@tim.35830408, Dcard

https://www.museum.org.tw/collection_detail.php?id=1345



abda.hl.gov.tw



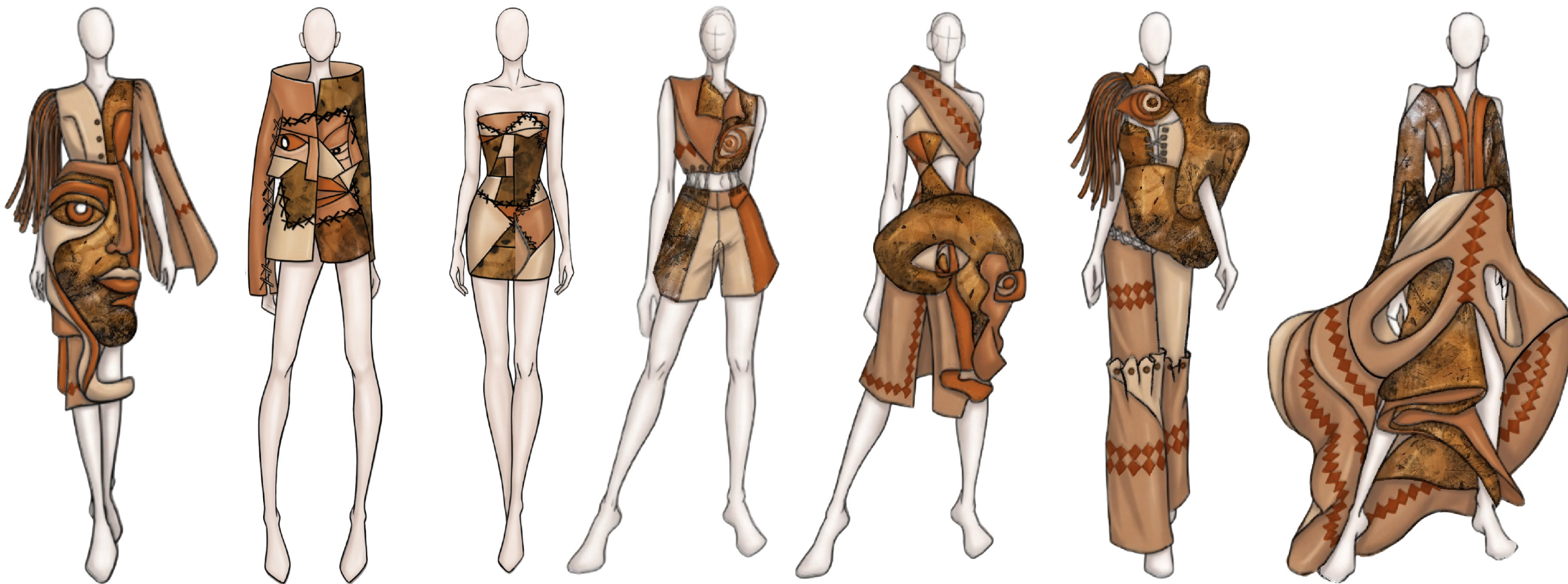
abda.hl.gov.tw



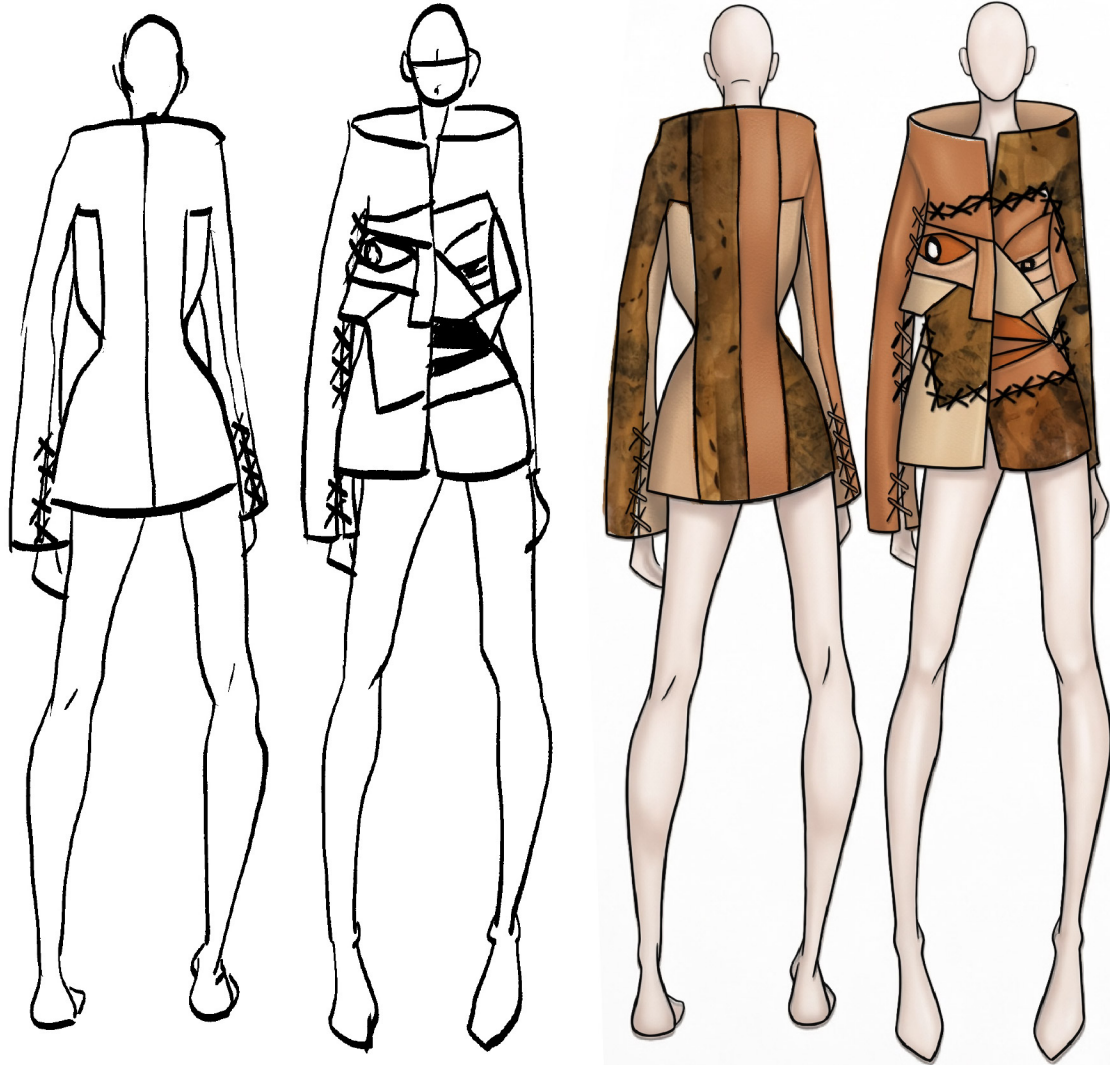
photo by 吳志學, 2012



03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS

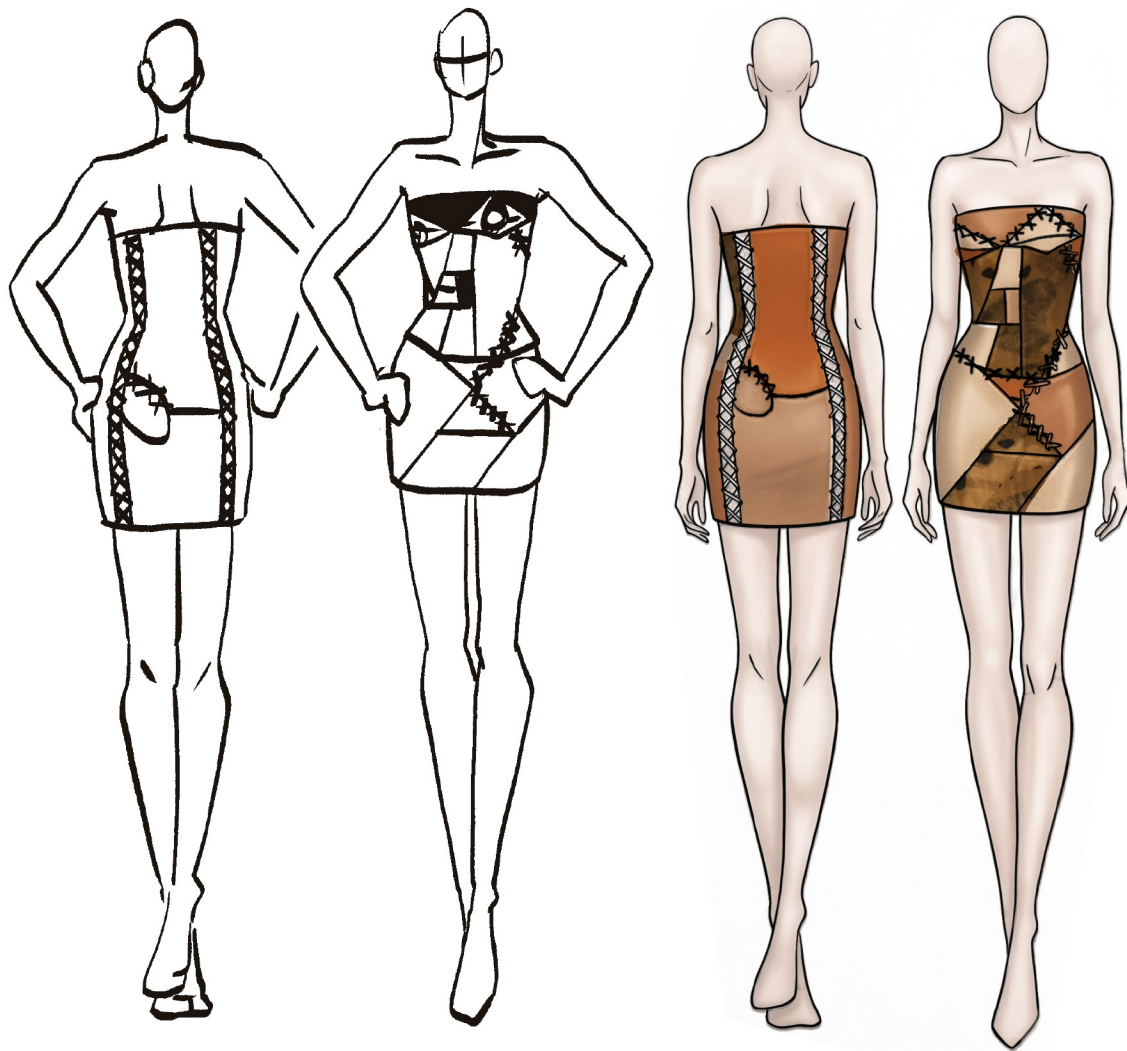


