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Three Keywords: Cloth, Sensuality and Power.

My intention for this piece of research in practice writing is to explore the meaning of the three chosen key words Cloth, Sensuality and Power. In order to generate potential questions to take forward within my future research. To demonstrate perspective on these chosen keywords the main artist's I intend to illustrate my points with are Kitagawa Utamaro, Utagawa Kunisada and John William Waterhouse. Referring to thinkers such as Constantine, Ruskin, Fukai, Guth, Clark and Berger. I will use both artists and relevant thinkers to refer to depictions of females in images and stories with the keywords of cloth, sensuality, and power in mind. To create perspective on these keywords I will refer to the contexts of history and cultures such as Epic poem stories within Greek culture and the wood block prints of the Edo period within Japanese arts. Using these contexts as a basis I will demonstrate how the words cloth, sensuality and power go hand in hand in order to relate to the practice of textile design.



Figure 1 Kitagawa Utamaro. (Ukiyo-e, Edo period 1603-1867) *Women making dresses* [Wood Block Print]

The Oxford learners dictionary (n.d) defines cloth as being ‘a material made by weaving cotton, silk, wool’ in this way cloth is a synergy of manmade material using elements from the natural environments. To add further to the definition Constantine and Reuter (1997, p.9) explain that ‘whole cloth is a fabricated product divided into warp and weft’. A system is created by the weaving together of animal or plant fibres the process of binding weft and warps, which are horizontal and vertical strands of fibre resulting in a length of textile surface.

As seen in *figure 1* this process amounts to the creation of a length of surface which has multiple uses and purposes across cultures. For example, cloth can be used to

create clothes which adorn the body. Shukla (2008) describes how 'adornment plays a critical role in communication; they are symbolically integral to the lives of people' different fibres can be used to adorn the body creating a story portrayed by cloths that have multiple textures, qualities, weights, and colour.

For many, cloth can be defined as an entity that can convey a communication of style, heritage, tradition within social realms. Kruger (2008, p.11) claims 'a piece of cloth transmits information printed in the cloths fibre, pattern and method'. Cloth can be defined as a sign of communication which conveys a message to spectators outwardly when worn, a message of sensuality and power in certain circumstances.

When we make eye contact with a piece of cloth, we can view the textures. To better understand and make sense of the cloths surface and role, our senses are invited towards a curiosity. Such as questioning ourselves with, what does it feel to touch this cloth or the body beneath it? This experience is enhanced with our sense of memory and sense of imagination as we are called to remember or to conjure up the experience of handling the cloth. Which creates a sensual experience.

The keyword sensuality can be described in the previously stated terms of our relationships with cloth. Constantine and Reuter (1997, P.216) beautifully describe cloth as being 'sometimes humble, sometimes sumptuous, fresh from the mill steeped in exotic, sensuous and romantic suggestion'. Cloth embodies sensuality especially within Japanese culture where cloth is an important medium for representing concepts of sensuality, and space for women.

Furthermore, describing the concepts of sensuality and the act of revealing and unveiling through specific Japanese practices helps give insight into the definition of sensuality in regard to the portrayal of women and feminine ideals.

Femininity as described by Buchanan (2018) is 'the culturally relative gender identity for women, it is considered by feminists to be an imposed system of rules governing how women should act, look and feel within a particular society', meaning that there are spoken, or unspoken ideals imposed through power on how the sensual social presence of a woman should be created in a community. Cloth is the medium used to convey this power as well as create a yearning and mystery for the human body.

Yearning and mystery are integral to defining sensuality, as well as the act of using a medium in order to create a romantic influence over another. A sensual practice which does this is described by Leonard (1970, p.36) who explains a practice in early Japan whereby a piece of furniture cloth is used to create an essence and expression of sensuality by describing how 'a kincho permitted a woman of quality to observe her surroundings while concealing herself from general view; those outside the curtains could only see her as an outline'. Cloth comes between two bodies as the stand in of the woman's presence creating that mystery of the female's sensual social presence. With the use of the cloth in this circumstance space is apparently separating the two bodies by mainly concealing the female figure yet only slightly revealing the female form creating the sense of curiosity to fulfil the full image of the body.

