

Explorations of fashion as a medium

With their sleek silhouettes, futuristic motifs, technological interfaces and interactive surfaces, the garments designed by Pia Myrvold are some of the most visionary expressions of fashion today.

By: Bradley Quinn



The "Cocoon Collection", photographed at Stavanger Museum, Norway

Her designs often defy typical fashion terminology as they reference abstractions such as identity, philosophy and expression, and cite tangibles such as architecture, art, technology and urban cityscapes. Myrvold's fashion collections evoke new systems of communication and fresh forums for interaction; ideas that seem to deconstruct traditional concepts of fashion rather than legitimise them.

Myrvold first learned to sew and then taught herself how to design and make patterns. Her unique position as an artist and crafts person has enabled her to refute the conventions imposed by fashion experts and the industry in general. Myrvold's point of departure was the decision to integrate fashion with other disciplines in order to create connections between the visual, the ideological and the technological, which she then bridged with the human body. At the end of the 1990's, Myrvold's work contributed to the emerging genre known as 'techno fashion', and her vision for 'Cybercouture' launched a web-based fashion platform eight years before the industry grasped the potential that interactive fashion has.

Since launching the Cocoon collection in March 1993, Myrvold has regarded clothing as a site of exploration. Cocoon was immediately bought by Charivari, once regarded as the most avant-garde fashion boutique in New York. Barbara Weiser, the boutique's owner, was drawn to the collection's billowing shapes and intricately structured fabrics, and displayed the garments in the Madison Avenue storefront windows. The collection alluded to a more intense interpretation of clothing than is found within the narrow constraints of mainstream fashion, and introduced something fresh to the New York scene. 'She's in her own world', said Manhattan-based fashion designer Yeohlee of Myrvold's work, 'and once you get into her world you understand how profound her work really is.'

Pia Myrvolds plagg er noen av de mest visjonære innen dagens mote, med sine elegante linjer, futuristiske motiver, teknologiske grensesnitt og interaktive mønstervalg.

Tekst: Bradley Quinn



The "Cocoon Collection", photographed at Hellestø Beach, Stavanger, Norway

Hennes design trosser ofte den typiske moteterminologien – hun refererer til abstrakte begreper som identitet, tenkning og uttrykk og siterer mer håndgripelige ting som arkitektur, kunst, teknologi og bylandskap. Myrvolds motekolleksjoner skaper nye kommunikasjonssystemer og møteplasser for samhandling; idéer som later til å dekonstruere tradisjonelle oppfatninger om mote, snarere enn å legitimere dem.

Myrvold lærte seg først søm, dernest mønsterkonstruksjon og tilskjæring. Hennes enestående posisjon som kunstner og håndverker har satt henne i stand til å gå imot konvensjonene som motedesignerskolene og klesindustrien pålegger. Myrvolds utgangspunkt var beslutningen om å forene moten med andre disipliner for å skape sammenheng mellom det visuelle, det ideologiske og det teknologiske, og å bruke menneskekroppen til å bygge bro. På slutten av 1990-årene bidro Myrvolds arbeid til den nye sjangeren som ble kalt "teknomote", og hennes visjon om Cybercouture ble starten på en nettbasert moteplattform åtte år før det gikk opp for resten av industrien hvilket potensial den interaktive moten har.

Siden Myrvold lanserte Cocoon-kolleksjonen i mars 1993, har hun betraktet klær som et forskningsområde. Cocoon ble øyeblikkelig kjøpt av Charivari, en gang betraktet som New Yorks ledende avantgarde-motebutikk. Barbara Weiser, innehaveren, ble tiltrukket av kolleksjonens bølgende former og kompliserte stoffstrukturer og stilte ut plaggene i vinduene sine mot Madison Avenue. Kolleksjonen henspilte på en mer intens fortolkning av klær enn det som var vanlig i den konvensjonelle motens tvangstrøye, og introduserte noe nytt for New Yorks moteverden. "Hun er i sin egen verden," sa motedesigneren Yeohlee på Manhattan om Myrvolds arbeid, "og kommer du først inn i den, forstår du hvor dypsindige arbeidene hennes egentlig er."