Pattern notes by me, 2025

Photo by Chen Liang Dao, 2013
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/idisdao/8713395429>

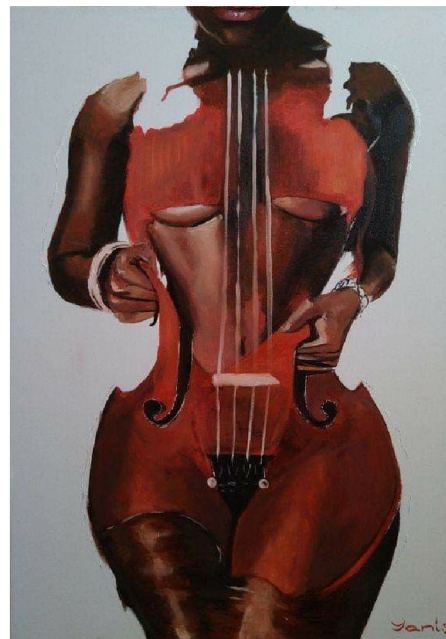


03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



Since each hide has a different level of stiffness, combining panels of varying firmness poses a challenge: how can you ensure the garment retains its shape and structure while remaining comfortable to wear? To solve this, I looked at how Dior and Alaïa place their seams. I used their methods as a guide for dividing the panels and spreading support across the body.