Space is an important part of creating a definition for sensuality within the kincho practice as well as other cloth practices within Japanese culture. Sensuality needs cloth and the space of a body, specifically a female body to give the material form and narrative. Fukai (2010, p.16) focuses on the relationship between a female body and cloth by explaining how 'a kimono simplifies her figure to a willowy column, to

the Japanese designers the superfluous space between the garment and the body referred to as *Ma*, is more than a simple void it is a rich space that possesses incalculable energy'. The aesthetics of cloth which adorns a woman provides a rich sensual power within the space between the cloth and the female form where contact is not made leaving room for an expression of erotic curiosity which defines sensuality.

The sensual value of cloth when placed on the female can be further illustrated through the Ukiyo-e prints of Japanese design. Fukai (2010, p.34) explains how the act of 'revealing and concealing is the code used to eroticise the body'. The codes of revealing and concealing which define sensuality can be seen in *figures 2 and 3*, which are Ukiyo-e prints made by the Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro. The Ukiyo-e prints illustrated below show depictions of the pleasure quarters celebrating the sensual beauty of the courtesans of the Edo period.

In order to understand these prints the keyword sensuality should be further explored by definition given from The Cambridge English Dictionary (n.d) which claims sensuality as being 'the expression or suggestion of physical, especially sexual, pleasure or satisfaction'. The figures represent an expression of pleasure and satisfaction where themes of fetishism become apparent. Buchanan (2018) claims 'fetishism in which an inanimate thing is given the value of a sexual object, the process is complete when the alternate object becomes the object of desire'. Although the inanimate images are drawn and printed the female body is depicted in convincingly natural sensuous mode resulting in the eroticisation of the female body and cloth.

As Clark (1956, p.3) discusses 'the human body in itself an object which the eye dwells with pleasure, which we are glad to see depicted' the Ukiyo-e models depicted and drawn by Kitagawa invite the viewer to experience a sense of pleasure and desire through their frozen yet enigmatic depiction.

The function of these images according to Guth (1996, p.13) were 'celebrating the ephemeral beauty of Edo's courtesans. They depicted women according to local canons of feminine beauty', in these images' ephemeral sensuality is shown and defined through the compositions, cloth, and gestures. In *Figure 2* the erotic sensual display of the chest is only slight as the cloth drapes are still clung to mainly conceal the female body. There is a gentler sensual intimacy the viewer experiences in *figure 2*, compared with the more overtly erotic composition of *figure 3*. Where the chest is fully exposed sensuality has become defined by composition of the figure. For Berger (1976, p.46) a woman's presence is 'manifest in her gestures, expressions, and clothes' in *figure 3* the female figure expresses her sensuality to the spectator through gestures as she delicately holds an emblematic white cloth perhaps connotating to a symbol of purity from her mouth.

Clark (1956, p.6) describes how 'the naked body provides a vivid reminder of harmony, energy, ecstasy humility, when we see beautiful results of such embodiments it must seem as if the nude as a means of expression is a universal and eternal value'. Meaning these depictions convey a unique expression where these images are suggestive of pleasure and depict successfully how sensuality and cloth marry to become a part of the eternal philosophy of textile design.



Figure 2, Kitagawa Utamaro.
(Ukiyo-e, Edo period 1603-1867.)
The hour of the Cock [Woodblock
Print]



Figure 3, Kitagawa Utamaro.
(Ukiyo-e, Edo period 1603-1867).
Courtesan [Wood Block Print]

By analysing the functions of sensuality and cloth in Greek and Japanese cultures we learn information on the definition and the dynamics of power. Power as explained by Buchanan (2018) is 'the ability to achieve a desired outcome, power is a transformative influence', in this way power is a concept that deals with the governing of a circumstance in order to assert control over the way a situation unfolds and ultimately ends.

During the time of the Edo period Guth (1996, p.30) explains that 'affluent merchants and artisans were particularly attracted to the aesthetic values of the Ukiyo-e- which to them represented a strategic response to their exclusion from political power'. As

the lower merchant classes were excluded from higher society, they gained their own power through a portrayed demonstration of their urban status and measure of taste through consuming the different aspects of urban culture.

One of these aspects was the Kabuki theatre, which was highly monitored by the government at the time. Power was exerted by this government over a particular group who were banned from performing in the year 1649. Guth (1996, p.32) explains the situation, 'Shinto shrine dancer and prostitute Okini and her troupe performed to great acclaim at shinjokawara-often in outlandish costumes, leading to Kyoto courtesans to imitate her. Resulting in excess of sexual activities.' Power can be defined as an influential performance such in the circumstances previously outlined. The actor shinkokawara had power; with her costumes of cloth, she ignited sensuality an influence of expression for women to such an extent that the disapproving authorities counteracted her influence with their power to ban all female performers from the theatres.

