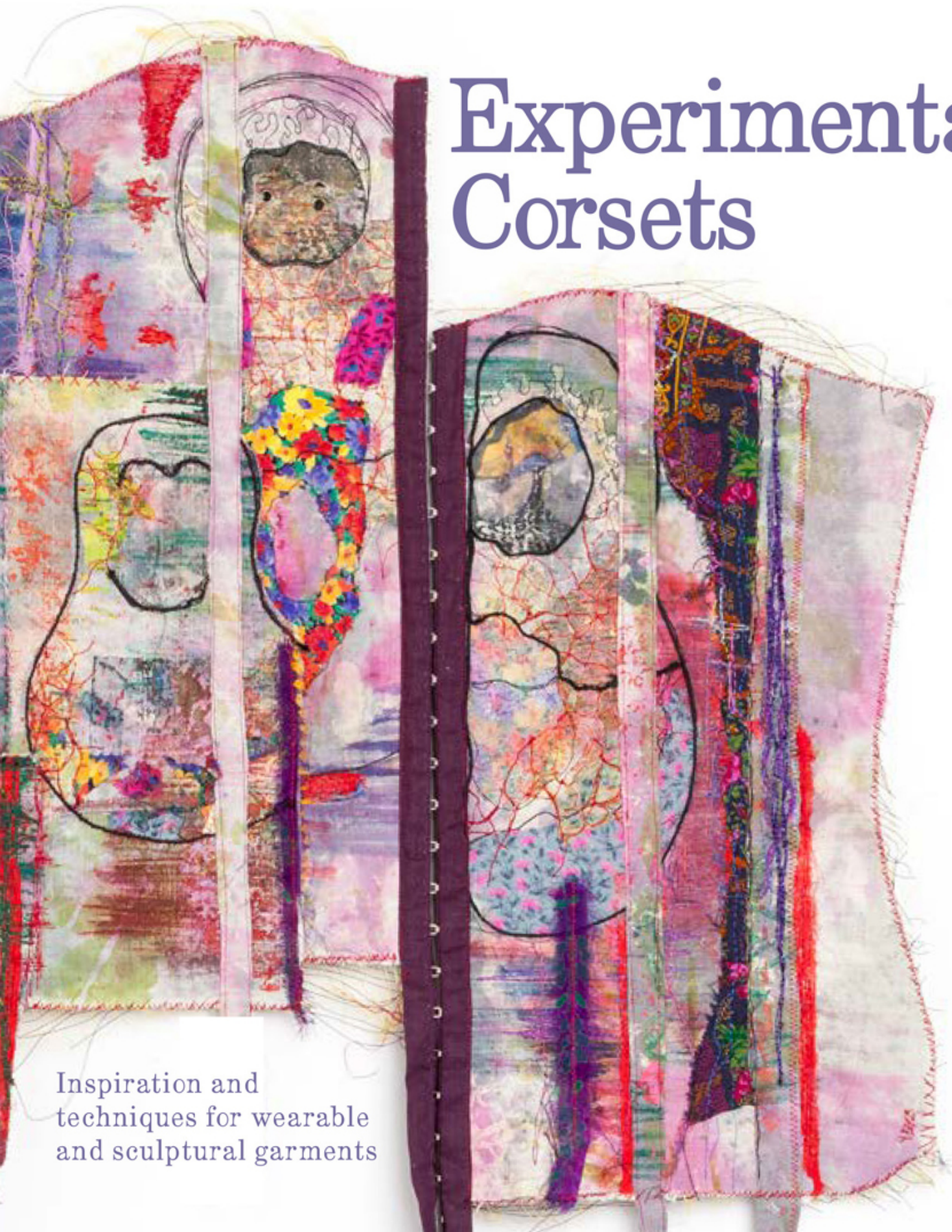


BATSFORD

Val Holmes

Experimental Corsets

The image displays two experimental corsets, one on the left and one on the right, both featuring intricate, multi-layered fabric construction. The left corset is primarily purple and pink, with a large, colorful, abstract face-like pattern in the center. The right corset is more vertically oriented, with a mix of purple, pink, and red, and a large, abstract face-like pattern on the left side. Both corsets have a dark, possibly black, central vertical strip. The fabrics are heavily textured with various patterns, including floral, abstract, and geometric designs. The edges of the corsets are frayed and layered, giving them a sculptural, three-dimensional appearance.

