

ONLY NATURAL — FASHION 2026

Faces in Shift

A modular vegetable-tanned leather garment inspired by Paiwan Indigenous culture and the hundred-face snake mythology

Fu-Ling Kuo

Costume Designer & Interdisciplinary Artist

MFA, Taipei National University of the Arts · MA Costume Design for Performance, London College of Fashion (UAL)



ABOUT

About Me

My name is Fu-Ling Kuo, a Taiwan-based costume designer and interdisciplinary artist. I hold an MFA from Taipei National University of the Arts and an MA in Costume Design for Performance from London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London.

Alongside my studio practice, I've worked across theatrical costume design, material research, leather craft, performance and installation, from designing adaptive, tactile costumes for live productions to developing original leather pieces rooted in post-colonial identity and Indigenous culture. In 2022 I received a Gold Award at World Stage Design.

Being a designer is not just what I do — it's how I think. I'm drawn to questions of identity, migration and cultural layering, and to materials and crafts that carry history within them. Through my work I keep returning to the same question: how does a face, a garment, a piece of leather hold and reveal who we are.

I'm especially drawn to slow, labour-intensive craft. My work often brings together techniques from different cultural traditions — Japanese kaki-shibu dyeing, Indigenous Taiwanese motifs, hand-prepared natural dyes — combining old methods with new forms. I'm particularly drawn to working with leather: a material that ages, scars and remembers.

For me, leather is never just a surface. It is timeless, natural and durable — a material that resists disposability and instead records a personal history with every mark it carries.



01 PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Summary

In a world where 60 per cent of garments are now synthetic, this piece reaches back to a century-old Taiwanese Indigenous dyeing tradition to ask what it means to make something that truly lasts.

Faces in Shift is a modular apparel piece constructed primarily from vegetable-tanned cattle leather (80% of total surface area), with a smaller proportion of ten-year aged chrome-tanned sheepskin deadstock (20%) rescued from storage rather than left to waste. The leather is surface-treated with persimmon tannin (kaki-shibu), iron-mordant botanical printing, and wax-resist (batik) dyeing using a hand-prepared blend of wood wax and white wax. Every technique is slow by necessity.

The work draws on Paiwan Indigenous culture and the mythological significance of the hundred-face snake — a totemic ancestor figure — as interpreted through an interview with Miyaw, a Truku Indigenous descendant, whose words about fractured cultural identity anchor the conceptual heart of this collection. The modular panel construction means individual sections can be replaced or passed on as identity itself shifts — countering the disposability of fast fashion at the level of both material and meaning.



MATERIAL

80% vegetable-tanned cattle leather • 20% chrome-tanned sheepskin (10-year aged stock)



TECHNIQUE

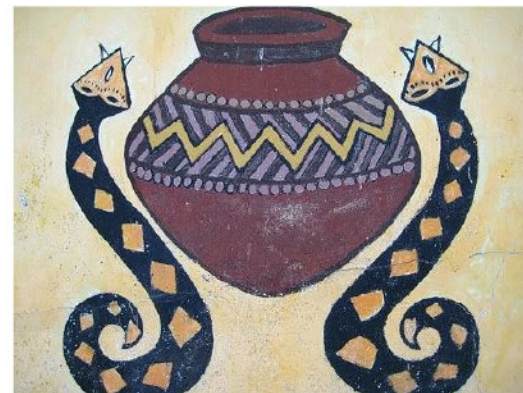
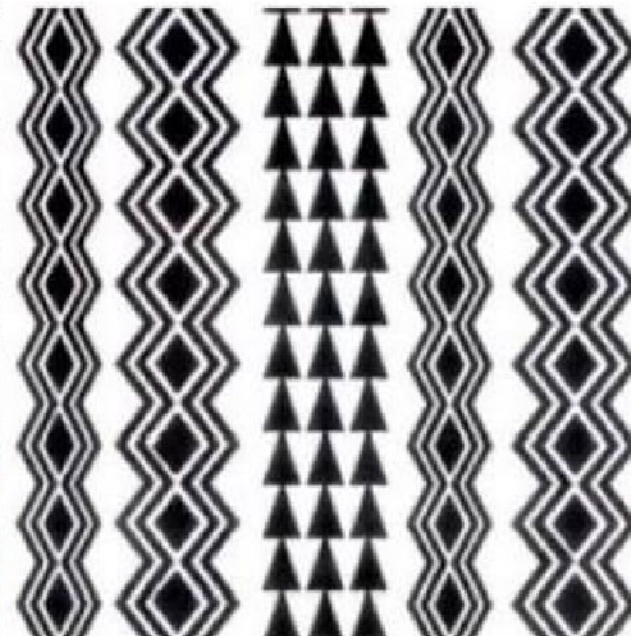
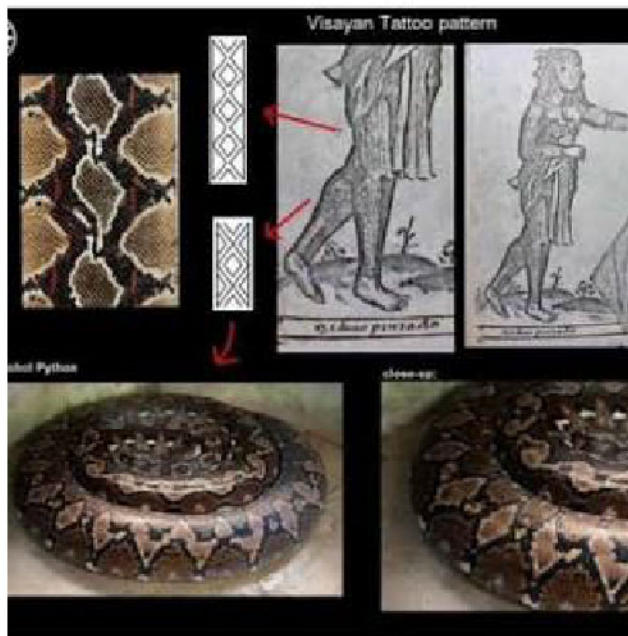
Persimmon tannin • iron mordant • wax-resist (batik)