Muse (2021) Painting by Yanis Salimov

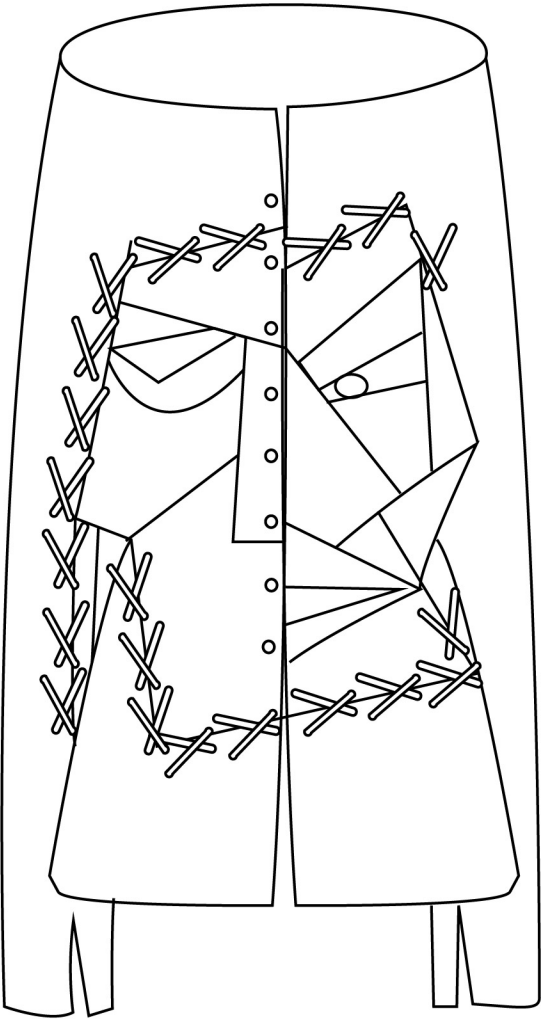


Pattern notes by me, 2025

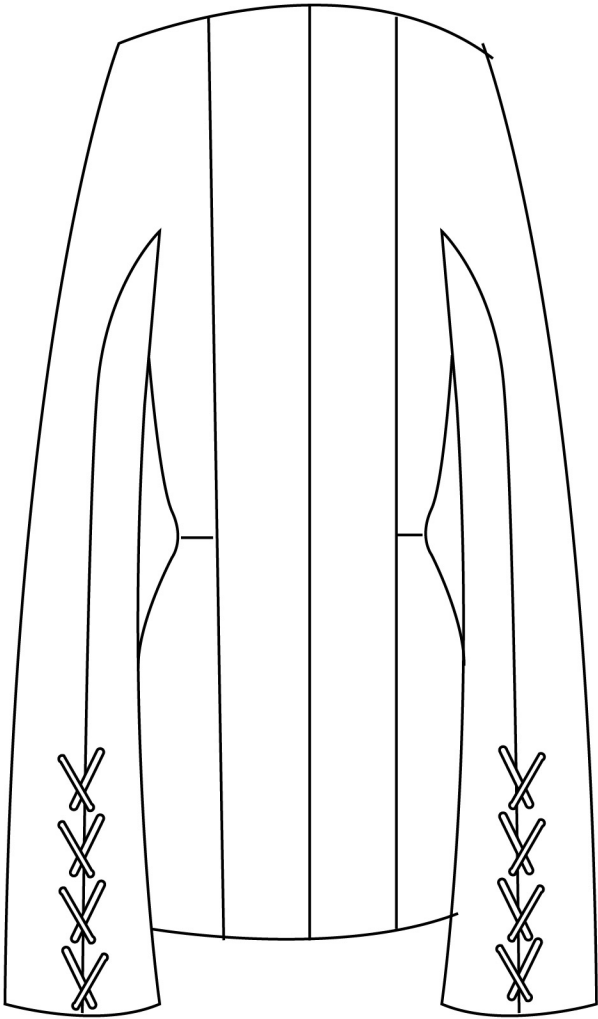


03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS

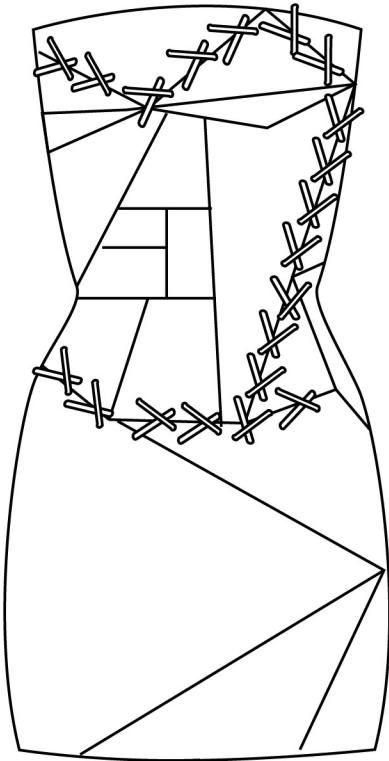
Front



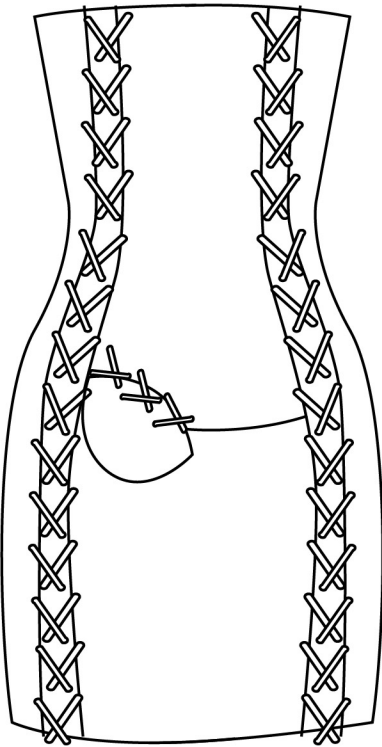
Back



Front



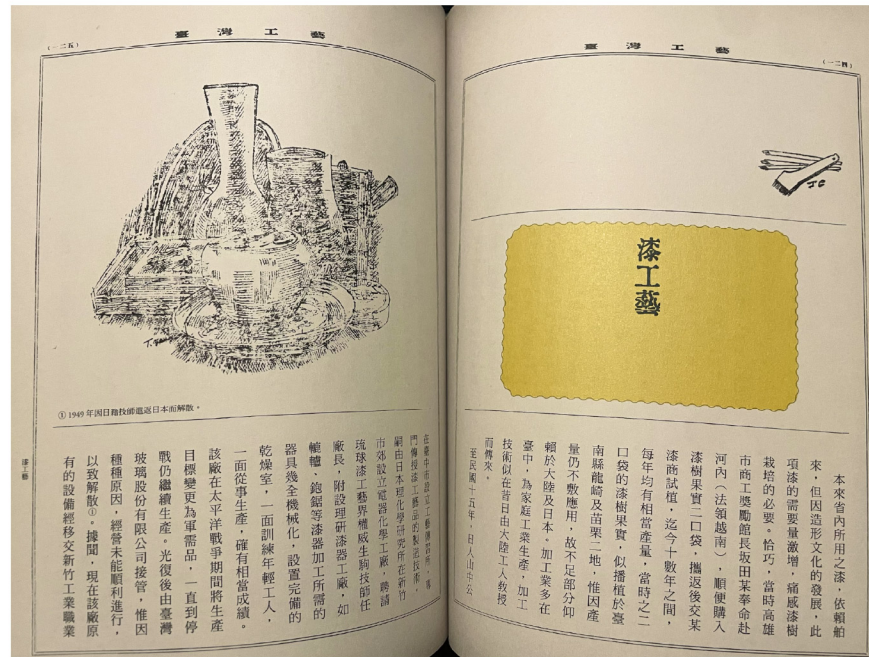
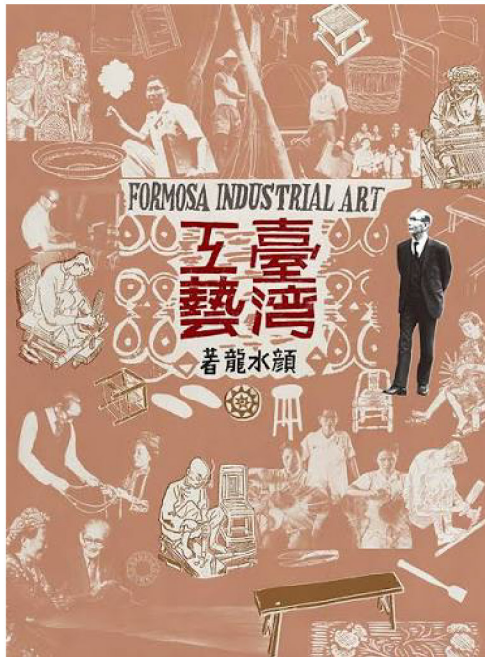
Back