Inspiration and
techniques for wearable
and sculptural garments

Experimental Corsets



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Preface

When I started producing sculptural corsets some years ago I was pretty convinced that my relationship to these pieces was that of a feminist making statements about women's confinement or, on the contrary, their liberty. As time moved on each corset arrived through a new technique idea that I would attribute to an invented or historical character. But I also became aware that the corset making was very much to do with my relationship with my own body. My over indulgence in house renovation has taken its toll on my back and I frequently wear a support corset when installing exhibitions, gardening and so on, and the periods when I find myself in the support corset relate to the times when I suddenly get the urge to create another more beautiful and sexy version. It is this revelation that led me to realize that a lot of women's art about the body is very personal, which is something to be built on rather than denied. Finally, in a response to this, I took an old white support corset and turned it into the sort of coloured corset that I would prefer to wear!



This altered back support by Val Holmes was first coloured with Procion dye then decorated with appliqué, machine embroidery with feather stitch, whip stitch and cable stitch. Shisha glass applied with machine feather stitch gives the finishing touches.

This book has evolved beyond corsets to include all sorts of wearable art, unwearable art, and even ‘underwearables’ in a response to these most intimate of garments that we hide and that hide us. The garments that we use to preserve our modesty and cover our desires. Or the garments that abandon our modesty, reveal our dreams and awaken desire.

Our relationship with these undergarments is often confused. It lies somewhere between Victorian pruderies that suggest even to name such garments could be considered unchaste, the feminist denial scenario in which all overtly sexualizing body covers could be considered the trappings of gender stereotyping that help to maintain women’s inferior social position, and covert or overt sexual fantasies in a new feminist approach that encourages us to take control of our bodies and how we want to picture them. Although of course this latter approach is also full of traps and pitfalls positioned by existing views and dogma.

In order to steer a path through this minefield of preconceived ideas, or innovative positioning, any artist needs to rely on her own reflections and the relationship she has with her own body – and body coverings – to project her ideas through the work she creates. Looking at the way other artists have approached this may help you to engage in useful responses.

