A Stitch Unravelled

An Analysis of *A Stitch Entwined* and its Process Towards Completion in Light of a Global

Pandemic

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Project Statement

A Stitch Entwined seeks to explore the ways impactful female relationships influence and form our perception of self and identity through ways of dress. A Stitch Entwined takes two universal modes of communication to illustrate this concept; the first being ways of dress and the second being a fairytale. Clothing is the first mode by which we communicate our identity with the world, and by which we identify others. Themes of identity, storytelling and relationships are expressed through a wearable sculpture and the modern interpretation of a fairytale. The fairytale extracts the garment from reality, and communicates a universal metaphor in which women shape and are shaped by generations of female kinship. The experience of the fairytale give permission the viewer to exit reality and engage with a piece of dress. The intention is to prompt the viewer to be introspective about ways their own female relationships have impacted their identity. While the inspiration for the piece has been my own personal relationships, the intent is for each and everyone of us to step back and reflect on the ways the women in our lives are reflected through us.

<u>Introduction</u>

I have approached this new form of my senior capstone project with the intent to inform the viewer of the multifaceted and academic approach I have taken towards completing *A Stitch Entwined.* The process has shifted as our world has reacted to a global pandemic. The pandemic has changed our ways of living, our relationships, and how we engage with the world. For those who participate in the arts, it has drastically changed how we practice, study, educate, value and partake in the arts both formally and informally. The pandemic has changed how we must engage with art practices both mentally and physically. Experienced artists and art students alike are forced to modify and adjust their practices as the balance of life has become unhinged and a new balance must be formed.

As a soon to be graduated art student, my cohort and I have had to begin the process of viewing ourselves as artists in order to produce satisfactory capstone projects. For someone like myself, who prefers to operate in theory and academia rather than making, it has been an arduous, challenging and vulnerable experience. In order to do so we have had to direct and analyze our personal beliefs, our backgrounds, our positions, our media and our message. I began *A Stitch Entwined* inspired by my mother and aunts and their relationship with me as my "fairy godmothers" and the desire to communicate a feeling of connectedness through identity and powerful female relationships.

Over the course of the last two semesters, I have delved deep into the meaning, power and reasons of ways of dress. Clothing is a means by which we have expressed our identities as humans since the earliest days of our evolution. The study of dress is anthropological,

psychological, sociological, and historical on a broad range of subjects. Dress is directly related to our identities, our societies and our reactions and impacts on world history. Much of the analysis in *A Stitch Entwined* was self critical, meaning I dove far and wide to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to express in the project. The first semester of this project began with a survey proposed to diverse online communities which sought to seek anecdotal evidence to direct the pathway of the project. In total I received eighty-nine responses. Questions analyzed clothing's specialness, memory, sentimentality, socioeconomic impact, and importance to interpersonal relationships.

When asked, "Clothing can be used for many different reasons or events, from celebration to costumes, and has the power to be transformative. Think about one of the most special or exciting things you have ever worn. How did it make you feel? Why did you feel that way?"

The words that appeared most often in responses were:

Beautiful, 23

Special, 21

Confident, 10

Excited, 7

In total to that question, over 36 different words were used to describe how clothing made respondents feel. Regardless of socioeconomic status or culture, respondents recognized special occasions as being times to dress outside of the norm – and associate with these special occasions were associated changes in one's own feelings of self-perception brought on by the clothes.

The second semester encompassed more thorough research, in which I analyzed specific elements of *A Stitch Entwined*. Please reference my most current post-panel review on pages ——. During implementation of the project I continually referenced extant and reproduction garments from 16th to the 18th century Europe, Byzantine Empire, ballet costumery, and modern cultural dress from around the world. Specifically I researched foundational garments like Spanish farthingales and stays. I ocellated between these specific periods of time due to their varying degrees of gender expressions, ornate details, and colors. All of these elements influenced *A Stich Entwined*.