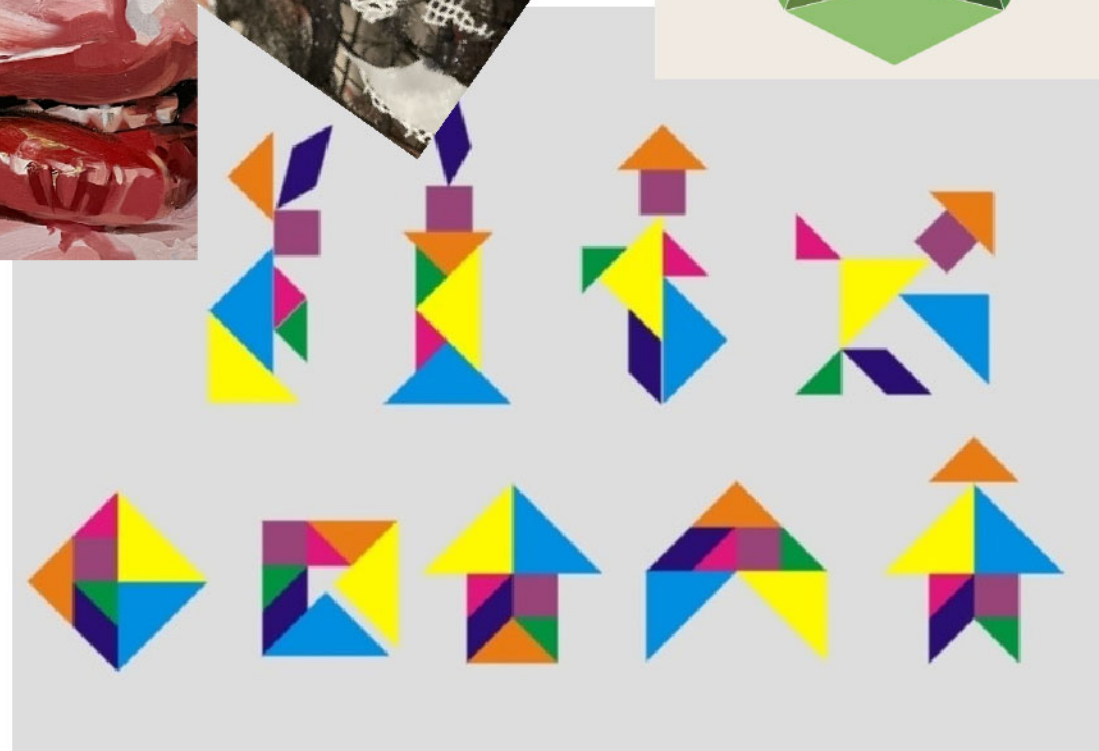
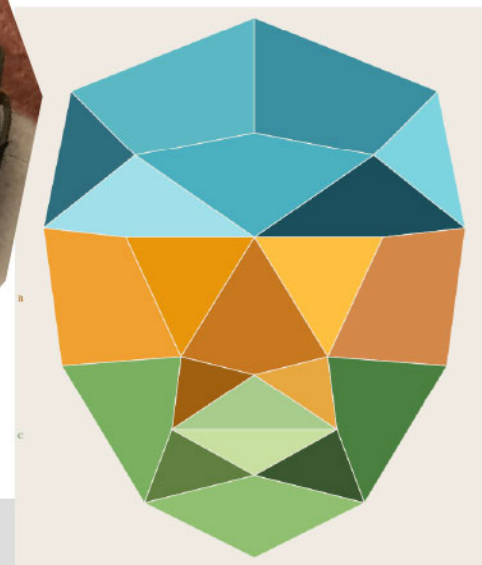
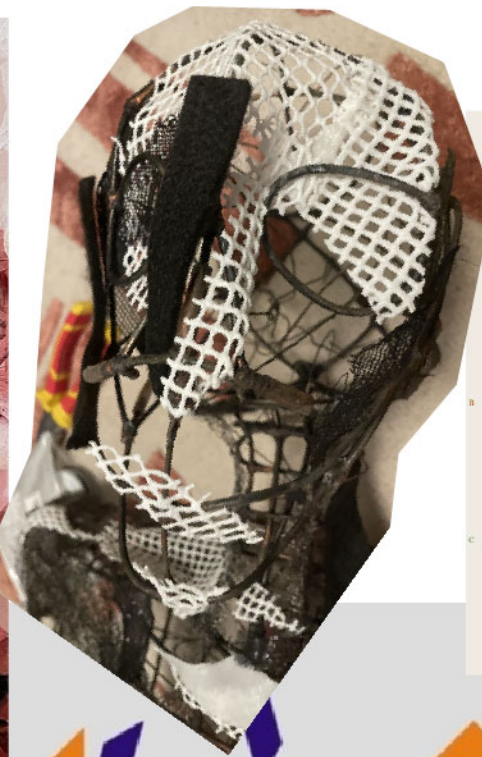
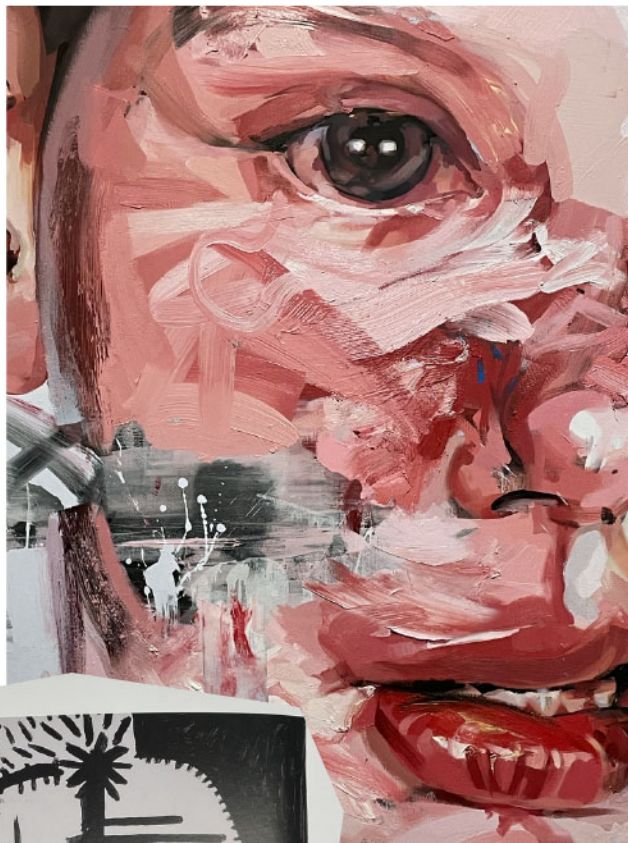
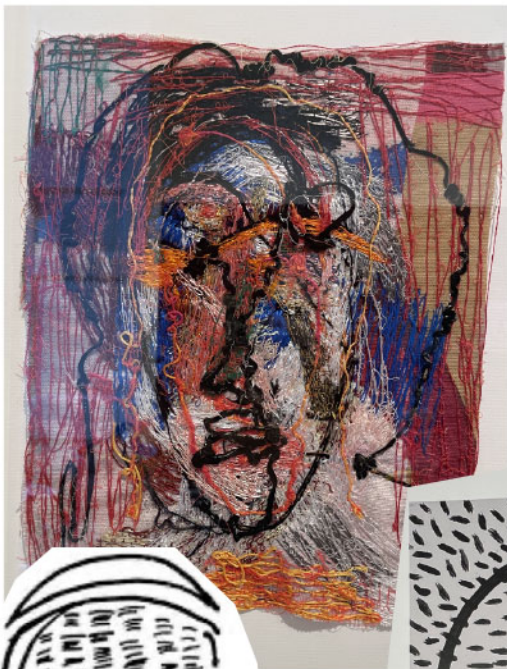
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Design Narrative