Introduction

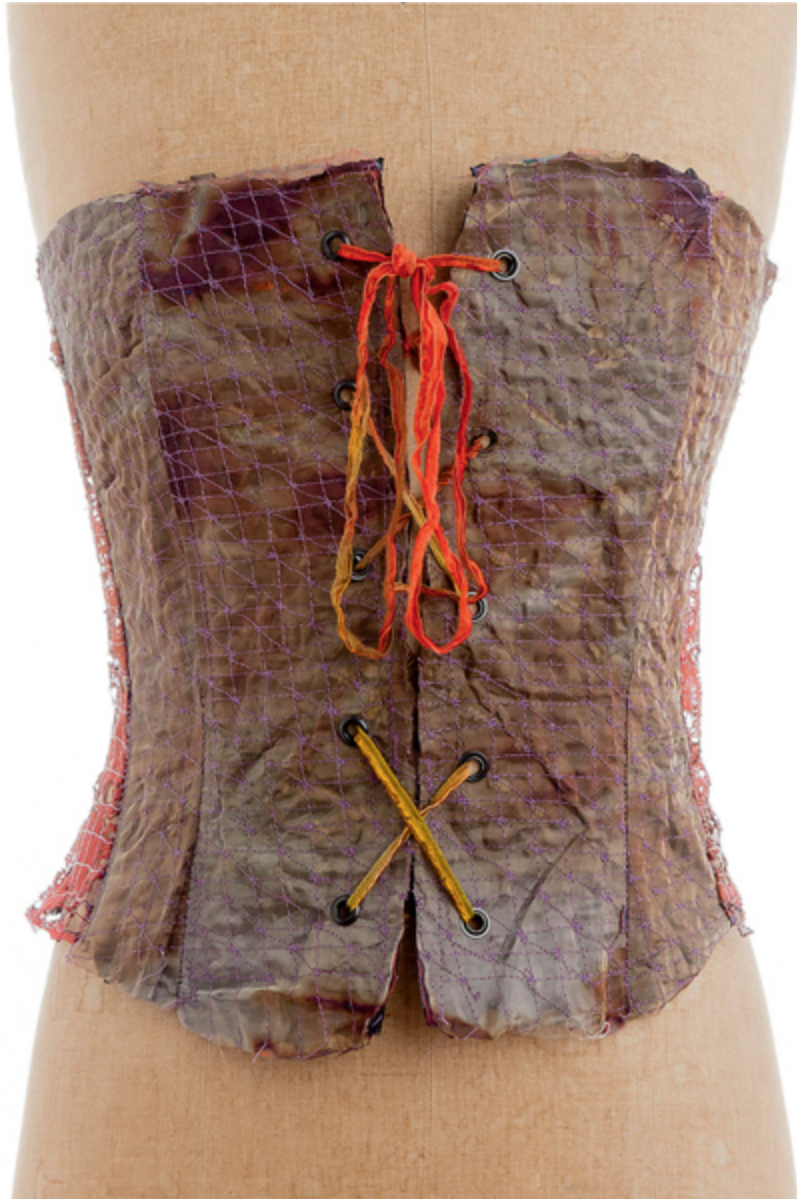
From the first bands of cloth surrounding the midriffs of Egyptian slaves that were copied by the upper classes, the appearance of female underwear may have come a long way, but its function has changed little throughout the millennia. Underwear has three functions that vary in their importance according to the morality of the times: to hide modestly what it covers; to expose immodestly what it does not cover; and, in many periods of fashion, to completely alter, or at least attempt to control, the actual shape of the wearer.

In *Corsets and Crinolines* by Norah Waugh (1954), the author suggests that unlike a man, who led a more active life and whose dress had to take this into consideration, a woman, or at least a lady of leisure, was able to adopt any style of clothing and, ignoring almost all restrictions, could exaggerate line and shape and push style to the limit until she found herself 'unhesitatingly encased in whalebone, cane and steel to achieve the desired silhouette, and then later, to attune herself to a changing world, just as unhesitatingly discarded all these artificial props.'

Waugh suggests that 'This over-emphasis of line has given a curious underlying rhythm to women's clothes and become an unwritten law of design. A long slender silhouette begins to widen at the base, emphasis shifts from length to breadth, and when the greatest circumference possible has been reached, there is a collapse, a folding up, and a return to the long straight line.'

Writing in 1954 she argues that there have been three such cycles in the preceding four centuries; 'each time the artificially widened skirt had to be balanced by a small artificially shaped body, each time the silhouette was different, and each time the names changed too; first, the whaleboned-body and the farthingale, second, the stays and the hooped petticoat, third, the corset and the crinoline.'

Interestingly her theory of oscillation between large exaggerated shapes, reduced to fine lines and then back again, has continued to be observed in fashion since the first publication of her book: from the billowing dresses and small waists of the late fifties to the boyishly straight lines of the late 1960s, beyond which things seem to have sped up and got out of control; the extremes are still there in fashion, though now often simultaneously.



Burnt Corset by Val Holmes. Fine steel fabric coloured using a gas flame was stitched on to a heavy plastic bin liner and heated to create a light quilting effect. The sides are layered polyester organdie, stitched and heat tooled to create a lace effect. See [here](#) for more details.



Slave to Chocolate (detail) by Val Holmes. The chocolate wrappers are appliquéd to the base fabric of the corset alongside quotes about the quality and dangers of chocolate and comments about the current use of slavery in the production of chocolate in some areas of the world. The complete corset is shown on [here](#).

Working with the body

It is this simultaneity of clothing shapes that perhaps gives us our confused vision of 'perfect' body size and shape. In the past the 'ideal

body' was rather easily defined by a fashion that would have some longevity and which would set the norm for the period. Women would struggle to achieve this body shape through diet or physical constraints in order to appear attractive in their particular era.