Craft & Hybridity

The craft of this piece is intentionally mixed. Taiwan was a Japanese colony for fifty years, and Japanese culture remained even after the occupation ended. It became part of daily life and blended in over time. Kaki-shibu is an example: a natural waterproofing method in which persimmon tannin is applied in layers until the leather darkens and gains depth. I did not choose it to make a statement about Japan or Taiwan. I used it because it is part of the tradition I work in, and that is how cultural layering happens. The seam of a panel stays visible, connected by waxed-cotton cord. This follows the idea of kintsugi: damage is part of an object's history, not a sign of failure. A break marks the start of a new story. This Japanese repair philosophy is used on leather with a Taiwanese background, both present together without one hiding the other.

Taiwan's Arts and Crafts History written by Yen Shui-long



Kintsugi work by me



02 CRAFT NARRATIVE



Botanical contact printing on leather using a self-prepared iron acetate solution with foraged Taiwanese plant specimens



Waxing the printing stencils (reusable and washable)



02 CRAFT NARRATIVE

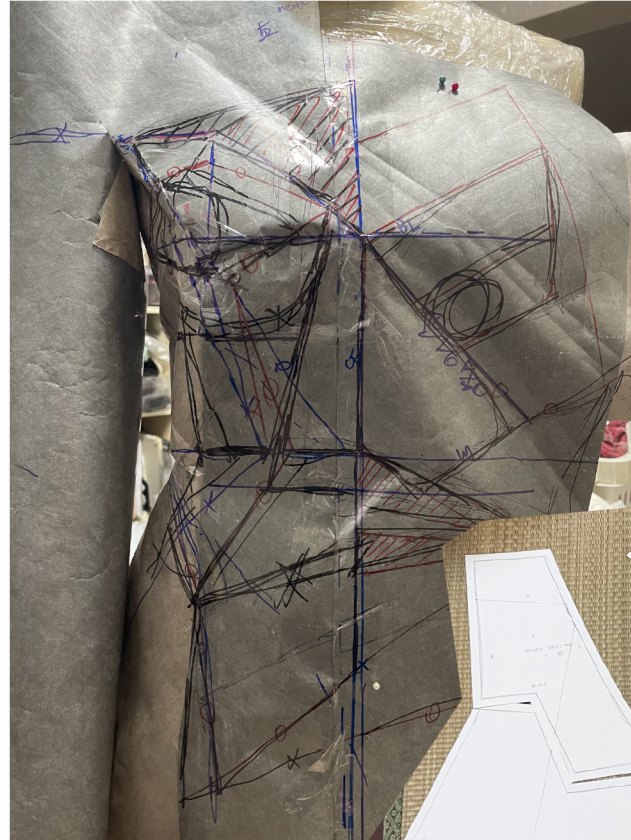
Applying kakishibu; colour development continued indoors under a plant lamp on rainy days



Gently scraping the wax from the leather's grain side, followed by immediate rinsing and drying



02 CRAFT NARRATIVE



Draping and cutting paper patterns; numbering the panels

02 CRAFT NARRATIVE

Assembling the panels (dress)



Assembling the panels (jacket)