Identity in London

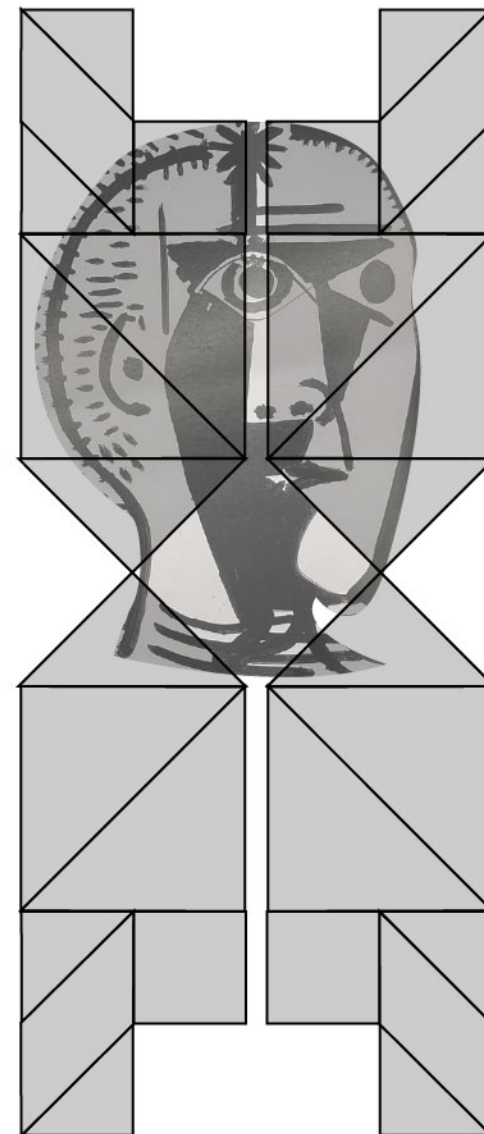
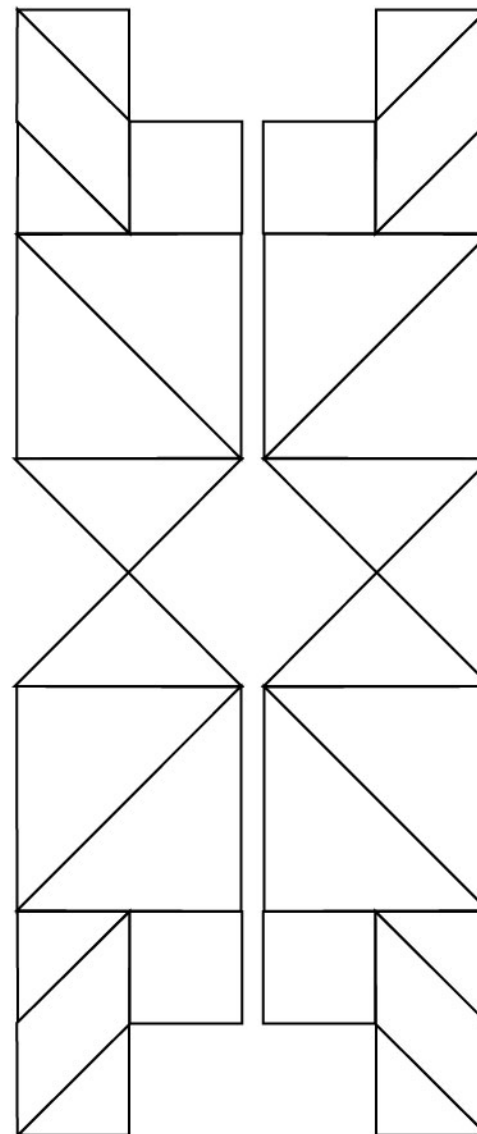
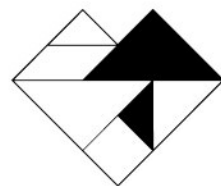
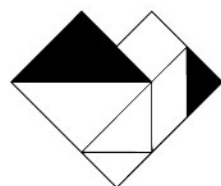
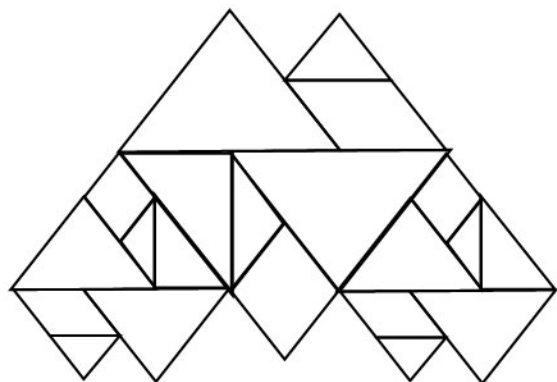
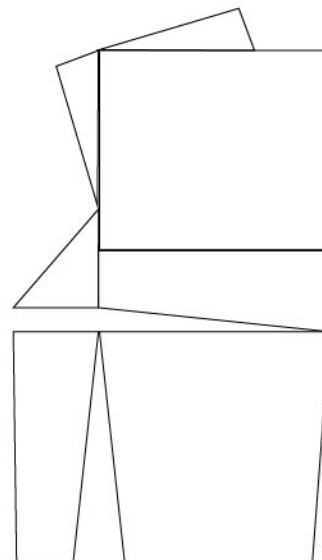
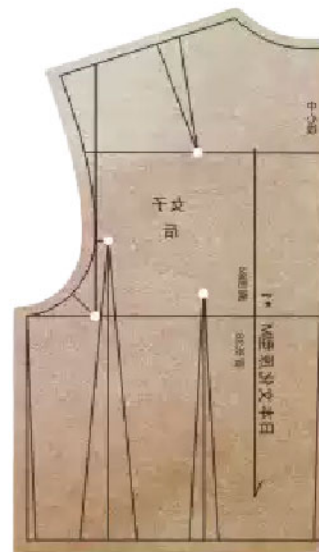
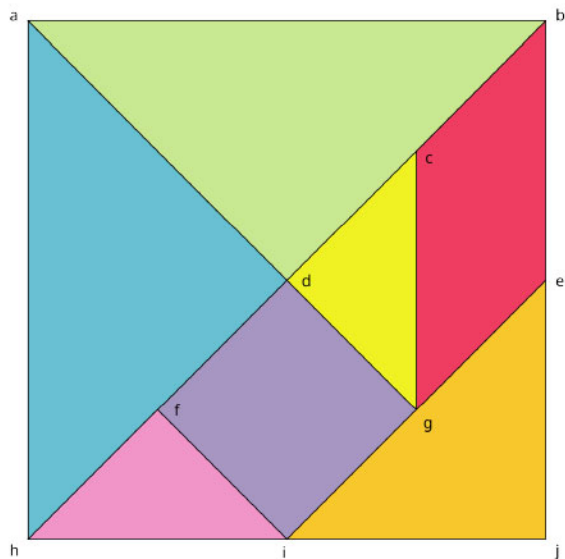
London is a city that forces you to keep redefining yourself. Living here, I sometimes feel less and less Taiwanese — language, habits, and aesthetic sensibility all quietly adjusting — until a sudden moment of culture shock makes me realise: I am still Taiwanese, entirely. Watching Taiwanese emigrants who have settled in Britain and gradually assimilated, I found myself disoriented about where identity is supposed to go. London itself mirrors this: a city assembled from countless migrant communities, each person perpetually negotiating where they belong and what they belong to. That anxiety of identity seems to be the city's common undertone.

Carrying this disorientation, I turned back to look at where I come from. Over four hundred years, Taiwan has been governed in succession by the Dutch, the Spanish, the Zheng dynasty, the Qing dynasty, and Japan — five regimes, each bringing new waves of migration, new languages, new cultural sediment. The result is that Taiwanese people today often find it genuinely difficult to say who, precisely, they are. Identity here has never been fixed; it is a historical accumulation, a process of constant renegotiation. Scholars term this condition diaspora or post-colonial identity crisis: after colonial rule, historical rupture, or migration, identity faces fracture and reconstruction.

