



SHAYLI HARRISON

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I'm taken under water. To where the tropical fish and corals endlessly compete in the award show of who's most colorful, vibrant and unique, and at the same time, get the exact feeling of a wonderfully sparkly, cool and delicious bright green frozen kiwi and mint margarita. As I descend from snorkelling the turquoise waters and slurp the last drops of the margarita, I elevate up, up, up into space, in the year of 2200 when we're all clubbing in futuristic, angular neon colored garments with fascinating shapes, large sequins and 3D-patterns, on a giant disco ball of a spaceship, circling Tellus in just a few hours.

Down on earth again I can feel myself being enveloped and submerged in layers upon layers of fabrics. I'm a moth, or a butterfly someone has ripped off its cocoon too early in the process. Un-protected and sick, but beautiful and lush, there's blood streaming from my nose, from my fingertips, and the drops instantly coagulate into long strands of gleaming ruby red beads. The force of life still shooting like colorful cannonballs from my being, but slowly and unremittingly degrading, silenced by my condition.

In just a few moments I've travelled through Shayli Harrison's one of a kind visual universe. She is one of those exciting new designers whose aesthetic isn't minimal or monochrome, and isn't for those norm-coreers slinking around the big cities in their white ensembles featuring Birkenstocks, fanny-packs and Ray Ban glasses. She obviously doesn't follow the «less is more» principle we're all force-fed. Shayli Harrison's design pops like a lollipop, and demands your immediate attention. She's an Aussie, Perth born and raised, residing until recently in Sydney and Melbourne. She holds a Bachelor in Design from the Whitehouse Institute of Design and launched her self-titled brand in 2012. Now, she's moved across the world to Antwerp, studying at the prestigious Antwerp Royal Academie.



I'm curious to know where your colorful and vibrant design aesthetic comes from. Tell me about that.

The vibrant colours in my work come from the influence of psychedelia. The artwork, music and writing of the time gave attention to the abilities of the human mind - the imagination and the senses. You can see this in my work as the characters I create aim to be as wild as the subconscious. I want to evoke a hyper-sensory experience. I am always open to new inspiration and the results for me are unexpected. I know something is brewing when I notice patterns and connections forming between the images, information, experiences and conversations that take me. I become very excited at this point and the process becomes a kind of treasure hunt. You will find me buried deep in research until the concept is finally uncovered. In this process, I exhaust my inspirations entirely. Whenever I finish a collection my greatest fantasy is to set it on fire. There are, however, inspirations that are inexhaustible and have become the signature in my work. I gravitate towards the aesthetics and philosophies that define the art-deco / symbolist era (art is life: life is art). You can see my love of bold shape, symmetry and geometry reflected in the clothing as well as the dystopian undertones in my inspiration.

What is your relationship to color like?

I experience excitement with color when I deprive myself of it, and so have survived for long periods of time without it. When I used to refuse to wear the colour pink in my late childhood and early teenage years, it was because I didn't want to represent the female stereotype. In my early adulthood I revoked the colour black in protest to all that is bland and conformist in the general populace. For each example there is a moment of re-discovery and re-formulated opinions, and the colour becomes exciting and fresh for me again. Right now, I'm causing some concern in the people around me as I have started dressing completely in black after nearly a decade.

How has living in Antwerp changed your design aesthetics?

There are certainly changes in both my appearance and the appearance of my work since I moved here. Particularly in this past year I have come to discover my love for medieval, gothic aesthetics. I have never lived amongst history before now so I never had the understanding that it was true. I came to recognize this history through my research as part of the historical costume project in second year. Through the exploration into Flemish primitive artwork and medieval, gothic clothing and culture I find myself wearing and working with darker and richer undertones. The climate in Antwerp is also something that I have had to consider when working on a collection. I notice the need for layering and accessories that I would not normally include. Suddenly I have to consider gloves and coats in the repertoire - an exciting challenge that I have felt resistant towards. It feels like a waste to spend all my time on a silhouette only to hide it under a coat. Although now that I am wearing more coats myself the idea is starting to grow on me.



Are most of your fellow students in Antwerp leaning towards a minimal design aesthetic, or is there a greater mix of visual aesthetics?

I can see that my peers have an appreciation for the minimal aesthetic, and that's certainly evident in their personal style. However, there is still a great deal of variation and a push from our teachers to create collections that are honest and personal. When students describe their work as minimal or simple it is not well received. We are encouraged to explore and push the boundaries towards something new.

One of your previous collections was called *Vacant space*, and was inspired by the launch of Virgin Galactic. Tell me about that.

At the time, I was following and researching the developments in space tourism. The hype surrounding this was immense and really ignited something in my imagination. The commercial *Vacant Space* collection was a comment on the controlled, stereotypical tourist experience of the future. Now, however, the excitement over sub-orbital stargazing has worn off with several deaths and failed attempts. It is just another case of me exhausting my inspirations.

Tell me about your latest collection, and why you chose to use the Ebola outbreak as an inspiration.

The inspiration for HAIMA (2014/15) came as a reaction to the environment in the world at the time of the first ebola outbreak. I had found it common to hear attitudes of denial and sarcasm when responding to the idea that we are as mortal as our third-world counterparts. The concept behind the collection was to persuade humility through fear. I developed characters that were a personified version of the ebola virus, serving as a reminder that no one can escape death.

The collection definitely differs from your previous work, in terms of vibe and colors. What other sources of inspiration did you use this time?

I am most enchanted by the gothic literature and accompanied illustrations of the symbolist movement, and have always taken interest in allegorical films/music and books. Although I use strong colour in my work, often the meaning behind it takes a darker turn and is used as a point of contrast. I found that naturally when researching my concept, I could make the connection between the present attitudes of the western world and *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allen Poe (1842) during the state of epidemic. Referencing then and now in concept and aesthetic allowed me to articulate our societies' history of fearful yet fatal attraction to corporeal plague.

From the symbolist period I have enjoyed the selected short stories of Edgar Allen Poe and Oscar Wilde and the associated illustrations of stained glass artist Harry Clarke. Darker undertones are also made present in some of my favourite films. Particularly I admire the work of Peter Greenaway, who directed *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) and *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993). Some films I have watched more recently (and have likely taken influence from) include *Possession* (1981) by Andrzej Zulawski, *Susperia* (1977) by Argento, and *Body Melt* (1993) by Australian director Philip Brophy.



What kind of feeling do you wish your design to evoke in your customers?

The one occasion where I allowed the target market/customer to influence my decisions taught me a great lesson. In the launch of my commercial label I had created a stripped back version of my work to appeal to a wider audience. That was a difficult decision to make due to the sheer investment into the business. This was a moment of sacrifice that I do not want to make again. It is not that the collection was bad or that there was no success in doing so, it was more that it was not true. This was a lesson in maintaining artistic integrity - a scenario that drove me to further develop creatively rather than commercially.

What are your future plans and dreams for your brand?

On finishing a degree it is typical that those around you begin to ask the same question, and at this point I have no concrete response. I think much of my future relies on exactly what I produce at the end of my studies. What reaction I can drive in my spectators and what networks I can create in my time here will define the opportunities for the future. Without knowing necessarily how, I would like to be in a position where I have creative freedom and can continue to push the boundaries of the couture market. The reason I design is because I feel the need to express, with the message I wish to convey becoming the foundation for research and design. In this way, I wish to aesthetically push a more graphic, evocative and personal visual universe.