Implementation of the project shifted greatly post pandemic shut down. The the original intent had been to create a sculpture in the round. While parts of the project were fabricated, the constraints of shelter-in-place shifted the focus towards a digital representation of the garment. It was more important to me to retain the sensorial experience of the project rather than to create a finalized sculpture. Therefore, I fell back on to my decade of experience in digital photography to produce the video and photograph series seen on my website and in the exhibition.

Revised Review

Over the last few weeks following capstone proposals, I have spent many hours thinking about the feedback and comments I received as well as researching anthropological and sociological studies pertaining to the themes I am exploring in *A Stitch Entwined*. My main concern of this reevaluation of my project was to deconstruct examine my intentions, to step back and view the overarching message. The major themes in *A Stitch Entwined* is the power clothing has to tell a story, and the concept of "femininity" as a contested and complicated term. Knowing these two themes, I have expanded upon my personal beliefs and relationships and researched cross-cultural connections that pertain to clothing, dress, and perception of "femininity" as an aspect of self-identity. An incredibly important point I have taken into consideration is the importance of not culturally appropriating any major aesthetic aspects in the garment I am creating. The project originated with my own powerful female connection to my mother and two aunts. When I was a baby, they called themselves my fairy godmothers and have cultivated relationships that have been powerful, impactful, protecting, and formative. Those types of relationships are what I am choosing to honor in this project.

I am using the word 'universal' to describe elements I have found in my research, and the research of other scholars, to exist throughout humanity regardless of time, place or history. The term "universal" does not negate individual or collective histories or experiences but rather highlights common anthropological, sociological and physiological methods and themes throughout human kind and *A Stitich Entwined.*

The intention of *A Stitch Entwined* is to honor the importance and impact of powerful female relationships in the formation of self identity. I am using two global methods of communication: fairytales and ways of dress. Through my research, I have found that dress is the mode by which humans express identity and perception of self, therefore I am creating a wearable sculpture. The fairytale extracts the garment from reality which makes it a universal metaphor that describes the impact of powerful female relationships on self-identity. The fairytale will be shown through visual representation of these relationships in the garment. I am using abstracted visuals of my own personal impactful female relationships to show how the metaphor is entwined in my own identity. This project gives permission and invites the public to move away from everyday reality and engage with with the garment in a space which allows the viewer to be introspective about ways female relationships have impacted their identity.

<u>Perception of Femininity:</u>

There are considerations to be taken when defining one's own personal perception of femininity or masculinity. My first consideration regarding this project specifically, is that dress and appearance are the outward expressions of our identity (Akdemir 185, Braizaz 62). Gender constructs have shifted throughout history but are largely dictated by society's definition of predictable social behavior (Braizaz 65). Changes in gender constructs usually occur as a result of sociopolitical and economic shifts in society. Throughout the history of clothing, there was very little differentiation in ways of dress between the sexes prior to 1649 (Akdemir 186). A separation of gender identity represented through clothing took place thereafter and did not begin to merge back together until the World Wars in the Twentieth Century. It took the social,

economic, technological and political changes of the world being at war in ways humanity had never experienced, in order to change ideas of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, we can conclude that contemporary ideas of femininity and masculinity are gender constructs that have been passed down for roughly three hundred years (Akdemir 188). Secondly, these societal norms have been mostly defined for us by men and hegemonic masculinity (Braizaz 66). Hegemonic masculinity puts the dominant male at the top of the human food chain. Male philosophers, scholars, psychologists, doctors, anthropologists, sociologists and historians have been the ones to define "femininity" throughout most of history. Rarely has there been any acknowledgement of a definition of femininity created by women. Hegemonic masculinity marginalizes women and also men who do not possess the "dominant" male traits (Morrenttini). The validity and certainty of these gender constructs have been debated and analyzed continually throughout history. Those who choose to engage with "opposite" expressions of gender identity are subjected to scrutiny because it exists outside of societal norms. It has only been within the last twenty years, with the spread of technology and information, that these norms are shifting faster than history has ever seen. Society is moving away from black and white constructs of masculinity and femininity and towards more fluid definitions. However, these changes are only occurring in progressive, modern, first world countries. It may take another three hundred years for a shift in gender identities becomes universal.

