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Kaidan: Fashion And Photographs Inspired By Japanese Ghost Stories

Gabrielle Hennessey

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REFLECTIVE ESSAY

I never thought I would be a fashion designer.

I remember being reprimanded during my childhood for cutting up my clothes, resorting to surreptitiously ferreting away odd bits of antique doll dresses and draping them onto my own dolls to create new clothing shapes. This never translated in my mind to a possible career, because those moments of secretive creativity were merely play – hidden, because I knew it would not be approved by my family, which placed much more emphasis on academia and the pursuit of a more “intellectual” vocation. By now my family has, thankfully, come to

support me in my creative endeavors, allowing me to cultivate new ideas and develop as an artist and designer. I am no longer the prospective doctor or journalist my parents were anticipating; on the other hand, scholastics had been such an important part of my life before my drastic change of vocation that it is a difficult thing to let go, and the fact that I was a student for so long still tends to show in my artwork and my design process.

Although I look to all sorts of different things for inspiration, overall I try to offer a more cerebral, intelligent way of looking at things. It is easy to make a woman look “pretty” and keep her within the confines of what is traditionally “feminine” or “beautiful” – but I think it is a lot more interesting to go beyond that, to offer fashion that allows an interpretation beyond the obvious binary options.

I remember fondly a story told to me in high school by my much-loved art teacher Carolyn Mortimer, who spent her time painting cows and motorcycles but peppered her class-time speeches with odd French phrases and stories about artists and life in general. Perhaps one of my favourite anecdotes involves the phrase “Pas de noir, pour Renoir,” which as all good oral traditions is quite difficult to track and prove – thus I do not even know how true the anecdote is, although it would still mean the same to me even if it were untrue after all. The French Impressionist painter Pierre-August Renoir did not believe in

using pure black when he painted, as his son Jean recalls in his memoir about his father the artist:

While training horses at Bordeaux and Tarbes, my father had learned that in the eyes of a true horseman a horse is never black or white. It is only foot soldiers who use such expressions. Horses which look black are brown bays, and the white ones are light gray. The hairs of their coat are mixed. It is the combination of tones, seen as a whole, that gives the impression of the horse's coat being all black. And among the countless hairs in it, even the black came in different pigments (Renoir, 2001).

As Carolyn's story goes, none of Renoir's friends wore black at his funeral, in memory of his idea of "pas de noir" – "No black for Renoir." The concept of "pas de noir" has continually fascinated me ever since I heard that story; it is one of those little truths (may I call it as such, although it may not be?) that reinforces my own belief that there are no absolutes, no black-versus-white divisions. A black horse is not just black; a hat is not just a hat. Binarism, I have come to find, is boring, and I try to avoid it as often as possible.

In our modern world, binarism is the system dictating to a person (among other things) why he or she may or may not be seen as a "woman" (or anything else). People who are born biologically female are inundated with the idea that they must fit a certain physical

stereotype to be considered “feminine” and “attractive,” being faced with possible ridicule or ostracism if they dare to step outside those black-and-white confines.

This is why tiny nipped-in waists and hourglass figures remain popular, even after decades of women being liberated from the centuries-long history of wearing corsets.

This is why women continue to be powerless against men, despite laws ensuring them otherwise.

To be feminine, according to this binary ideology, is to be soft, pretty, and curvy. It is to be hypersexualised in body, yet infantile in mind. To be feminine is to be reigned over by a man, despite any legal changes within society, and to maintain one’s life and looks in order to be most appealing to a man.

This binary definition of femininity is not limited to the western world, however; the role of women within likewise patriarchal Japanese society follows this same pattern of servile passivity, with men and women still falling under the typical male-female, husband-wife roles of the last several centuries. The exoticised, erotised view of Japan in the west is, after all, an extension of Japan’s own beliefs of female submission and servility.

Yet in Japanese classical literature we find stories of powerful ghost-women who seek vengeance against those who had tormented, abused, or forgotten them – not relying on the power of a man to

avenge them after death, but taking it into their own hands to redistribute all that had happened to them in life. This heightened sense of power after death became incredibly interesting to me after reading a few revenge plays from Japanese *kabuki* and thinking about what made them so different from revenge plays of the western world.