At a time when the peak of fashion is more ill-defined, and the norms of the perfect body unattainable and fictitious (thanks in part to Barbie and Photoshop), foodie culture, food availability and systematic over-eating have led to an appreciation, not only of the fuller figure, but also of the extremely large figure. What is deemed acceptable in body shape seems to be reproduced in the simultaneity of fashion and clothing shapes, leading to a crisis for many in the way they see their bodies.

But can feminist anger at the vision of anorexic-looking top models, Barbie-doll imagery and the overuse of Photoshop really justify over-consuming to the point of becoming clinically, dangerously, overweight? As the acceptance of the more-than-fuller figure is becoming the norm, could this be seen as the contemporary interpretation of Waugh's theory that the female body moves between the extremes of the slender figure and the 'greatest circumference possible'? The issues are numerous and complicated and create a malaise in our relationships with our bodies and how we perceive them.

The discussion of our relationship with the female body in general or with the individual artist's body in particular has been the subject of much feminist art in the last half century. Bearing in mind that the female body has been a subject of predilection for male artists for centuries, many female artists have deliberately attempted to reconquer this space in art as rightfully theirs to comment on and explore in all its intimacy.

The notion of how we (and others) see our bodies, and how this relates to the clothing and undergarments that we adorn ourselves with, has become an important subject for many female artists and textile artists.

We are what we wear

Another fruitful area of research for the textile artist lies in the notions that we are what we wear or that we wear what we are.

In the first place we are what we wear, or can even become what we wear. The clothes or dress code chosen may at first seem to be some sort of disguise. We dress up as the bright schoolgirl we wish to be, or choose consciously the attire of the successful office worker or manager. The clothes are there to tell others what we are, even if inside this feels a long way from the truth, and we wish or need to hide behind the façade. The disguise may become the reality, but at first the person inside is only pretending, wearing a complicated mask. Dressing up to go out and wearing make-up is another aspect of disguise and the choice of underclothes that underpin all this may also form a part of the whole. By using dress codes in this way we play at some sort of fancy-dress game, becoming the character of the fancy dress while in the disguise, and perhaps eventually losing the original person to become the chosen character permanently. What is left when the mask is taken away is another area of contemporary crisis.



Nana's Corset by Val Holmes. Appliqué with free-motion embroidery. A wearable corset. See [here](#) for details.



La Maison Close (The Brothel Corset) by Val Holmes. Worked with black lace and dyed cotton scrim on hot-water soluble fabric, then shrunk with cold water. Formed with corset boning. See *The Bride's Corset* on [here](#) for more details.

In the second place we wear what we are. The clothes and the look don't even seem to have been chosen. They arrive and seem to suit so much that they are part of the person and define the person. There is no element of disguise. The person may exaggerate aspects but there is an underlying feeling that the person is only disguising themselves as themselves. The result may be quite positive and interesting, but

may also be negative and boring, creating the need for a new disguise in another dress code.

The notion that the clothes define the person or that the person has defined their clothes out of choice to hide a reality or as a wish for disguise or character enhancement can be used as a springboard for creation. Wearable or unwearable art created to define a fictitious or named character pulls its strength from the arguments above. One could imagine that it is in the intimate garments the person wears that the definition of the intimate character is at its most real and truthful, and it is perhaps for this reason that a large number of artists address this type of clothing.

The corset in art

The corset can offer an interesting area of study for the textile artist who wishes to evoke a character through conceptual dress, perhaps over and above other types of clothing. This is because, in a sense, it encompasses both of the above arguments: we are what we wear and we wear what we are. The character chosen by the artist may well define the corset and its appearance, but the corset defines the body and the final way in which the body will look. There is therefore a double constraint placed on the conceptual character that we can feel when looking at the corset: that of a defined appearance that must be adhered to as well as the defined – and confined – body shape.