Due to the fact women were banned from the theatre there came the rise of male actors who impersonated women as seen in *figure 4* which depicts the actor Iwai Hashiro V a renowned female impersonator. The gestures within this composition are similar to that of *figure 3* where the element of hanging a cloth from the mouth is portrayed. However, what seems to be missing in this expression is the explicit nudity which embodies the aspect of sensuality.

Power can be defined as the act of influence in with Guth (1996, p.32) stating 'so influential were they that women often patterned their behaviour and dress style after those female impersonators'. Referring back to the definition of power as the ability to create a transformative influence within a culture, specifically the social presence

of an individual. In this context the social presence of a female her expressions and clothing were transformed by the ideal feminine power which the male actor embodies.



Figure 4, Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) *Hour of the Monkey* [Wood Block Print]

In Greek culture, Kruger (2008, p.11) states 'the Greek language links together two different activities so that woven fabric, poetry, and Metis (craftiness) are delineated with the verb to weave'. Weaving cloth with the warps and wefts of fibre is the same as weaving together a story using words as the thread sentences are woven into a length of a tale.

In the Greek narrative that is to follow, cunning skills and cloth making are a way for a woman to gain a sense of power. Through the stories of the Greek female figures, the deceptive nature of sensuality and how it is linked through cloth can be understood as the expressions of defining power.

Briefly the story of Penelope within Homer's *Odyssey* is outlined as followed.

Odysseus' wife Penelope anxiously waits for her husbands return. In hopes that her home will be restored after it has become overrun with potential suitors, all who claim she is now a widow and should consider remarriage. To keep the suitors at bay, Penelope claims she will consider remarriage once she has completed the cloth on her loom, each day she makes progress to completing the cloth. However, once night comes, she unravels each warp and weft she did in the earlier hours. Trapping the looms progress in a standstill.



Figure 5, John William Water house (1912)
Penelope and her suitors [oil on canvas]

In *figure 5*, The depiction of Penelope, the key figure explored in Homer's *Odyssey*, by Waterhouse represents the social stance to women's apparel in the context of Greek history. Clark (1956, p.65) discusses the rarity of female nudity in Greek

depictions 'there were both religious and social reasons for the scarcity, Greek women went about heavily draped from head to foot and were confined by tradition to their domestic value'. The powerful influence of these religious and social rules influences the way a woman expresses her sensual self through cloth at the time.

In this depiction, Penelope is clad in a draping cloth that covers the majority of the body, there is no slight flirtatiousness of the nude sensuality as seen in *figure 2 and figure 3*. Penelope's body is represented by the codes of concealment from the spectators suggesting no room for invitation to curiously scan at her body.

Furthermore, the drapery of cloth may not reveal the female form beneath, yet when considered with the previously stated Japanese concept of *Ma* the power of the sensual cloth is hinted through the space revealed underneath Penelope's arm on her right side. Furthermore, the tension of Penelope's situation is heightened by the taught thread which hangs by her mouth in similar gesture as *figure 3 and figure 4*.

Kruger (2008, p.17) outlines how 'In ancient Greece women's chambers were built at the back of the house, these were known as gynaikomitides' this was the space Penelope became trapped when her home was overrun with suitors. Although physically her power of free movement was taken away, Penelope used her skills of weaving as a power to build a plan to counteract against her situation. Power is a skill, which is mastered when working with the metrics of cloth and expression of sensuality. Penelope uses her skills of power and craftiness to create a sense of control through the crafting and un-crafting of her cloth defying the socio sexual politics of her time.

In conclusion, by exploring the definitions of the chosen key words, the links between cloth, power and sensuality have been established in a way that allows for ideas to

manifest on how to develop the concepts further . Potential questions arise from this research which I could take forward. For example, How is sensuality historically depicted through cloth as an expression of power ? . I could also research how power for women is gained through using cloth to enhance sensual expression. This research mainly focused on historical depictions of the themes of cloth, sensuality and power in Japanese and Greek cultures. There are further aspects of these cultures artistic practices and narratives I could explore to answer the potential questions perhaps from a feminist lens.

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