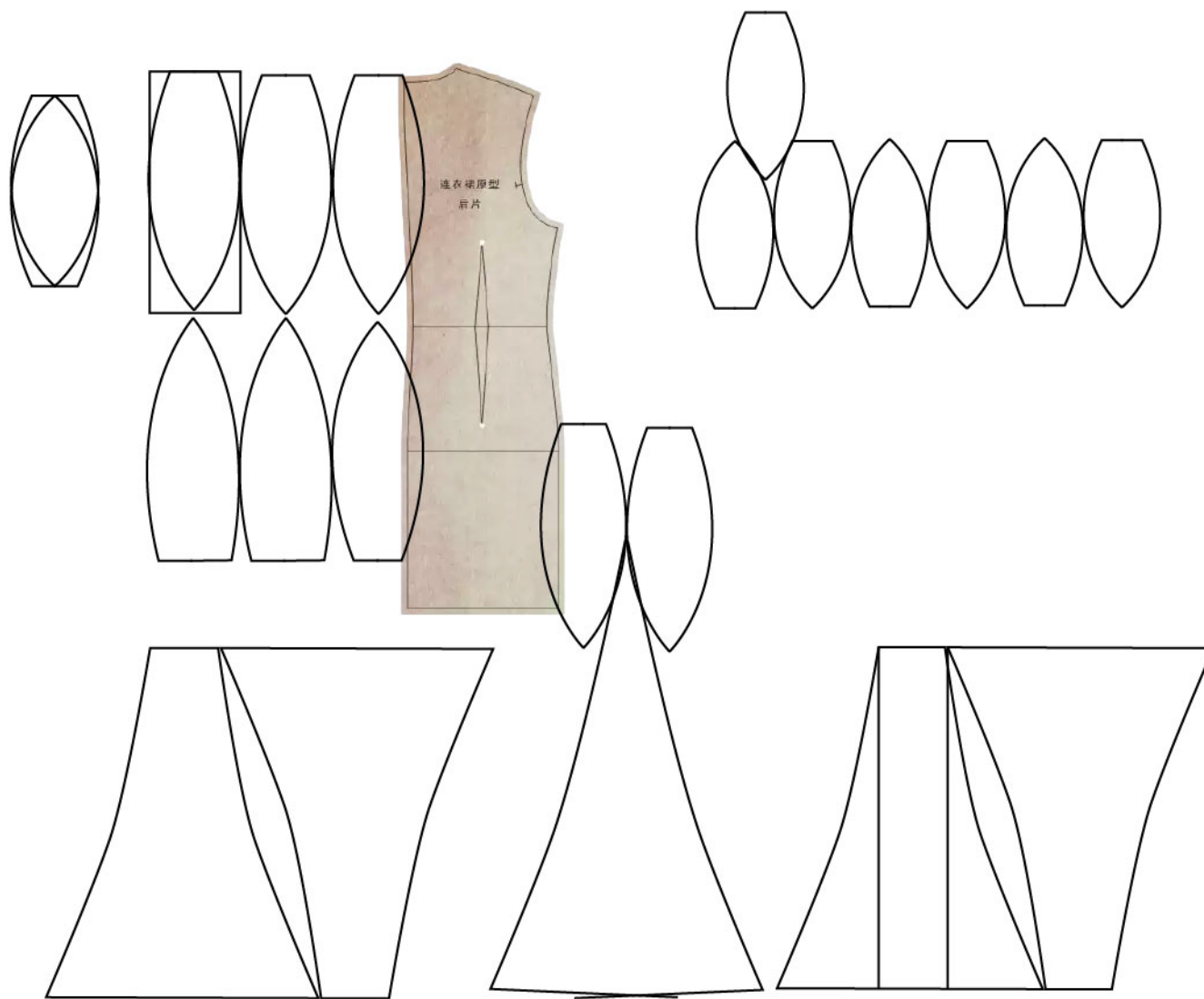
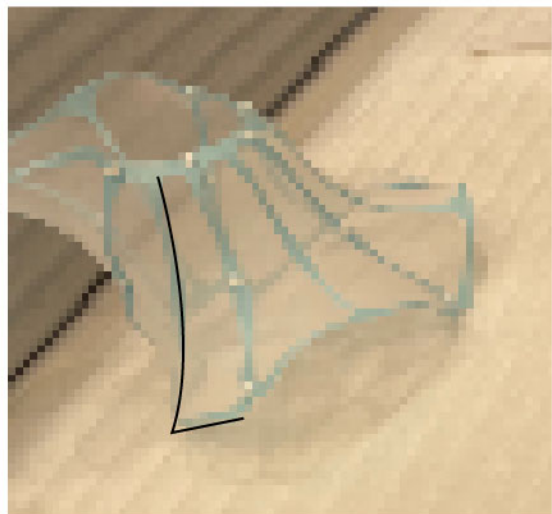
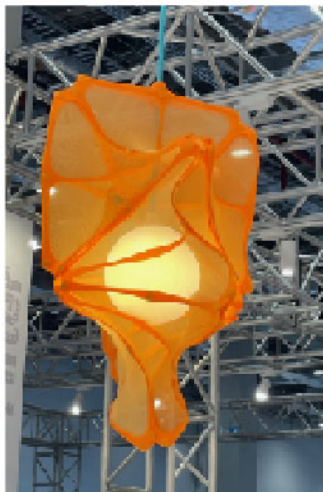
02 STORYTELLING

A botanical phenomenon describes this precisely. Korea and Taiwan share certain street-tree species; yet when a subtropical tree is transplanted to temperate Korea, it grows differently in response to climate, soil, and light — to the point of being almost unrecognisable as the same tree. The genetic code has not changed; the alternating or opposite arrangement of the leaves has not changed. But the environment has reshaped its outward form. Only by looking closely — by reading the leaf arrangement, the genetic signatures — can you recognise, on a Seoul pavement: this is a Taiwanese tree. People living abroad are much the same: language, habits, and appearance adapt to the environment, but certain deeper genetic signatures remain, legible only on close inspection, yet never absent.