In Hamlet, Ophelia is powerless in death as well as in life. After her final words in Act IV, she is heard from no longer – and it is up to her brother Laertes, not herself, to avenge her death. However, the women of Japanese revenge drama take it upon themselves to punish their tormentors. Their weakness in life serves as a foil for the sheer power they exercise from beyond the grave. As a contrast to the typical infantilised femininity found in patriarchal society, this terrific power fascinated me and gave me the idea to base a collection on Japanese ghost stories, which in Japanese are referred to as *kaidan*.

Kaidan (怪談) is a Japanese term transliterating roughly to mean “story of the strange and mysterious.” The most famous Japanese *kaidan* of all time is *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the story of Oiwa and Tamiya Iemon, which was first written for the *kabuki* theatre as the play *Toukaidou Yotsuya Kaidan* and, despite its age, continues to influence contemporary Japanese horror.

The story opens with the murder of Oiwa’s father by the hand of Iemon, who is an unemployed, masterless samurai and the husband of Oiwa. Afraid of his father-in-law’s awareness of his past evil deeds, he

kills him in a nighttime duel, a secret that leads to increasing resentment of his wife Oiwa.

lemon becomes the love interest of Oume, the granddaughter of a wealthy neighbor who hatches a plot to rid lemon of his wife and thus leave him free to marry Oume. The poison that he gives to Oiwa does not kill her as planned, though; rather, it severely disfigures her, causing her right eye to droop and her hair to fall out. Upon seeing herself in a mirror, Oiwa realises her husband's betrayal and, distraught over her loss of honour and their ruined marriage, succumbs to depression. lemon sends a servant to make inappropriate advances to Oiwa in an attempt to drive her out of the house, and in the ensuing scuffle her throat is lacerated by a sword sticking out of the wall. The servant watches, horrified, as she dies.

Another servant learns of the plot between lemon and the wealthy neighbor. When lemon discovers his servant's knowledge of the affair, he kills the servant and has the corpses of both this servant and his dead wife Oiwa nailed to a door and dumped into the river without a proper Buddhist burial. The story then spreads that Oiwa and the servant have run away together as an adulterous couple, leaving lemon to receive the sympathies of the townspeople.

Thinking all is well, lemon marries Oume quickly and is welcomed into his wealthy neighbor's family. Upon removing his new bride's coverings on the wedding night, however, he is confronted with

the disfigured face of Oiwa. Startled, he decapitates her with his sword, only to realise that he has just murdered Oume through the tricks of Oiwa's ghost.

Oiwa continues to haunt her unfaithful husband with a vengeful power she never had during life. A dogged lemon sees the ghost of his dead wife everywhere he goes. Her ruined face leers at him from paper lanterns, her hair and white kimono appear where once were vines and smoke. He finally meets his death at the hand of his brother-in-law, who completes the circle of vengeance and kills lemon for the death of not only his sister but also his father.

During the fall of 2008 I designed a collection of womenswear inspired by Japanese ghost stories, especially *Yotsuya Kaidan*. The women ghosts within *kaidan* are able, upon death, to bridge the gap between the living and the dead in order to exact justice on those individuals who had tormented and mistreated them during life. This supernatural power stands in direct contrast to the typical subservience of Japanese women within a repressive patriarchal society. This mysterious power is what I tried, at first, to emulate within my collection.

The first step of my design process was to conduct research, not only by learning the stories of the women ghosts in various Japanese *kaidan*, but also by familiarising myself with the aesthetics and design behind traditional Japanese garments. As my research

progressed, I began to better understand what makes design distinctly Japanese – a characteristic referred to as *wabi-sabi*.

Wabi-sabi (侘寂) is perhaps the most important element of beauty according to traditional Japanese thought; it is an aesthetic that embraces asymmetry and imperfection, incompleteness and transience, as well as elegance, humility, simplicity, and solitude.