Ultimately, our own personal relationships and definitions of femininity and masculinity serve firstly ourselves and the expression of our identities. "Even if every individual has a gendered body, it does not imply that he or she lives it with the same intensity as another person of the same gender" (qtd. in Braizaz 74). Through my research I have found that there is no clear

definition of femininity or masculinity. It is something that is so personal to the individual, that extrapolating a dictionary-worthy definition will never be sufficient. Femininity and masculinity have been discussed, debated, defined, examine and expressed since the dawn of human kind. It has been and will be analyzed by biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and many others for as long as society continues to develop and change. By considering this, *A Stitch Entwined* shows my own relationship with femininity and how its definition exists for me in the project. Femininity is something which I feel gives me agency. It is a mode by which I feel empowered and confident. My definition of felinity exists around ideas of duality such as outspokenness versus silence, refinement versus the untamed, and expectations versus reality. I often like to play with juxtaposed feminine visuals such as placing a soft dancer within a harsh environment. Femininity for me is something which can have power within softness, exists with both empathy and determination, and can be both nurturing and formidable, in which its resilience operates in the ability to be flexible. Femininity is not something that defines me as subservient or lesser. "Patriarchal" oppression affects us and operates most freely when we do not identify, resist, redefine, and subvert its power. That is the function of A Stitch in Time which honors softness, memory, family, and female kinship.

Universal Ways of Communication: Clothing

Clothing has the power to connect us to others, ourselves and our past. Those who engage with femininity intensify social gaze and scrutiny upon one's own identity (Breward 307). Since childhood, "women are encouraged to think about the image and how they express of themselves through their clothes, jewelries, adornments etc." (qtd. in Braizaz 62). Things that can influence

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how we choose to adorn our bodies and express our identities are things such as, "family history, working life, [and] conjugal and friendly sociability's" (qtd. in Braizaz 66). Ultimately our society and its culture influence our ways of dress and this is true globally. As with all culture and identity, this is the result of many different influences. Academia tries to draw clear lines to define culture, however, in day to day lives "the materials that convey the practices of thoughts and ordinary people are always mixed, blending forms and themes, invention and tradition, literate culture and folklore" (qtd. in Breward 304).

With the aforementioned information in mind, I set out to define just how powerful clothing can be in identity formation. I found that there were three universal purposes for clothing, both real and perceived. These purposes are derived from a lecture on the utility of headwear by Christine Brown at The George Washington University Museum's Textile Museum. The three categories can be applied to all forms of dress:

Reveal:

Ethnicity

Geographical affiliation

Marital status

Socioeconomic status

Emotional states

Authority or power or deference to

Attract tangible or intangible things such as wealth, love, fertility

Familial relationships

Conceal:

Body parts

Tangible or intangible threats

From public view

Emotional states

Protect:

Against physical threats, such as the elements, animals or other people

Against intangible/spiritual threats (Textiles for the Head)