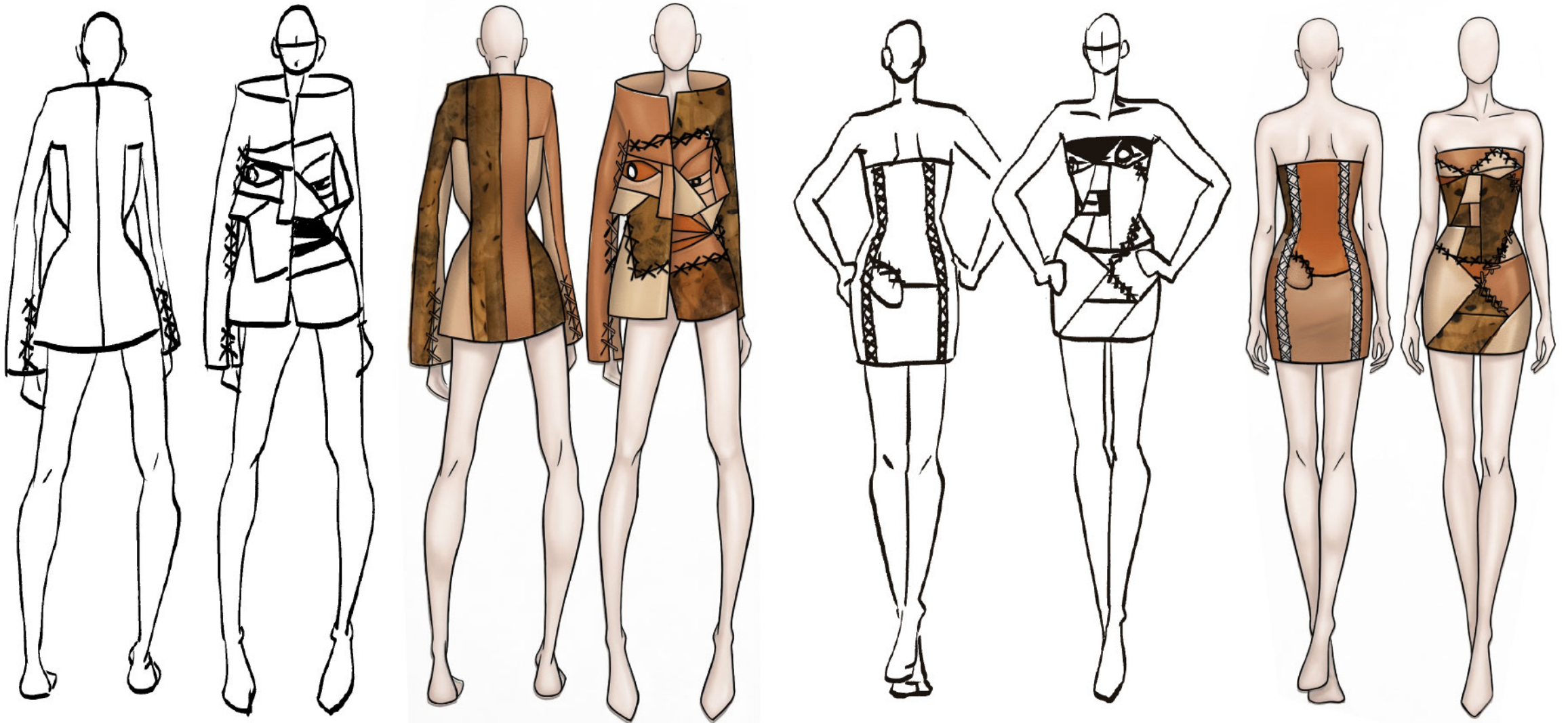
This design responds simultaneously to my own struggle and to Miyaw's — and invites every person in London, wherever they come from, to find something of themselves within it. The pieced vegetable-tanned leather garment is composed of independent panels, each carrying a distinct cultural code, totem, or texture. They can be exchanged, rearranged, even passed to another person. The wearer is not defined by a fixed cultural costume; they choose which symbols to carry on their body today — as Miyaw put it: 'Isn't the labelling of oneself also something one does to oneself?' This is an exercise in identity autonomy through dress: each wearer decides which signature to make visible, today.



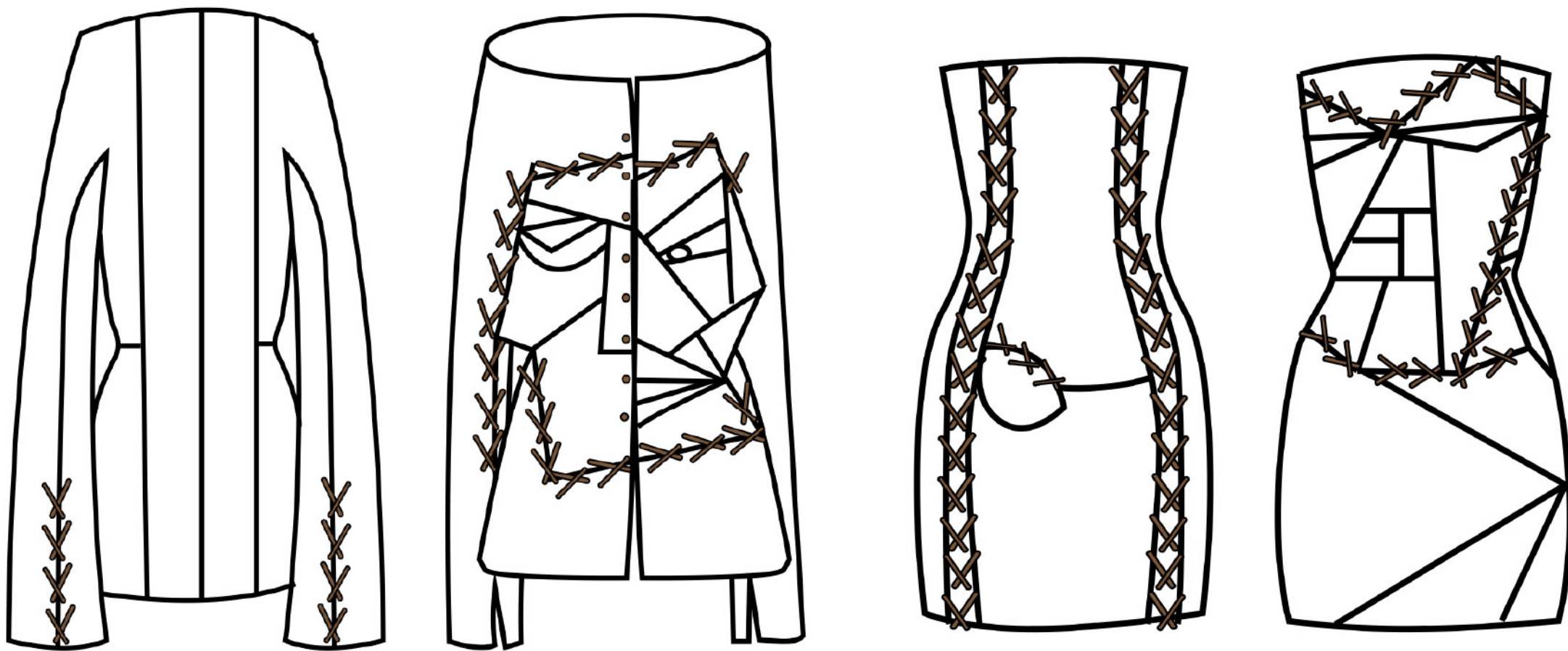
03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