Wabi-sabi may be seen in a Japanese tea ceremony, where a tea master may choose a tea bowl with visible imperfections and a more rough-looking, uneven glaze treatment, treasuring it over the more “perfect” bowl that, conversely, is less unique and has much less character. It can be felt in the humble architecture of Japan which, although based on neat structures and precise ratios, still maintains a feeling of simplicity and quiet elegance.

When designing my collection I strove for a feeling of *wabi-sabi*, staying away from deliberately symmetrical silhouettes and leaving parts of the garments deconstructed to reflect how things might slowly fall apart when left alone in nature. Some hems are left undone, some gathers of fabric appear to be sliding down the body – yet they are still controlled to an extent, so my little world of entropy is really only a fabrication of what I think it could be.

After extensive research, I was ready to embark on the actual process of designing my collection. During the sketching process, my designs evolved and developed into silhouettes that are extremely

sculptural and largely asymmetrical. At first I kept in mind details from female ghosts within certain *kaidan*; for example, in several designs I incorporated the idea of Oiwa's lacerated body and created garments with rolling plumes of gathered fabric tumbling down the body. This is not to say, however, that I wanted my collection to go in an altogether macabre direction, and for a while I struggled with maintaining equilibrium in my designs and keeping them from going too far into the cliché. I did not want my collection to look simply like bloody zombie costumes, because that would have been too easy and obvious.

Nearly any designer will agree that the first twenty or thirty percent of design ideas are pure rubbish and fail to hit the mark. Although I would only be fabricating six garments for the fashion show in April, I followed the advice of my fashion instructor Todd Conover and decided to overcompensate during my sketching process and produce at least one hundred different looks. He requires all his design students to think beyond the final number of garments, not only so we have a chance to "warm-up" a bit, but more importantly so that we may truly see the underlying idea of a collection. This higher level of understanding often leads to a sophisticated, intelligent collection of looks that delves much deeper into exploring the intended inspiration than could a collection comprised of only those first several sketches.

When I finally reached my goal of one hundred preliminary sketches, the next step was to eliminate irrelevant designs in order to

consolidate my overgrown collection of one hundred into a concise, well-thought-out collection of twenty-five. During this editing process, I redesigned certain looks in order to create a more cohesive collection with one main look and voice. Then, I developed these fully into finalised illustrations of twenty-five complete looks. Here, I diverged from the look of my typical fashion illustrations, opting instead for a stiffer, more stylised expression reminiscent of traditional Japanese woodblock prints. With the illustrations complete, I was ready finally to create the pieces.

As I began the garment construction process during the spring of 2009, however, it was clear that I needed to change my design plans. Each time I attempted to drape a garment, I would hit dead-ends, with each session less successful than the previous. After a time I realised my troubles were coming from the fact that I was trying to force the fabric into something it didn't want to be. After this realisation I became more receptive to the fact that I was becoming more interested in exploring the feelings of the women ghosts and representing them as forgotten, betrayed women, not as the vengeful demons bent on the destruction for which they have become known.

With this change in direction came a change in the look of my garments. Gone were the strong pleats and caged-in silhouettes I had planned; the focus turned instead to playing with the idea of entropy, reflecting the hauntingly beautiful melancholy of things left undone. I

found I wanted to pursue the beauty of a forgotten garden, overgrown for want of attention. I wanted to present Oiwa and her fellow women ghosts as women who were treated as ghosts in life as well as death.

I found myself drawing more and more inspiration from the work of Japanese avant-garde designers like Yohji Yamamoto, borrowing ideas of silhouette and reminding myself of their belief that the space between clothing and the body is just as important – if not more important – than the outward silhouette. In Yamamoto's pieces especially there is a sort of meditation between the flesh and the negative space of the air around a garment, a meditation that I felt fitting to the direction of my line. From the Japanese fashion house Issey Miyake I found further inspiration to create looks entirely different from the western idea of fashion silhouettes – in other words, to stay away from the typical idea that womenswear must always exhibit a waist and emphasise an hourglass shape. One of the eventual goals of my entire fashion career, in fact, is to encourage exploration of gender and identity through clothing – for not every woman should feel forced to look a certain way to be perceived as “feminine.” And as I began to incorporate more hand-knit pieces into my collection, I looked to designer Sandra Backlund, who creates highly-stylised pieces of art-fashion out of chunky wool knits and unusual fabrications like metal and human hair. I appreciate designers like Backlund who forgo the tendency to create only easily-salable pieces, because designing to

sell is an easy thing to do. It is much harder, on the other hand, to create thoughtful, artistic pieces of sculptural apparel that speak to people on a more human, individualistic level.