In my garment, I am exploring the purposes of revealing, concealing, and protecting based upon the lives of my female influences and their role(s) in my life. I have started by analyzing my three fairy godmothers, then expanding to two other significant women in my life, my "adopted" sister and my best friend, whom I also consider to be a sister, and her mother. I will be asking these women to donate to the project pieces of clothing or adornment. These items should be representative of their identities and or/ their impactful female relationships. The purpose of the garment is to show how these things can influence how we dress ourselves and how they transfer down through generations.
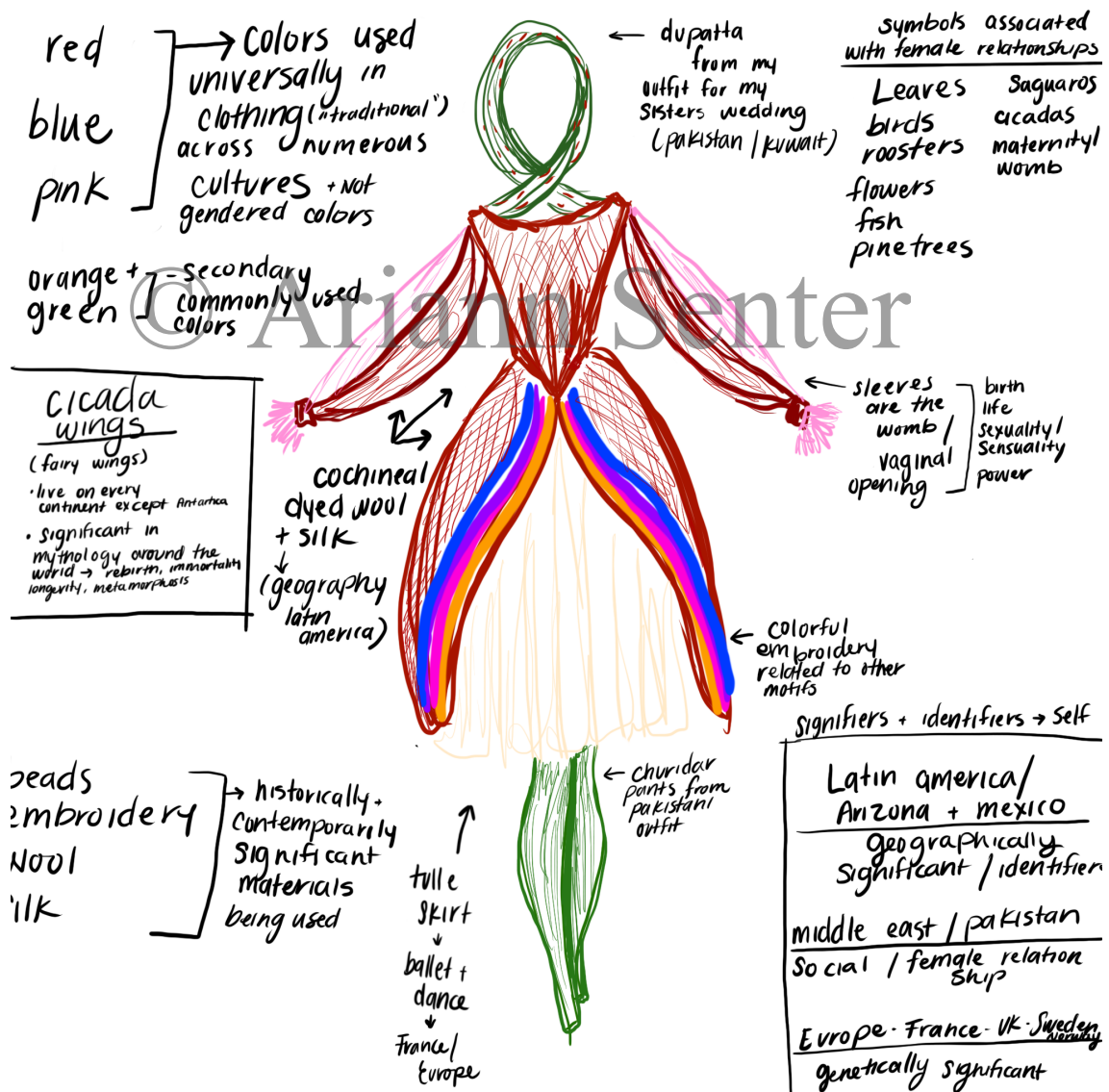
I also began to expand upon my visual representation in the fairy garment itself. I started by examining folk costumes and clothing of nomadic peoples from across the globe and throughout history. I found there were silhouettes, motifs, materials and meanings that were common and I included them in *A Stitch In Time*. These include but are not limited to the heavy use of embroidery, veils, hats and headgear, beading, nature motifs, tunics with pants and skirts and vivid hues of red, blue and pink. They were not constrained by gender defined motifs and these similarities inspired a closer examination of my design and revision. However, I was