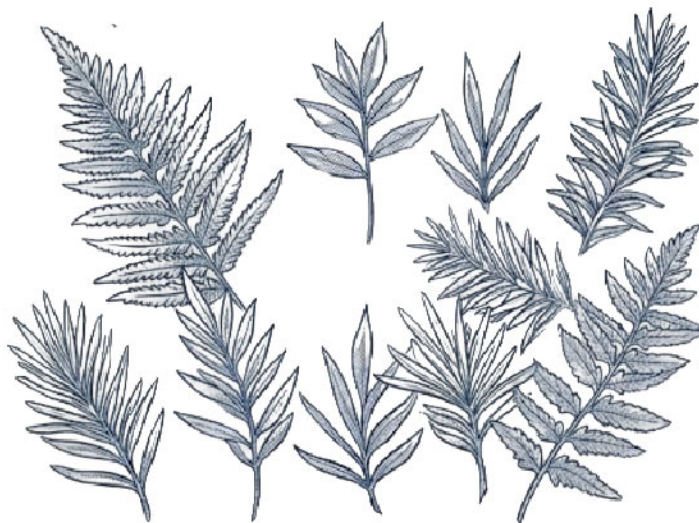
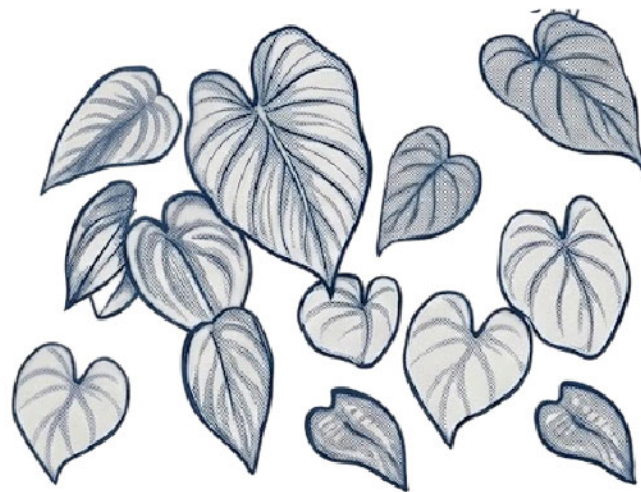
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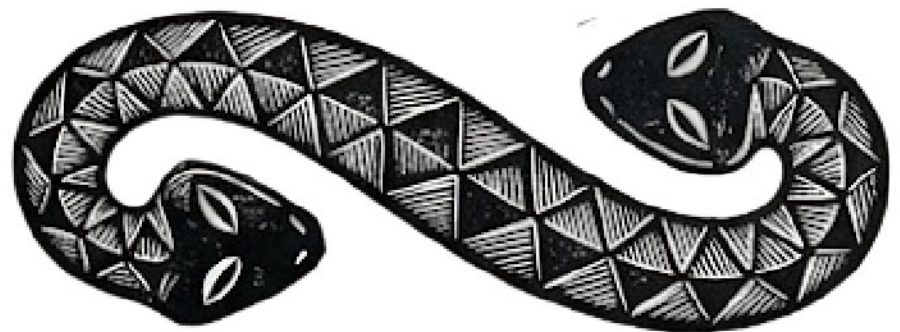
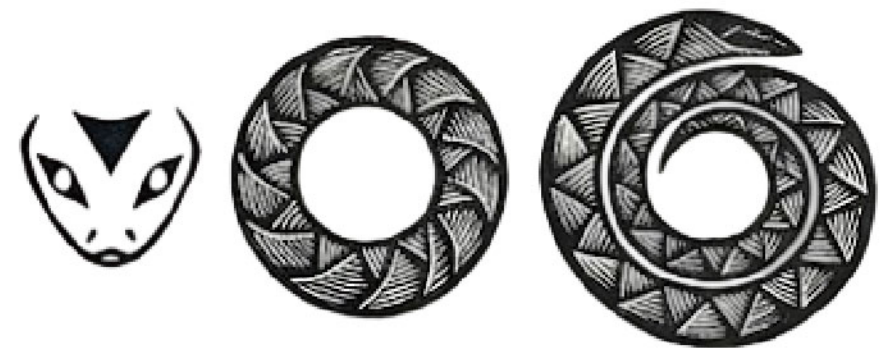
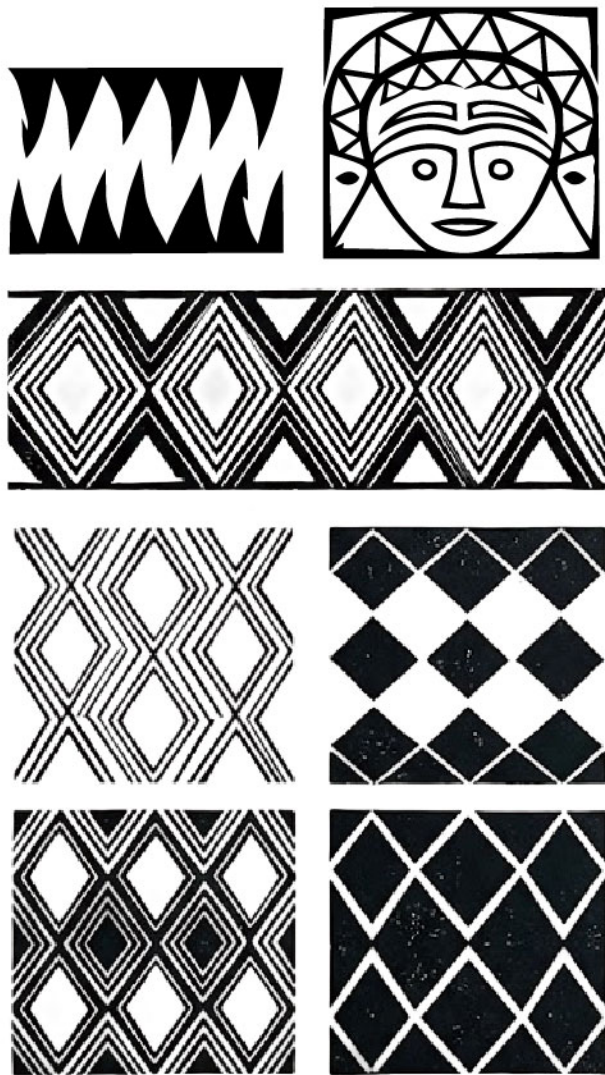
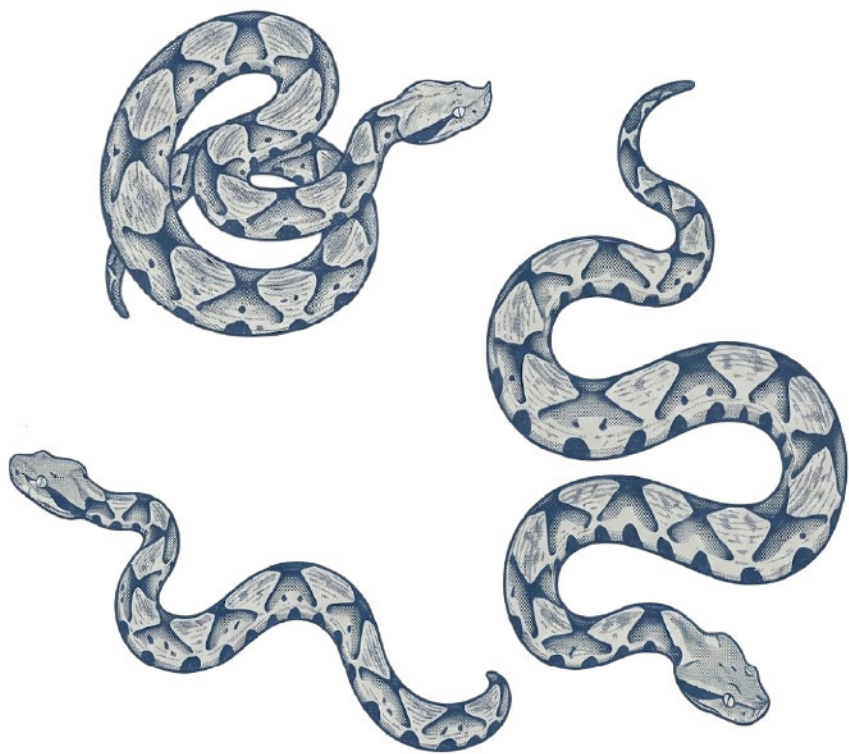
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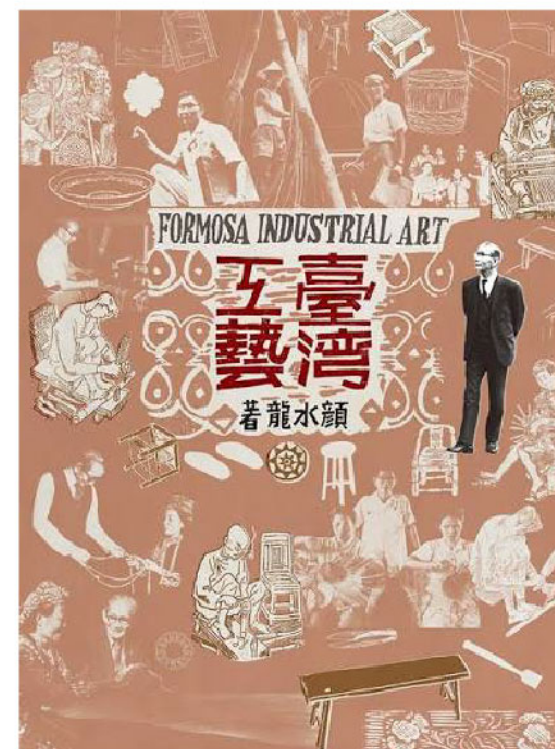
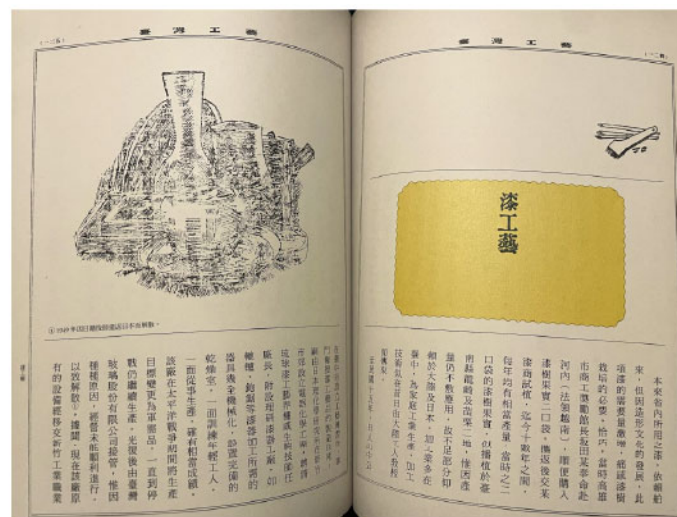