Clothing as art

Wearable art or art that is wearable is an area that textile artists continue to exploit. It is important here, perhaps, to discuss the difference between beautiful clothes, that may even use eccentric techniques, and clothes that have a real statement to make as pieces of art. There is a difference, and one should be aware of it. These days it's not just beauty that makes something art! Having said that, I loved the banner at a Venice biennial that insisted 'It doesn't have to be ugly to be art'. The tension between art and craft, with their

inherent, sometimes unjustified hierarchy, will always be with us. The current view would seem to be that content, or conceptual content, is what can make the defining difference; placing something as art because of conceptual content. Thus the end result justifies the means employed rather than the means leading to an end. That is to say that once the statement or concept has been decided upon by the artist, the work will follow a pattern using the necessary techniques in order to express the idea, rather than a work being technique led. That said, we are textile artists and embroiderers who love technique, so why shouldn't we enjoy this too!

The final piece created to explore a concept may therefore be three-dimensional and wearable, but equally may be a sculptural reference to clothing that is actually unwearable, either through the materials chosen or perhaps the scale of the work; being either too small or too large.



Mourning, a miniature mulberry-paper corset by Val Holmes.

The final piece may be two-dimensional and simply reference an article of clothing rather than being made to wear. The object is flat and presented as such, referring to parts or the whole of a garment simply by its outline and shape, or the use of sewing notions such as buttons, zips or other closures.

In all cases the palpable presence of the wearer, the suggestion of the body enclosed by the garment or the distinct absence of the body within or underneath the work forms part of the statement and part

of the strength of the piece. To work with clothing in art is to work with the body or its pertinent absence, and it is the consciousness of this that will help to make a piece of work successful.



The Bride's Secret Garden is an embellished paper corset on a Lutradur base.

Three-dimensional Sculptural Corsets

Corsets as art pieces are very often unwearable, and this is usually because the materials chosen are just not practical to be worn. If the piece is not meant to be worn, then the way in which it is to be displayed has to be addressed.



Approaches to modelling and display

In the introduction I discussed the idea that artwork based on clothing is inevitably also about the body, and it is this reference to the presence or absence of the body that can give clues to how such pieces may be displayed, and therefore the design necessary to allow the chosen display method to function.

I would suggest that globally there are two methods of displaying three-dimensional unwearable clothes and corsets, and that is very simply the presence or absence of a representation of the body.

In the first instance some sort of dummy or mannequin could be used as a support to represent the body as a presence. The mannequin could also be worked upon and become part of the piece, or it could be quite simple, a faceless plastic body that almost implies absence, or at least an absence of person, even if the physical body is present. The use of a mannequin may imply ownership of the corset, as in a shop or museum where the body inside is necessarily not that of the spectator.

In the second instance the garment or corset is allowed to define the space from which the body is absent by using some sort of pedestal, or creating a means of hanging the corset or garment in the air. The artwork of the corset stands on its own, but its shape can be more easily perceived, and the exaggeration of form or thinness more easily appreciated. The absence of the body will implicate the spectator further into the piece, transferring her own body into the space that has been left with the impossibility, discomfort or eroticism that this action implies. The result may be even more destabilising: the mannequin represented a real woman, and now nothing is represented except some imaginary concept. Dangerous ground for the sexual imagination.

Textile sculptural corsets

Although it may seem quite automatic to make a textile-based corset wearable, there are materials, inclusions or methods of construction that preclude this possibility. The following considerations should be taken into account when choosing if a textile corset is to be a sculptural or wearable item.



The Bride's Corset by Val Holmes, made from machine-stitching cotton scrim and lace onto a shrinking fabric.

The choice of materials

Certain fabrics may be difficult to clean or too delicate to be worn. The fabric used for the construction method itself may pose a problem. *The Bride's Corset*, shown left, is constructed on hot-water soluble fabric that has been sprayed with cold water instead of being dipped in hot water. This causes the hot-water soluble fabric to

shrink, causing ripples in the fabrics that have been stitched to it. If left in water the soluble fabric will simply disappear and the shrinking effect with it. Furthermore, *The Bride's Corset* is modelled onto chicken wire and then lined in order to keep its shape, so it is completely unwearable. Similar effects can be achieved by heating certain plastics with a heat gun. The plastic would be unpleasant to wear, but a lining could be used to allow for the piece to be worn.