Cocoon Collection



The "Cocoon Collection" was made of "toile", simple unbleached cotton mainly used by designers to create the early versions of the design, before using the real choice of material. Myrvald treated the fabric by tearing it into strips, sewing it back together, and washing, hand painting or dyeing it. The photos were taken in Stavanger Museum, in the Natural History department, built in 1900.

Winter Rose Collection

Myrvold took another brave step when she launched her next collection, Winter Rose, which she presented in Paris in October 1993. Myrvold made the collection from only one material, the inexpensive toile fabric traditionally used by couture designers to create garment prototypes. The collection echoed the sophisticated silhouettes of the Art Nouveau, symbolically combining a historical fashion style with an Arte Povera approach to materials. Myrvold incorporated deconstructivist elements – at a time when the style was virtually unheard of in Paris – by sewing shredded layers of toile into what she described as a ‘mille feuille’ structure. Once finished, the garments were washed to make the selvedge threads fray and mesh into web-like textures on the surface. Myrvold embroidered the garments with strings of ripped fabric that evoked the delicate blossoms and trailing vines of a climbing rose.

Rather than present an autumn/winter collection made from warm fabrics such as velvet and wool, Myrvold had decided to break away from the seasonal cycle that the fashion system follows. Producing designs that could be worn at any time of the year was a radical departure from the fashion cycle, and fellow designers warned her that such a bold move could deprive her of the opportunity to present her collections on the official Chambre Syndicale schedule. Others urged her to take a less artistic stance, pointing out that conceptual designers rarely get their moment in the fashion limelight, but Myrvold refused to change tactics. Years later, when the late Richard Martin described the ‘Fifth Season’ that climate control environments appear to create, Myrvold’s method of layering fashion separates all year round was remembered as visionary.

Myrvold tok et nytt, dristig skritt da hun lanserte sin neste kolleksjon, Winter Rose, i Paris i oktober 1993. Myrvold laget hele kolleksjonen av ett eneste materiale, den billige toilen som motedesignere tradisjonelt har benyttet til prototyper av plaggene. Kolleksjonen gjenspeilet de elegante silhuetterne fra art nouveau, og kombinerte symbolsk den historiske moten med en arte povera-holdning til materialbruk. Myrvold innlemmet dekonstruktivistiske elementer – i en tid da denne stilen nesten var ukjent i Paris – ved å sy lag på lag med filler av toile på plaggene i det hun kaller en mille-feuille-struktur – som en napoleonskake. Når et plagg var ferdigsydd, ble det vasket, slik at kantene frynset seg opp og viklet seg sammen til en spindelvevaktig overflate. Myrvold broderte smale filleremser på plaggene, slik at det minnet om utsøkte blomster og ranker med klatreroser.

Myrvold hadde bestemt seg for å bryte med moteverdenens sesongtenkning og ikke presentere en høst/vinter-kolleksjon med varme stoffer som fløyel og ull. Det å lage kreasjoner som kunne bæres uavhengig av årstid, var en radikal nyorientering. Designerkolleger advarte henne og sa at et så dristig skritt kunne føre til at hun ikke lenger fikk presentere kolleksjonene sine innenfor Chambre Syndicales program. Andre prøvde å overtale henne til å se litt mindre kunstnerisk på det og pekte på at konseptkunstnere sjelden fikk sitt øyeblikk i motens flomlys, men Myrvold nektet å skifte taktikk. Flere år senere, da nå avdøde Richard Martin beskrev “Den femte årstiden” som er et resultat av klimakontroll i menneskets miljøer, fremsto Myrvolds metode med lag på lag-mote året rundt som visjonær.

Det overrasket henne at hun fikk merkelappen “konseptdesigner”, for hun hadde trodd at de fleste moteskapere trakk veksler på temaer og tankegang som underbygger andre deler av den visuelle kulturen. Som kunstner hadde Myrvold utforsket



The “Winter Rose Collection”. The hats were constructed by sewing strips of ripped “Toile” in an outward spiral, finally washing the finished hats to produce a “mille feuille” effect.

Silk torn into ribbons and sewn onto toile, and then hand painted with reactive colors.