03 SKETCHES & TECHNICAL FLATS



Craft & Hybridity

The craft of this piece is itself a site of hybridity. Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule for fifty years; Japanese culture permeated Taiwanese life and craft tradition at every level. The surface treatment of the leather uses kaki-shibu coating — a natural waterproofing technique of Japanese origin, in which persimmon tannin liquid is applied in repeated layers, allowing the leather to develop a deep patina over time. The repair philosophy draws on kintsugi: where a panel is mended, the join is left visible — stitched in waxed cotton cord rather than hidden — so the history of damage becomes part of the piece rather than a flaw to conceal. These crafts cross the cultural boundary between Japan and Taiwan, coexisting on a single leather surface — just as Taiwanese identity accumulates, layer upon layer, through every act of rule, influence and reshaping.



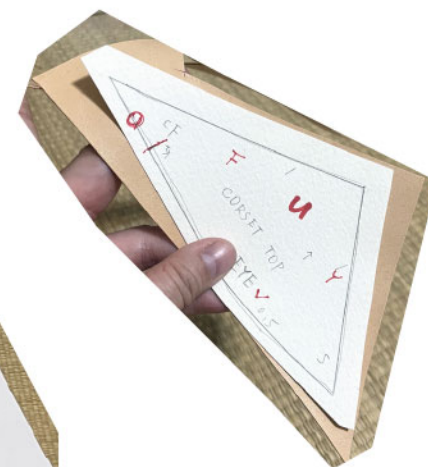
02 CRAFT NARRATIVE



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RESEARCH NOTE

The Commercial Applications of Kakishibu Dyeing

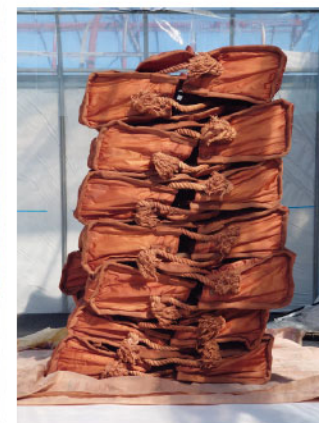
From temple construction to luxury bag collections: a millennia-old natural dyeing craft

Origins & Traditional Uses

Kakishibu is a natural tannin liquid pressed from unripe green persimmons and fermented for months to years. Used in Japan since the Heian period for its waterproofing, antibacterial and anti-rot properties, it has long reinforced umbrellas, fishing nets, sake-filtering cloth and stencil paper, and even coated temple structures such as Hōryū-ji.

Case Study: Yoshida & Co.'s OLDNEW Series

In 2023, Japanese heritage bag house Yoshida & Co. (maker of PORTER) released “OLDNEW” under its LUGGAGE LABEL line, its first new collection in six years. The pieces are dyed by Omae Co., a craft workshop in Notogawa, Shiga Prefecture with over 40 years of kakishibu experience, using repeated dipping and sun-drying to build deep, nuanced colour. The “KURE” colourway goes further: pieces are dipped a second time in iron-rich water to darken the tone toward black, a direct parallel to the iron-mordant darkening used in this project. Priced from 52,800 to 71,500 yen and sold through PORTER flagship stores and Dover Street Market Ginza, OLDNEW shows a clear commercial pathway: a traditional dye craft repositioned as a high-value fashion proposition.



RESEARCH NOTE

Other Applications & Implications

Also Used Commercially In

- | Sake clarification: the largest industrial use of kakishibu today
- | Building coatings: a non-toxic, mould- and formaldehyde-resistant interior finish
- | Personal care: an antibacterial, deodorising soap ingredient
- | Craft papermaking: traditional reinforcement for Ise-katagami stencil paper
- | Independent dye studios: kakishibu-dyed canvas bags sold via Creema, Rakuten

Implications for Faces in Shift

Kakishibu's trajectory, from temple coatings and fishing-net reinforcement to a high-value positioning point in luxury bag collections, shows how natural mordant dyeing can credibly command a 'slower is more valuable' position in today's market. This is the same path Faces in Shift follows in its material philosophy and market positioning.

