

Dreaming of Melusine – how did I get there

As a background research for my exhibition I delved into the Victorian period female dress. What kind of embodiment one could imagine manifesting in the structures of the costume from this period? I looked into the history of the corset, crinoline dress and also accessories like different kind of jewelry. During Victorian period the jewelry had a significant meaning in reflecting emotions that couldn't be expressed other wise. Men sent necklaces with hidden compartments that held secrets to women, there were brooches with flower symbols that had different meanings. I was particularly intrigued of jet brooches and necklaces that are made of gemstone; hard coal that has formed from wood under extreme pressure. I found it interesting that something that has formed under extremely strong pressure buried deep in ground was made into an object to express emotions that had to be kept hidden... From this notion I started to think about a work that would be certain kind of accessory to clothing or even some kind of conceptualized piece of garment that would relate to this idea of repressed feelings. I was also thinking of the women's position in a society in those times; how many extremely talented women wanted to have careers and were instead bound to home doing handicrafts or other "suitable" entertainments for women. So for executing this piece I wanted to find a technique that would be monotonous like their days were filled with repetition of the same. I contemplated on different kind of textile manipulation techniques, embroidery and stitching. Finally I found a perfect technique that has been used for making paper beads. I adapted this technique to fabric in the form of beads that had juxtaposition to Victorian jewelry. These tightly rolled layers of fabric also resonated the echo of the jet coal symbolizing the unexpressed emotions. This is how the beaded "Silence" was born.

From the notion of silence I started to build the meaning for the next piece that I had had in mind already since early 2020. This piece would be an installation partly hanging in the air, composed of light structure that would resonate movement all over. I wanted to think of a costume that would only have it's outlines; like a sketch or brushstrokes of the painting. I'd been shocked by the fact that during Victorian times many women were burned to death because of their clothing. Crinoline skirts were easily flammable due to their structure: the cage that formed under the actual skirt from boning created a kind of tunnel for air and with fireplace centered heating the huge hems got occasionally in flames and the results were sometimes deathly. I started to see pictures of bent crinoline formed by the fire in my mind. Structure wise I was familiar of the benefits of different bonings used in corsets and felt that I needed to create a material form that would be similar to that of the crinoline.

The name "Dreaming of Melusine" for the twisting and turning "wire" piece derives from the myth of Melusine. Early on in the process of making I struggled with the notion of representing something that wouldn't only correlate as timid (from the Victorian dress) and sad and started to crave for a counter force for this timidness. I studied Victorian era's artists and found out that there was a myth that seemed to appear time after time in some of the works. This was the myth of Melusine. The myth itself originates as far as medieval times and is one the most famous myths especially in French folklore and fiction. Melusine was a heir of King of Scotland and his fairy wife. In her youth she entombed her father in a cave which displeased her mother. As a punishment Melusine was condemned to transform into a serpent every Saturday night. When married she managed to keep this secret from her husband. Until one day she was discovered and thus turned

into a spirit loosing her earthly form condemned to roam the dark forest alone until eternity. I therefore imagined the Victorian lady with her repressed feelings dreaming of Melusine, dreaming of transition: change in life. In my context I changed the curse of Melusine's condemnation into release; freedom. The twisting and turning of the pieces also refers to the nature of creative work; it often feels like weaving a web of loose threads: you have no idea in the beginning which idea will be worth finalizing. You cannot think everything through beforehand; there's thinking in making. Tim Ingold, famous anthropologist has said: "The craftsman does not impose the form on matter but finds the grain of things and then bends the grain to his or her evolving purpose. Thinking through making creates knowledge that grows from the inside, being in the unfolding of life."

For the last piece "Awakening" I had crafted a sculptural base already earlier in the fall for virtual design show. This dress was to be transformed into a costume installation. I wanted to emphasize the well known fact of corsets as "body bending" garments but loose the stiffness and instead (again) create flowing movement. This piece was also to be a counter piece for the "Dreaming of Melusine"-work. If "Melusine-piece" was airy this work needed to be so full of material that it would be succulent, bursting with material. I really wanted to dwell on what the materials were telling me; thinking in terms of their nature: materials are WHAT THEY CAN DO. To understand the material you need to have thorough knowledge of it. You don't just jump on it. I used very thin pleats to create a form that I could make to act like the bellows of the accordion; sometimes stretch them wide or keep them more closed. These pieces I then attached on the dress to give abstract touch and increase sensory feeling of the piece. For the black bottom part ("the leg") I drew inspiration from different Victorian period "smocking" techniques and tested several other ways of forming 3D surface. In the end I aimed for very organic looking surface; something that would resemble black stormy sea and it's waves as Melusine has been believed to dwell in deep waters once condemned to it's spirit form. It's interesting how in many myths is a curse to be transformed from human to animal. I want to question this; as humans we also have our animal sides and even if we don't literally turn ourselves into animals embracing the animal side can be considered as something important and graceful instead of demeaning.