

HAND PAPERMAKING

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FRONT COVER: Emiko Nakano, detail of White Shadow, 2016, 170 x 145 centimeters (66.9 x 51.7 inches), multilayered weave, itajime-chijimi with Japanese paper, silk, Photo by and courtesy of the artist. BACK COVER: Articles of lace-bark purses from the Great Exhibition (1851/1861). Photograph © Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.



Sprout, 2001, 48 x 18 x 18 inches, cast cotton with hemp, matte medium, tomato paste, and human hair. All photos by Petronella Ytsma and courtesy of the author.

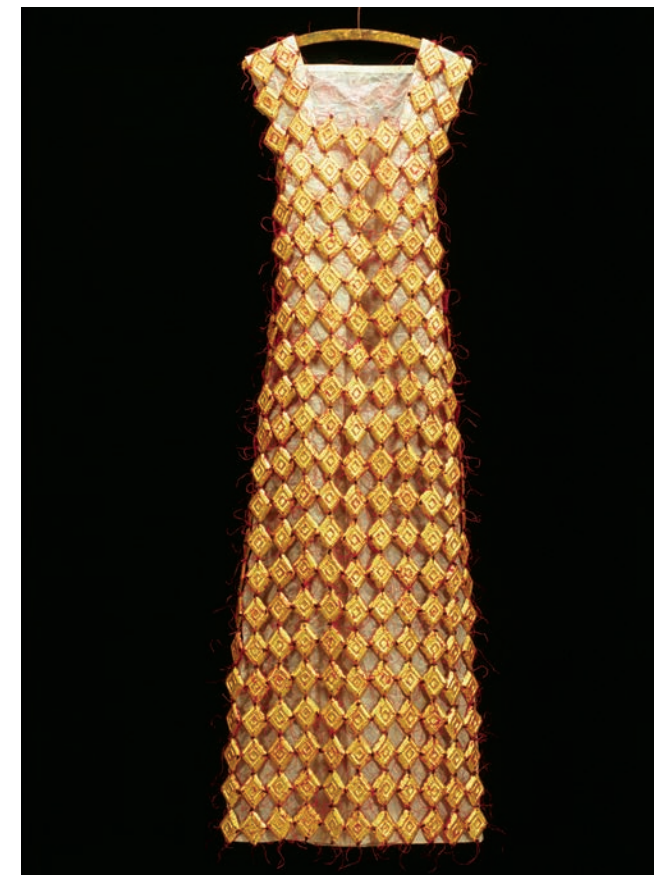
Second Skins: Paper Garment as Metaphor

ERICA SPITZER RASMUSSEN

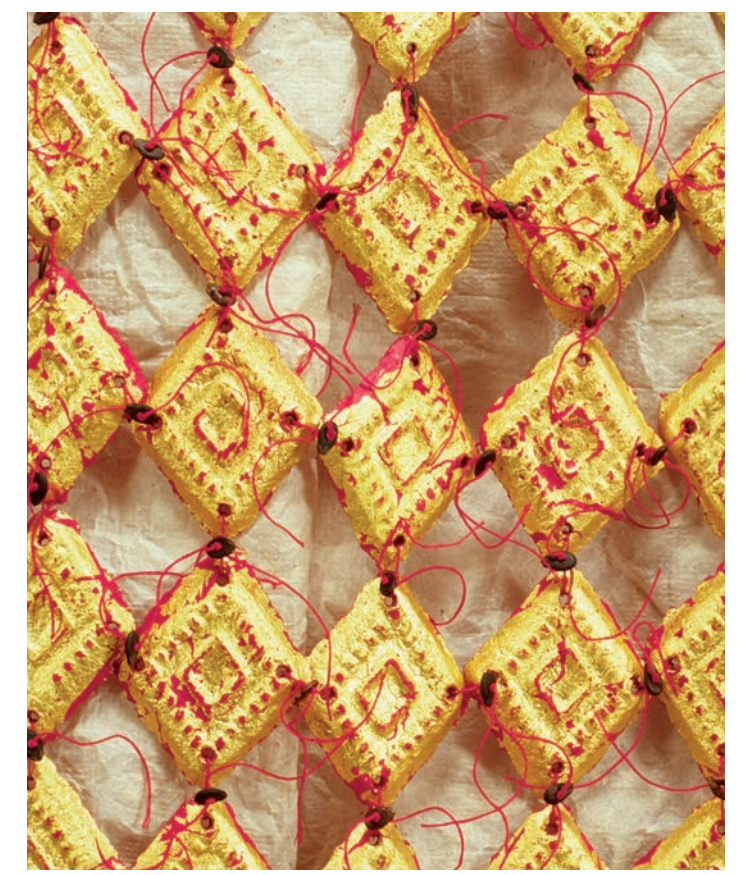
I am a papermaker working in garment form. I use clothing as subject matter because it provides me a ground on which to investigate identity, corporeality, and family stories. The garment defines the body as would a second skin.

