



DISCARDED WOOL: A pile of sheared wool lies discarded on the Isle of Man. Lack of profitability resulted in the government failing to renew an export agreement in time for shearing season, and farmers publicly dumped the wool in protest.

Image source: Dave Kneale

MATERIALS BREAKDOWN

The waste of hides from food production is one of the biggest issues agriculture faces and is a key factor in its carbon emissions. However, cross disciplinary collaboration across industries has the potential to completely dismantle the leather trade and the way we perceive waste, in a way that has not been considered before.



Hides for export:

Hides laid out on the ground for me to pick from during one of my visits to the abattoir before being packed for export.

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While leather goods fetch astronomical markups, farmers are left burdened by disposal costs of the very same hides, deemed a worthless commodity in its raw state. To envision a future where every inch of skin tells a story, my practice connects British farmers with Tanneries and Leather merchants, to develop a fully traceable leather supply chain that provides the end customer with full transparency on the origins of their leather goods. By providing a 'product passport,' or certification that the leather has derived from regenerative farming, I am offering a new level of luxury for customers, who can be assured their product is part of a circular, socially engaged system that supports local trade and community. This level of transparency in animal products already exists in the luxury food industry, and I want to replicate this in fashion. Through this system, I would aim to return or reinvest a percentage of the profits from the end product back to the farmer, to render the hides a profitable again.



Tanning Sheepskin Process: Sheepskins in tanning at Organic Sheepskins Co, in Somerset, U.K.



GREAT BRITISH PASTURE LEATHER

I will source my Leather from Great British Pasture Leather. They're only leather supplier in the UK that offers fully traceable leather from regenerative farms, embedding its production in practices that allow communities, ecosystems and the welfare of animals to prosper. Their philosophy is to define the materials quality by its animal history, rather than the standards set by the industry. They embrace the imperfections or marks evident from a life lived in fields and pasture raised, and reject the 'standardisation' of leather that is conventional in mass production. By consciously choosing to redefine exceptions of quality by finding beauty in the marks that offer insight to the life of the animal and its history, we can go beyond the surface and understand the systems behind it. With the acceptance that organic materials such as leather has no clear standards in appearance and feel, we can embrace it as a material 'emblem' of our connection to food systems.

Traditional leather construction and craftsmanship to intuitively guide the design.

ULU OF NORWAY

In pursuit of reviving the value of hides, I collaborated with Ulu of Norway, known for their sustainable practices and commitment to traditional craftsmanship. The hides used in the collection, such as oak bark-tanned reindeer hides and Norwegian sheep hides tanned with reindeer brains, showcased a distinct finish, capturing the essence of their processing history and exemplified their 'live of the land' values. My design choices were dictated by the shape of the hides, emphasizing efficiency and waste reduction. Ulu's dedication to traditional leather craftsmanship, rooted in Nordic culture, aligned with their niche market catering to those valuing traditional Nordic uses and functionality.



Artisan Materials: The lightness allowed movement of the body without being too heavy. The suppleness and lightness of the sheepskins influenced the construction of a cohesive look that celebrated the intertwined journey of the materials. However, during final fittings, the overpowering nature of the sheepskins necessitated a reevaluation, leading to the decision to pair each piece with simpler garments for enhanced wearability and broader market appeal.

Left: Setting out to draw on traditional leather craftsmanship and tanning techniques to create a profitable use for hides, experiencing the abattoir first hand was one of the few times I could really associate the animal to the meat it produced, but the hides were notably absent in the factory setting, further confirming our lack of awareness around the by product. To visually connect this absence in my collection, I took a life casting of a female torso to mold leather, manipulating the natural folds and organically draping it across the form. This approach emphasised the unique qualities of leather, highlighting its ability to conform to any shape while capturing intricate details. I could make lots of connections in the way I intuitively draped the leather, to the journey I could trace when studying it as a hide - The way the hide is thicker towards the four corners where the legs stood, where as towards the middle it was thinner and had a slight stretch indicative of stretching over the animals body. The resulting drapes aimed to evoke the audience's realisation that this is not our skin but belongs to another being.



Fully Traceable Hides: Manx and Norwegian Sourced hides from regenerative farming.

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The quality of sheep wool finish is paramount for achieving desirability in the luxury market, a crucial consideration when selecting hides for tanning. My goal was to restore value to each hide despite industry set aesthetic standards, intentionally avoiding a uniform selection of staples or colours. The lighter hides produced a more traditional and recognisable finish, while the darker staples, with their coarser and longer nature, resulted in a thicker, more matted finish. Through this process, I discovered that coarser finishes, although producing beautiful wool, are less versatile and lack the refinement expected in luxury products, impacting desirability. Close examination of the hides provided a unique opportunity to study the staples, revealing observations not otherwise apparent. The varied shades of staple reflected the animals' lives, with rich brown roots transitioning to bleached tips, indicative of a rich life spent predominantly outdoors, but juxtaposed with poignant numbered markings' served as a stark reminder that these lives are inherently commodified by humans. This experience offered a profound insight into the reality of meat and textile production, as I selected specific hides with unique markings and staples for tanning, while the others were compactly packed for disposal.



Nidderdale Tannery utilised sheep skull markings to hand-carve coat buttons.