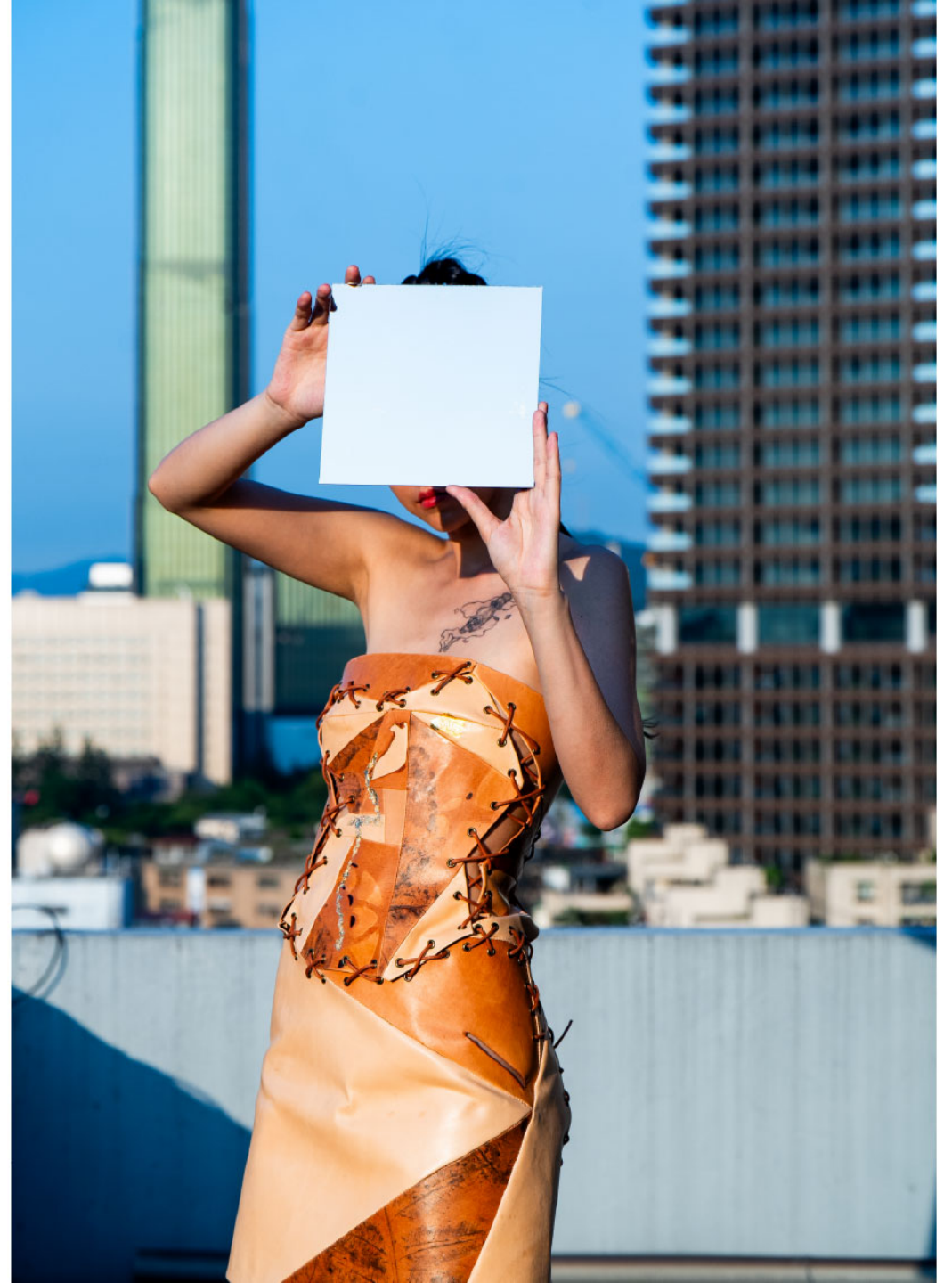




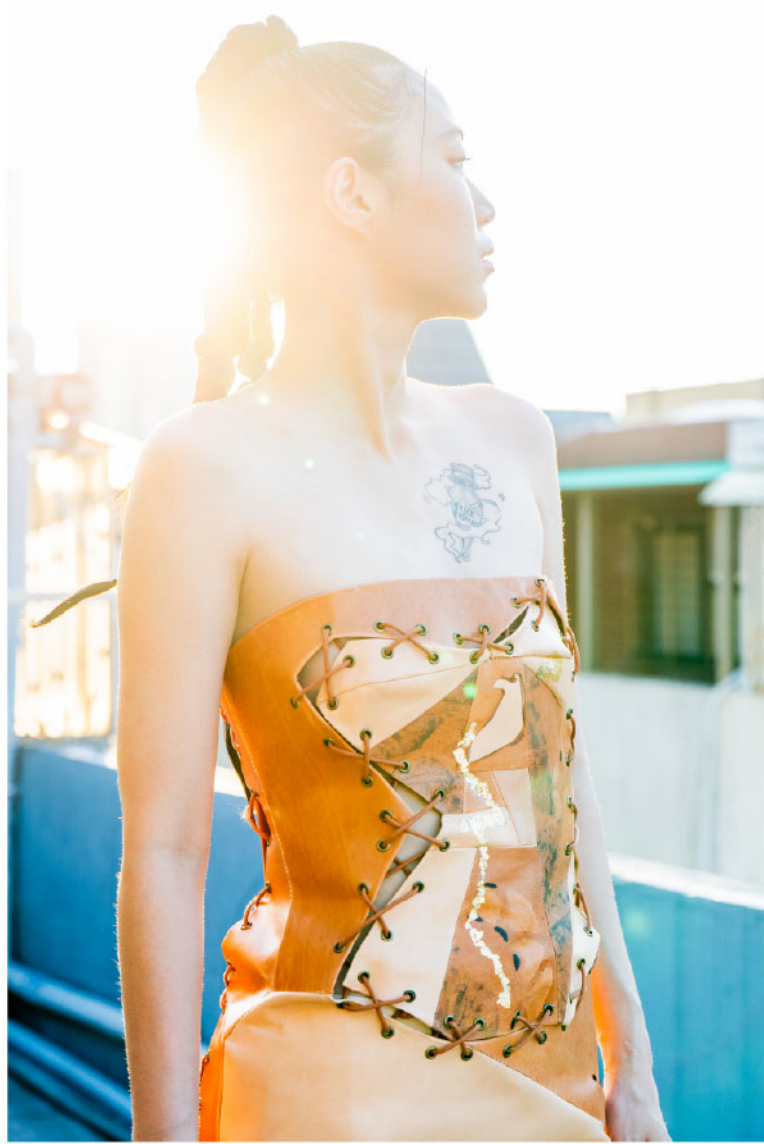












Materials & Provenance

Material	Origin	Type	Proportion / Role	Sustainability note
Vegetable-tanned cattle leather	Taiwan	Natural	80% surface area	Slow-tanned, biodegradable
Chrome-tanned sheepskin (10-yr aged stock)	Taiwan	Mixed	20% surface area	Rescued deadstock, diverted from waste
Persimmon tannin / kaki-shibu	Traditional	Natural	Surface treatment	Natural preservative, no chemical additives
Iron mordant (ferrous acetate)	Self-prepared	Natural	Botanical printing	Iron + acetic acid, non-toxic
Botanical specimens (leaves)	Foraged, Taiwan	Natural	Surface printing	Zero waste — specimens composted post-print
Wax-resist (wood wax + white wax)	Hand-prepared	Natural	Batik resist dyeing	Plant / mineral wax, biodegradable
Waxed cotton cord	9	Natural	Binding / stitching	Biodegradable fibre
Eyelets	9	Metal	Functional hardware	Durable, repairable
Snap fasteners	9	Metal	Functional hardware	Durable, repairable, recyclable

Sustainability Statement

Every material used in Faces in Shift is natural, or — where not strictly natural — deliberately rescued from waste.

The foundation, vegetable-tanned cattle hide, makes up 80 per cent of the garment's surface area. It is produced without chrome salts and tanned using plant extracts over several weeks — a process that cannot be industrially accelerated and is, by its nature, antithetical to fast fashion logic. The hide itself is a by-product of the food industry; using it prevents landfill and avoids demand for petrochemical synthetics.

The remaining 20 per cent is chrome-tanned sheepskin held in storage for ten years — leather that would otherwise have remained unused deadstock. Incorporating it diverts existing material from waste rather than sourcing new hide: a deliberate trade-off between tannage purity and circularity.

Persimmon tannin (kaki-shibu) acts as a natural preservative and waterproofing agent, extending the leather's usable life without chemical coatings. The iron mordant is self-prepared from iron filings and acetic acid; the wax-resist medium is a hand-prepared blend of wood wax and white wax — no synthetic dyes, no plastic components.

The modular panel system is the design's core sustainability mechanism: a worn panel is replaced individually rather than discarding the whole garment, and panels can be detached and passed to another wearer. At end of life, the leather and all natural materials will biodegrade.