I use handmade paper as my primary medium because it alludes to the flexibility and fragility of cloth and skin. I often embellish the paper with unconventional media in order to support the narrative aspect of the work. For example, when I was a little girl, my father told me that eating tomatoes would make me “big, strong, and hairy chested.” So for years, tomatoes and hair were staples in my papermaking practice as I grappled with issues of sexual identity. For *Sprout* (2001), I employed tomato paste and human hair to construct a calf-length garment that addresses the fuzzy lines between the ideal masculine and feminine bodies.

When working in the studio, I use two different methods to create a semblance of fabric from paper. I will either cast a mixture of cotton pulp and Elmer’s glue around three-dimensional forms or create yardage by overlapping and adhering dried sheets. When using the latter technique, I am able to cut and sew the paper much like fabric from a bolt. Cotton linter, flax, abaca, and cattails are favorite fiber choices in my wet shop. Occasionally I will incorporate the handmade paper of other artists when the situation calls for reinforcement.



Juju Dress, 2003, 60 x 18 x 4 inches, cast and laminated cotton with acrylics, tracing paper, waxed linen thread, gold leaf, watermelon seeds, and Big Ass Paper.



Detail of *Juju Dress*.

A paper garment often begins with a personal experience. For instance, *Juju Dress* (2003) materialized when I was in my mid-thirties and wanted to start a family. Unfortunately, I found myself dealing with infertility. I took constructive action by seeking medical assistance and conjuring a wearable talismanic garment.

I began the artwork by deconstructing a comfortable sleeveless summer dress of my own, turning it into a sewing pattern. Because I was “battling” infertility, I looked to armor for design inspiration. I used fifteenth-century Italian armor as my primary reference because I found the complexity of the multiple plates aesthetically stimulating. While I was contemplating the materials most appropriate to embellish, a memory resurfaced from my childhood. When I was small, my girlfriends and I believed that swallowing a watermelon seed resulted in pregnancy. I admit that I tried swallowing a watermelon seed, but to no avail. Later, my husband and I ate great quantities of watermelon, and I saved the seeds. After washing and drying the seeds, I drilled a hole in the center of each one so that they could be attached like beads. I cast cotton pulp in diamond-shaped cookie molds. I painted the cookie castings with acrylics, applied gold leaf, and drilled holes in each corner. Using wax linen thread, I connected the plates and added a seed to each juncture. I lined the interior of the dress with Julie McLaughlin’s Big Ass Paper that I laminated to tracing paper for additional strength.

I wore this paper dress to my monthly fertility procedures as a way to enlist magical forces in my reproductive quest. The nurses told me they could hear me coming as I rattled down the hallway of the clinic. I now have a healthy little boy in tow. The dress has since been retired and resides on a clothing hanger as a sculptural object.

Another work that simulates a traditional garment is *A Portrait of My Father* (2010). This work came about when I received an invitation to do a residency at PapierWespe in Vienna, Austria. Being the daughter of a Viennese Jew who escaped the Holocaust, I decided that it was high time to make some artwork about my rarely discussed family history. In addition to speaking and teaching at PapierWespe, my personal charge was to visit a piece of property that my family still owned, gather plant material, and process the fibers into sheets.

My residency became a family affair. My husband, son, father, uncle, and aunt all came along. In a remarkable coincidence, I booked rooms at a bed and breakfast near PapierWespe that turned out to be my father’s childhood home. I had the premonition that the trip would be an emotional pilgrimage, but I had no idea how intimate the return to the homeland (and the homestead) would be. Among other revelations, I realized that my son was the same age as my father when he was forced to abandon his home. Seeing Vienna through my son’s eyes, I was impacted by how devastating this must have been for a small child.