02 CRAFT NARRATIVE



Flesh-side treatment and panel bonding



02 CRAFT NARRATIVE



Setting eyelets and snap fasteners



Applying gold leaf and finishing sealant



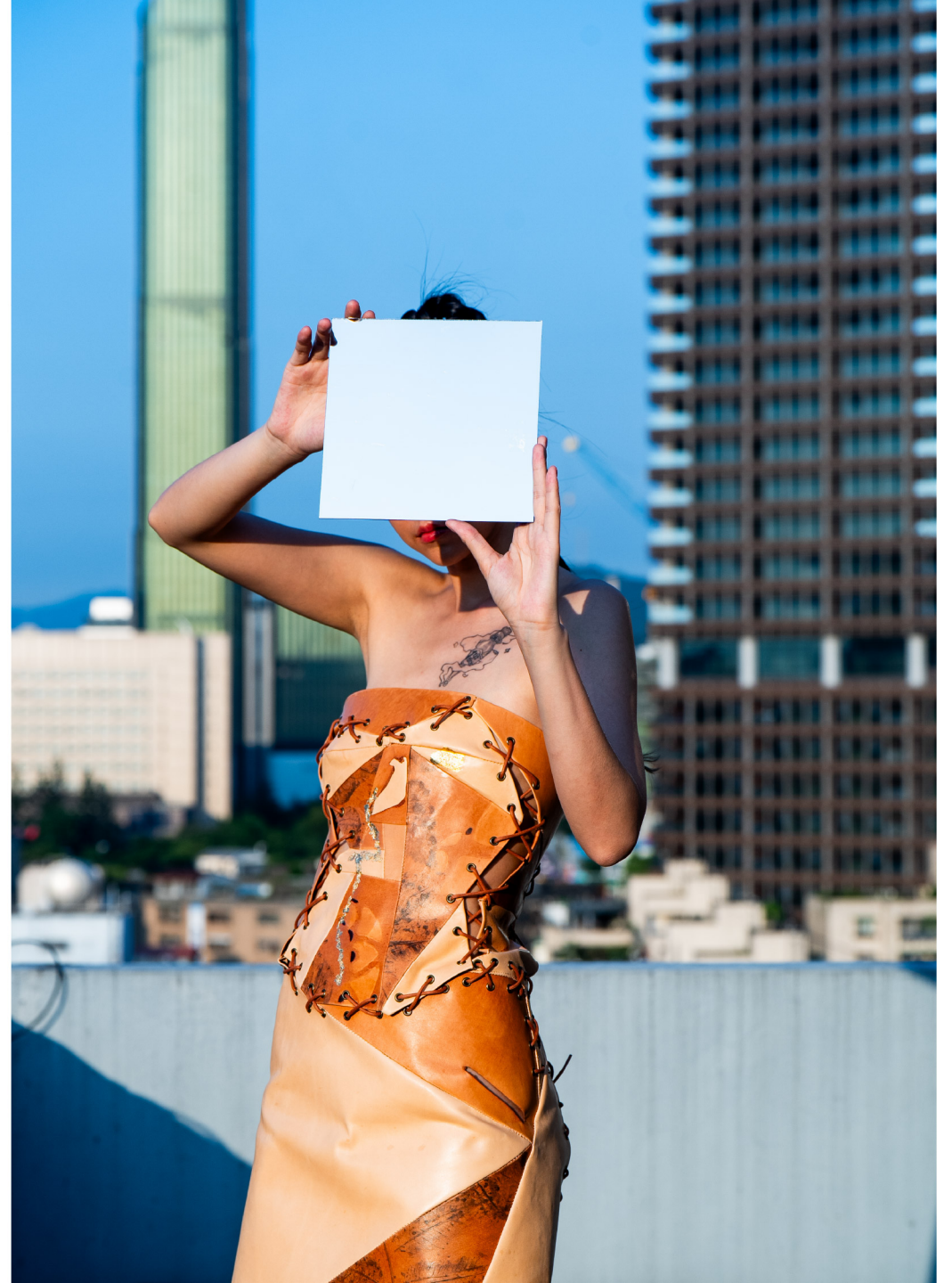
















Materials & Provenance

Material	Origin	Type	Proportion / Role	Sustainability note
Vegetable-tanned cattle leather	Taiwan	Natural	80% surface area	Slow-tanned
Chrome-tanned sheepskin (10-yr aged stock)	Taiwan	Mixed	20% surface area	Rescued deadstock, diverted from waste
Persimmon tannin / kaki-shibu	Traditional	Natural	Surface treatment	Natural preservative, no chemical additives
Iron mordant (ferrous acetate)	Self-prepared	Natural	Botanical printing	Iron + acetic acid, non-toxic
Botanical specimens (leaves)	Foraged, Taiwan	Natural	Surface printing	Zero waste
Wax-resist (wood wax + white wax)	Hand-prepared	Natural	Batik resist dyeing	Plant / mineral wax, biodegradable
Waxed cotton cord	.	Natural	Binding / stitching	Biodegradable fibre
Eyelets	.	Metal	Functional hardware	Durable, repairable
Snap fasteners	.	Metal	Functional hardware	Durable, repairable, recyclable

Sustainability

This garment is made mostly from vegetable-tanned cattle leather, which makes up 80% of the material. Vegetable tanning takes weeks, not hours, and that extra time matters because it lets the leather change and age with the person wearing it. Every mark left by the body becomes part of the garment. The ageing is meant to happen. The other 20% is chrome-tanned sheepskin that I found in storage, where it had been for ten years. Using deadstock instead of new hide is not a perfect answer, and mixing tanning methods is a compromise. I chose this approach because the material was already available, and leaving it unused would not have been more sustainable. The leather is kept in good condition without synthetic coatings. The iron mordant is made from iron and acetic acid. The wax-resist medium is a hand-mixed blend of wood wax and white wax. The plants used for printing are foraged and then composted. The only non-natural parts are the eyelets and snap fasteners, which are metal and can be repaired. If a panel wears out, you can remove and replace it, so the rest of the garment keeps going. When it finally reaches the end of its life, all the natural parts will break down. This garment is made to last, not to be thrown away.

RESEARCH NOTE