My collection, then, had completely diverged from the hyper-powerful otherworldliness I had first emulated. Instead, it became a study on feminine melancholy. Perhaps it is more appropriate to describe the collection as a study of what makes us most human – that is, our reliance on each other – and of what happens to us when we are abandoned by those we love.

As a supplement to my fashion collection, I decided to create accessories, which I would catalogue and arrange in a book of photographs and title *Kaidan* as an expression of my collection inspiration. With this book, I intended to give a human face to the women ghosts of *kaidan* in order to better understand them and see them as more than the demons of Japanese *kabuki* and horror films.

For accessories, I hand-knitted several scarves in a large gauge with thick wool, acrylic, and silk-blend yarn and high-diameter knitting needles. These scarves were knit in flat garter stitch, then joined at the ends to create enormous circle scarves meant to loop multiple times around the neck; their constant, never-ending circular structure is different from conventional rectangular scarves. The scarves are accented with long fringe meant to run down the body and create movement as the models walk down the runway.

Additionally, I customised shoes for each final look. For these, I purchased shoes with a large, dramatic faux-wood base reminiscent of traditional Japanese shoes; after the original vamp was removed from each shoe, new straps were engineered out of white elastic strips and accented with fabric used within the collection. Each shoe is different from its partner to reflect the overall asymmetry of the clothing, as well as to coordinate with each unique garment.

Bracelets were the last accessories made. I bought poly-coated metal chains from the hardware store, which were broken into smaller lengths for bracelets. Small metal bells were strung onto wire to create large bangles; both the chain bracelets and bell bangles were then painted white, in keeping with the collection's general colour palette. Since each bracelet was painted after being completely assembled – rather than link-by-link or bell-by-bell – the paint will slowly chip and evolve over time as the piece is worn. Thus it is, on a small scale, yet another exploration into entropy and the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic.

After the accessories were completed, a miniature photography studio was set up in my house in order to catalogue the pieces for my photo book, the final piece of my Capstone Project. I own a digital single-lens reflex camera and rely mainly on natural sunlight for my own photography; thus, the setup for the shoot was rather simple and inexpensive. Rather than procuring a model for the shoot, I chose to photograph myself. I had been immersed in the idea of *kaidan* for so

long – nearly five months – and I felt that physically including myself in the final stage of the entire project would be a more fitting end.

The entire photo shoot was completed in the span of three hours, during the best light of the day. The camera was placed on a tripod and set in ten-second self-timer, which was enough time for me to run back in front of the camera against my makeshift studio wall. Each shot was reviewed after being taken; since I lack a remote trigger that can release the camera shutter wirelessly, the shutter had to be released manually (with delay) after every shot.

After the final shots were taken, the photographs were imported into my computer and digitally post-processed in Adobe Photoshop to yield images reflecting the general aesthetic of the collection – that is, to echo the haunting sadness and loneliness of those women left behind, and to express the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* within the picture plane by playing with colour and composition.

Before Oiwa dies, she is – first and foremost – a woman with a broken heart, torn apart by the loss of her husband's love. Only because of this grief in life does she become a monster in death.

My book, then, remembers the ghosts of *kaidan* and pays homage to their vulnerability as abandoned women. I have paired the photos within the book with poetry from Edo-period Japanese women writers; I felt it only appropriate that the voice within the book should belong to likewise-despairing, broken-hearted Japanese women.

When reading the poetry within the book, one can see how we might all be like ghosts sometime in our lives. Although alive and breathing, still composed of flesh and blood, we may yet feel invisible, nonexistent, ignored – as though we were ghosts.

In respect to the women ghosts of Japan, I hope I have treated them well. We must not curse them as heartless demons, for they were once women broken. Let them show us how fragile and precious is the state of human emotion.