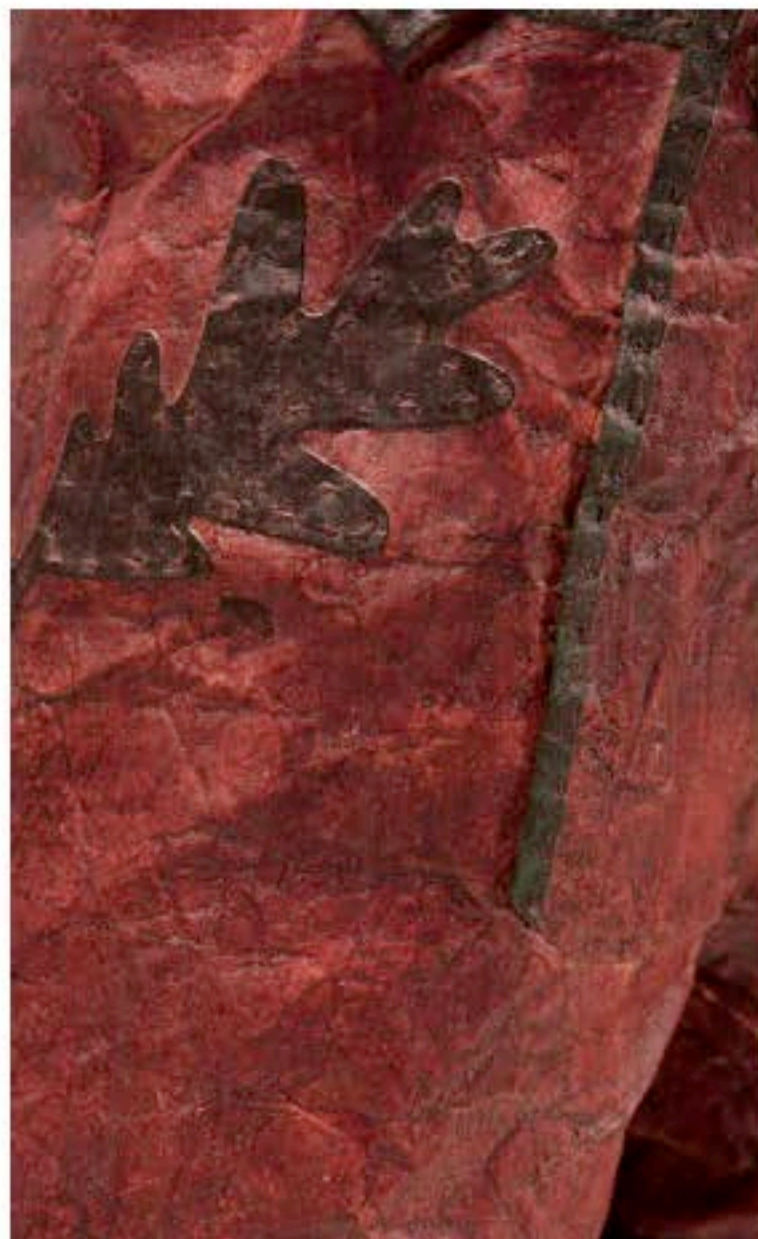


A Portrait of My Father, 2011, 24 x 10 x 8 inches, laminated abaca, flax, and various plant fibers gathered from ancestral land, acrylics, cotton thread, bovine blood.

After returning home with sheets of paper made of unidentifiable plant matter gleaned from the family land, I pieced the sheets together. I then began the pattern-making process by deconstructing a pair of my son's short pants. The resulting paper lederhosen are modeled after the ones my father wore as a child in the early twentieth century. In order to provide this garment with dimensionality, I installed plastic-coated electrical wire in the suspenders, waist, and hem.

When it came time to exhibit the lederhosen I made a brash decision. Because the diminutive scale of the sculptural garment made the work too sweet, I painted the exterior of the lederhosen with bovine blood. Given the sinister scenario that caused my father's family to flee for their lives, the addition of the blood acts as an imperative counterbalance to the adorable nature of the work. As with much of my sculptural work, I strive to juxtapose physical attributes—beautiful/repulsive, masculine/feminine, saccharine/sour, comical/horrifying—to create an engaging emotional response.

My work may at first appear to be an exercise in self-absorption. Indeed, the making of the work is often a cathartic experience. But gauging by the reactions of others, I would dare to say that my work



Detail of A Portrait of My Father.

addresses the very nature of being human. Like the innumerable generations who came before, I am involved in the universal tradition of crafting objects and telling stories.