acutely aware of my position as a European descendant in relationship to the design of my garment. I do not want to appropriate any literal materials or visuals in the garment. It is also important to acknowledge that the idea of "traditional" ways of dress in the context of European colonialism operated as a way to "other" non-western cultures (Rovine). I am also not looking to exoticize any iconography from other cultures. To deconstruct these biases, I looked to historical dance costuming to bridge the link between fantastical representations of real garment construction. Ballet costuming manages to adapt "traditional" ways of dress into modern or "western" silhouettes while also honoring and celebrating these ways of dress communicate the purpose and aid in the identification of the wearer and their story. By using construction techniques and silhouette designs from traditional ballets, I will use this juxtaposition in my garment. Merriment also plays an essential role in *A Stitch In Time.* The garment is intended to uplift, excite and bring joy to the viewer all while prompting them to investigate the deeper connections in relation to self.

Familial connections are formative to our personal cultures, the societies in which we live and the ways we learn to develop as individuals. Often, clothing acts as a conduit that connects us to the important people in our lives. These people are entwined into our own perception of self. This was a thread that was common to nearly every response in the survey I conducted. My garment is a celebration of women who helped form and shape who I am. They are a part of my own definition of femininity and have in fact influenced my perception of identity. They are guides, mentors, confidants, matriarchs and individual people who have been formed by the women in their lives as well. This influence is ancestral and compounds on itself meaning that each generation is influenced by the previous. Even though there are representations of people in

my life in *A Stitch Entwined*, they are not literal portraits of individuals. Instead they are symbolic of my relationship to my mother, my aunts, my friends, and their relationships to the women in their lives. The fairy garment is an exaggeration and fantastical visual aid to the story that will be told. The projects invites the viewer to take time for introspection to examine the ways that identity and dress choices are influenced by the women they know. In order to break down how I am showing these people through the fairy garment, I have included by revised design and will expand upon it below.

red
blue
pink
→ Colors used universally in clothing ("traditional") across numerous cultures + not gendered colors

orange + green — secondary commonly used colors

cicada wings
(fairy wings)
· live on every continent except Antartica
· significant in mythology around the world → rebirth, immortality longevity, metamorphosis

beads
embroidery
wool
silk
→ historically + contemporarily significant materials being used

← dupatta from my outfit for my sisters wedding (pakistan / kuwait)

symbols associated with female relationships
Leaves   Saguaros
birds   cicadas
roosters   maternity/
flowers   womb
fish
pine trees

cochineal dyed wool + silk
↓
(geography latin america)