The Commercial Applications of Kakishibu Dyeing

From temple construction to luxury bag collections: a millennia-old natural dyeing craft

Origins & Traditional Uses

Kakishibu is a natural tannin liquid pressed from unripe green persimmons and fermented for months to years. Used in Japan since the Heian period for its water-proofing, antibacterial, and anti-rot properties, it has long been used to reinforce umbrellas, fishing nets, sake-filtering cloth, and stencil paper, and even to coat temple structures such as Hōryū-ji.

Case Study: Yoshida & Co.'s OLDNEW Series

In 2023, Yoshida & Co., the Japanese heritage bag maker behind PORTER, launched “OLDNEW,” its first new collection in six years under the LUGGAGE LABEL line. Omae Co., a craft workshop in Notogawa, Shiga Prefecture with over 40 years of kakishibu experience, dyes the pieces using repeated dipping and sun-drying to create deep, nuanced colours. The “KURE” colourway goes further, with pieces dipped a second time in iron-rich water to darken the hue toward black, which directly parallels the iron-mordant darkening used in this project. Priced between 52,800 and 71,500 yen and sold at PORTER flagship stores and Dover Street Market Ginza, OLDNEW demonstrates how a traditional dye craft can become a high-value fashion product.



<https://hypebeast.com/zh/2023/8/porter-yoshida-oldnew-collection-release-info>

RESEARCH NOTE

Other Applications & Implications

Also Used Commercially In

- | Sake clarification: the largest industrial use of kakishibu today
- | Building coatings: a non-toxic, mould- and formaldehyde-resistant interior finish
- | Personal care: an antibacterial, deodorising soap ingredient
- | Craft papermaking: conventional reinforcement for Ise-katagami stencil paper
- | Independent dye studios

Implications for Faces in Shift

Kakishibu was once used for temple coatings and fishing nets, but now it is a highlight in luxury bag collections. This change shows that natural mordant dyeing supports slower, more valued processes in today's market. Faces in Shift shows this idea too: kakishibu, iron mordant, and wax-resist are not just surface decoration. Instead, they show that slower craft keeps its value over time.

<https://hakkanews.tw/2024/09/11/142414/>
<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acul/202409110096.aspx>
<https://www.newsmarket.com.tw/blog/136631/>



<https://hch.hakka.gov.tw/>