Being singled out and labelled a 'conceptual' designer surprised Myrvold, because she had believed that most fashion designers drew upon many of the themes and philosophies that underpin other aspects of visual culture. As an artist, Myrvold had explored theories such as deconstruction and post-structuralism, which were already being discussed in architecture, filmmaking and literature. Looking at French fashion, she had identified elements of *dérivé*, *detournement* and *flânerie*, and had assumed that designers consciously drew upon those themes. 'At that point I realised that working within the confines of the conventional fashion system would never enable me to express myself fully', Myrvold said. 'I thought it was funny when people said being called an outsider was something bad, because it didn't bother me at all. So as I defended my move from artist to fashion designer, I became really clear about what I was expressing. I explained my belief that clothes could be a medium for communicating ideas, that is, ideas other than the values of prominence, success, beauty and the need to belong that dominate the fashion system', she said.

Ironically, it may have been Myrvold's outsider approach that attracted the *Chambre Syndicale*'s attention, and the reason why they subsequently offered her a coveted place on the Fashion Week schedule. Irrespective of whether the *Chambre Syndicale* understood her work or not, it was clear that the media appreciated her style. When foreign press reports arrived at the *Chambre Syndicale* after Fashion Week, Myrvold's collections featured alongside those of leading French designers. As a result, Myrvold debuted on the official Fashion Week schedule in October 1994 with the *In-Formation* Collection, and showed two collections each year until 1999.

teorier som dekonstruksjon og poststrukturalisme, som allerede ble diskutert innen arkitektur, film og litteratur. Når hun så på fransk mote, hadde hun gjenkjent elementer som *dérivé*, *détournement* og *flânerie*, og hadde gått ut fra at designerne bevisst utnyttet disse temaene. "Da skjønte jeg at jeg aldri ville kunne uttrykke meg til fulle hvis jeg skulle arbeide innenfor begrensningene i det konvensjonelle motesystemet," sier hun. "Jeg moret meg når folk mente det var uheldig å bli omtalt som en outsider, for det plaget ikke meg i det hele tatt. Så i mitt forsvar for overgangen fra kunstner til motedesigner, ble jeg helt klar på hva jeg uttrykte. Jeg forklarte at jeg mente klær kunne være et medium for å kommunisere idéer, det vil si andre idéer enn å være betydningsfull, vellykket, vakker og "innenfor" – altså de verdiene som dominerer moteverdenen."

Paradoksalt nok kan det ha vært Myrvolds outsiderposisjon som fanget oppmerksomheten til *Chambre Syndicale*, og som var grunnen til at de senere tilbød henne en ettertraktet plass i moteukeprogrammet. Enten *Chambre Syndicale* forsto hennes arbeider eller ikke, var det tydelig at mediene satte pris på hennes uttrykksform. Da de utenlandske presseklippene kom til *Chambre Syndicale* etter moteuken, hadde Myrvolds kolleksjoner fått like mye plass som de ledende franske moteskaperne. Resultatet var at hun debuterte i det offisielle moteukeprogrammet i oktober 1994 med *In-Formation*-kolleksjonen, og deretter viste to kolleksjoner i året frem til 1999.



"Winter Rose Collection"

Like the *"Cocoon Collection"*, the *"Winter Rose Collection"* used shredded and torn strips of toile, but all the garments were lined with silk, and sometimes padded to give warmth. The inside of the clothes appeared perfect, without a single misplaced thread, in contrast to the deconstructed exterior.

In-formation

As the name In-Formation suggests, references to information technology underpinned many of the garments. The clothes represented exchanges of information and the communication processes mediated by the newly-launched Internet. Executed in toile, some of the garments recalled the cocooning shapes of the Winter Rose collection, but were dyed in monochrome colours and hand painted. Ribbons traced their surfaces, intended to represent a communication infrastructure underpinned by microchips, circuit boards and data transfer drives.

In-formation included a capsule collection entitled Paris Identity, which featured garments sewn from reconstituted shopping bags acquired at Rough Trade, Virgin MegaStore, Ed, Monoprix and Picto, and plastic carrier bags from institutions such as the Museum Jeu de Paume, the Pompidou Centre and the French Ministry of Culture. The plastic logos were reconfigured thematically and sewn onto the fabric before the garment was assembled. Raincoats were made by sewing the plastic bags together and trimming them with overlock stitching, reconstituted T-shirts were made in the same method, with logos cut out of the clothing and sewn together with overlock stitches. Reviewing the collection for Scanorama magazine, Alex Duval Smith wrote: 'In her Paris studio she turns plastic bags into works of art. And le tout Paris is very impressed.'