← sleeves are the womb / vaginal opening
birth
life
sexuality/ Sensuality
power

← colorful embroidery related to other motifs

← churidar pants from pakistani outfit

tulle skirt
↓
ballet + dance
↓
France/ europe

signifiers + identifiers → self

Latin america/ Arizona + mexico
geographically significant / identifier

middle east / pakistan
social / female relationship

Evrope · France · UK · Sweden
genetically significant

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The materials I will be using will be mostly silk, wool, embroidery, and tulle. Silk and wool are ancient materials that are historically significant to virtually every culture in history and continue to be significant to humanity. Both are very dualistic in nature as they are derived from animals, and painstakingly processed to create luxurious fibers. Silk can be both soft and delicate on the skin and incredibly durable, depending on its use. I chose these materials for their significance to many cultures as well as their ability to take dye. Embroidery has been a technique used in clothing construction since before 500 BCE (Willem). It is an integral part of human dress and can be used to create beautiful patterns and symbols.The quilted silks I will use in *A Stitch Entwined* will reflect symbols I associate with the women in my life, with the intent to connect with people of all backgrounds. The purpose of these patterns is to reveal personal relationships and spiritual protection. Specifically, I will be using images of bears. My grandmother, who passed when I was a toddler, gave her grandchildren totem animal signifiers, with mine being a bear. It is a tradition we continue in the family even after her passing. I acknowledge the cultural history of totemism amongst indigenous peoples in North America as well as around the rest of the world, and the relationship to my totemic symbol is part of my family legacy. In *A Stitch in Time*, it is not my intention to appropriate any totemic, religious or spiritual significance from indigenous cultures, but rather to connect metaphorically with the influence of ancestors and their symbols of self-identity.

The colors I will be using are red, blue, pink, green and orange. I found these colors to occur repeatedly in clothing around the world and were often bold and bright and genderless. However, I also associate these colors with specific people. I will be dyeing my silk with

cochineal bugs that I have harvested from prickly pears in my childhood neighborhood in Tucson

Arizona. This process will reveal the geographical influences on my identity to Southern Arizona

and Mexico. "The cochineal insect, a small parasite that feeds on the prickly pear cactus, was

cultivated domestically in Mexico and Peru in pre-Hispanic times" (Malkin). Cochineal has been

used as dye for hundreds of years and at one time was a valued resource. It produces a brilliant

red from the carminic acid and can range in shades from light pink to a deep purple depending on

the processing. Red is a color that is often associated with love and power. This color will

represent those themes in the garment. The cochineal dye will be symbolic relationship with my

mother, our home, and our history together.

The sleeves of the garment will be split to reveal a chiffon interior. These will represent

maternity, the womb, and it is symbolic of the dualistic battle between sexuality and sensuality,

and its representation in patriarchal systems that characterize social systems. Many women on a

global scale experience this tension between self and the world.

It will also symbolize the matriarchs in my life, my fairy godmothers who have

experienced birth and have guided life through the act of giving life and nurturing children. By

using sleeves as the vehicle for this symbol I am representing the way women have carried

humanity, literally in their arms throughout history.

I am also repurposing a very special garment I have in my closet. It is a handmade salwar

kameez that was made for me to wear at my sister's wedding. My sister came into my life at age

six as an international exchange student from Pakistan that my family hosted. She became a part

of our family, as did the rest of her family. We consider ourselves to be sisters, and she has been

a guide and mentor for me all my life. Our relationship has expanded across cultures and

continents. When she was married, my mother and I were honored to be asked to wear traditional

Pakistani clothing that was made for us. The salwar kameez and dupatta represented her family

adopting us in the way we had adopted her many years ago. (I love this) In my fairy garment, I

am repurposing the dupatta as a hood that will be taken off. This is to show deference to my

sister and her culture and her influence in my life. The purpose of wearing the dupatta on the

head in the project is to symbolize the protective nature of home and strong connections to

others. However, when the dupatta is taken off, it symbolizes the agency a woman has to reveal

or conceal herself from public view. I will also be using the salwar- the pants- under the dress.

Pants are protective against the elements and can show resilience against westernized concepts of

femininity.

I am planning to use cicada wings as the pattern for the fairy wings. Cicadas exist across

every continent except for Antarctica and image of the cicada can symbolize metamorphosis,

change, rebirth and immortality. The sound of the cicada occurs in the Sonoran Desert in the heat

of the summer months, when life seems oppressive and deadly. Yet, the cicadas thrive and

endure. My use of cicada wings is to represent stoicism through hardship how these important

relationships can lift us up through the hardest times.

I will also be repurposing pointe shoes. Pointe shoes for me represent my own identity,

and the dualism of femininity. Ballet is the use of grit, physical and mental strength, composure

to obtain an idyllic form of perfection. The pointe shoes represent femininity's external

representation of being soft and graceful while being formed internally through pain and

determination. The shoes will be old, and literally broken, yet still able to move in their intended

floating way.

I will also be collecting artifacts and materials from the women I have mentioned as my inspirations for the project. I will ask them to donate a small adornment that has been significant to their own identity. It could be something that brings them joy, makes them feel a certain way, or has historical significance. These items will represent how each individual person forms their own identity through their ways of dress, and the compounding influences on their lives as well.

Universal Ways of Communication: Fairytales

Another form of universal communication is fairytales. The purpose of folklore and fairytales has been, like femininity and the purpose of clothing, widely debated throughout history. There are many interpretations of what fairytales mean to the human condition. Most importantly, we know that there are similar tales spoken across the globe, throughout history. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, believed that fairytales were a part of humanity's collective unconscious (Fritscher). As defined by Oxford Dictionary, the collective unconscious is "the part of the unconscious mind which is derived from ancestral memory and experience and is common to all humankind, as distinct from the individual's unconscious" (Collective Unconscious). Messages within fairytales can relate to many people, because they relate to our shared experiences as human beings. Analyst Marie-Louise von Franz states, "Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes. Therefore, their value for the scientific investigation of the unconscious exceeds that of all other material. They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest, and most concise form. In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic

patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material. But in fairy tales there is

much less specific conscious material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche

more clearly" (qtd. in Betts) Fairytales are stories which reveal basic human behavior and

exemplify important morals and life lessons. They are permissive and fantastical in nature

because they exist outside of reality.

 My fairytale will be a story about the way impactful female relationships form our

identities. This will be a universal story and inspire the listener to inquire about the ways women

in their lives have shaped them. I am pulling inspiration from "Sleeping Beauty", a tale that I feel

closely connected to. I will be representing the women in our lives who may be our mothers,

sisters, aunts, friends, wives, lovers, grandparents or guides. Our relationships with them may be

nurturing or they may be painful, but they all help shape us into who we are. The basic form of

my story will show figurative representations of influential female relationships and have them

bestow a gift, lesson, virtue or moral to a baby.

> In a land, not far from here, there lived a fairy. One dark night under a bright moon, the fairy born
> a baby. The baby was cradled in the arms of its mother, her mother's mother, her mother's sisters.
> What joy! A new soul, fresh and absolute. Together they smiled down at the face of the babe and
> said, "Young one, what a life you have to live, we have so much to teach you."

I plan to speak of gifts of perseverance, resilience, strength, determination and

hard work. I will show maternal relationships, and sisterly relationships that include

positive and negative experiences. *A Stitch in Time* will also highlight my aesthetic

choices in relationship to colors, and the symbols I mentioned above. Items of the dress

may be given as objects in the story and their significance explained. I will also be

conducting discussions and conversations with my mother, aunts, sister and best friend

and her mother about virtues and lessons the women in their life taught them. These virtues are not necessarily gender specific but may perhaps be less obvious lessons than those given to us by our masculine relationships.

There will not be literal representations of the women I am inspired by. Another aspect of my fairytale is an auditory experience that metaphorically connects the garment to the themes. The viewer will listen to the narration of the fairytale while they look at the garment, and by doing so they can more deeply understand the connections between what they see and what is said in the narrative. By taking a moment to step outside of the constrains of our reality, I hope that the viewer will begin to consider their own relationships and how they choose to express their identity through clothing. The fairytale - both the garment and the narration are an exaggeration, and may appear at face value as nothing more than a costume and children's story. A *Stitch in Time* is meant to exist outside of, and push the societal constraints of behavior and ways we dress. Engaging with this piece can act as a way to highlight parts of ourselves of which we are unaware.

At this point I am open to the consideration of the faculty regarding the video projection behind the garment as a part of the installation. My intention with *A Stitch Entwined* is to create an immersive transportive and ethereal experience for the viewer. The fairytale and the garment will be metaphors for how female relationships impact our identity. It will allow the viewer to examine their own relationships and expression of identity through ways of dress.

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