Presenting her work alongside collections from top fashion houses gave Myrvold insight into the norms and values upheld by many of the world's leading brands.

She realised that she was competing in an arena that chose to ignore ethical considerations: designers routinely bought fabrics associated with environmental pollution, produced clothing in third world sweatshops and exploited young models, designers and photographers. 'I knew that fashion was a tough business long before I started my own label', Myrvold explained, 'but I never realised that the industry lacked ethics. At the time, I was sad to see how the fashion industry refused to concern itself with issues that scream for attention in our time; no questions asked, no solutions offered, just sell and survive, by any means possible.'

Som navnet In-Formation antyder, var mange av plaggene basert på informasjonsteknologi. Klærne representerte informasjonsutveksling og den kommunikasjonsprosessen som det nye mediet Internett førte med seg. Plaggene var utført i toile, og noen av dem minnet om de kokongaktige formene i Winter Rose-kolleksjonen, men nå var de farget og håndmalt. Bånd slynget seg over stoffene i en tilsiktet referanse til en infrastruktur for kommunikasjon, til microchips, strømkretser og dataoverføring.

In-Formation omfattet en basiskolleksjon som het Paris Identity, med plagg som var sydd av resirkulerte handlebager fra Rough Trade, Virgin MegaStore, Ed, Monoprix og Picto, og plastbæreposer fra institusjoner som Museum Jeu de Paume, Centre Pompidou og det franske kulturdepartementet. Plastlogoene ble satt sammen tematisk på nye måter og sydd på stoffet, før plagget ble sydd sammen. Regnfrakker ble fremstilt ved å sy sammen plastposene og kante dem med overlocksøm. På samme måte ble T-skjorter resirkulert, med logoer klippet ut i stoff og sydd sammen med overlock. I en omtale i magasinet Scanorama skrev Alex Duval Smith: "I sitt Paris-atelier forvandler hun plastposer til kunstverk. Og tout Paris er svært imponert."

Da Myrvold fikk anledning til å presentere sine arbeider side om side med toppmotehusene, ga dette henne innsikt i normene og verdisynet som preget mange av verdens ledende merker.

Hun innså at hun konkurrerte på en arena som fullstendig neglisjerte etiske hensyn: Designerne brukte rutinemessig stoffer som ble assosiert med miljøforurensning, de produserte klær hos slavedrivere i den tredje verden, og de utnyttet unge modeller, designere og fotografer. "Lenge før jeg startet mitt eget merke, visste jeg at motebransjen var tøff," forteller Myrvold, "men jeg skjønnte ikke da at hele bransjen manglet etiske standarder. Jeg ble nedslått av å se at moteindustrien nektet å befatte seg med temaer som skriker etter oppmerksomhet i vår tid; den stilte ingen spørsmål, hadde ingen svar å gi – det dreide seg utelukkende om å selge og overleve, uansett virkemidler."



"In-formation" – the "Paris Identity" project

The T-shirt logos and plastic bags used to create this collection came from the textile store **Marché st Pierre**, the bookstore *The Village Voice*, the record store **Rough Trade**, *The Louvre* – to inaugurate the recently opened inverted pyramid and Carrousel du Louvre – and experimental music groups. Pia Myrvold made a habit of asking stores, museums and people owning the logos to donate plastic bags or T-shirts as an essential part of the identity art project, to get as many people as possible involved in the idea.

1. Model presenting "In-formation" – "Internet Software" coat and dress. The ribbons were sewn onto toile, as representations of circuits in a microchip.
2. "In-formation" – "Paris Identity" – "International Herald Tribune" dress. These 1 cm plastic ribbons were cut with razor blades and rulers, then pinned onto the stretched toile, before being sewn one by one to assemble the final garment.
3. "Paris Identity" – "Quai Ouest" dress
4. "In-formation" – "Paris Identity" dresses from Galerie Yvonamor Palix, Le Louvre, Petit Fer à Cheval.
5. Evening jacket from "In-formation" – "Paris Identity", using plastic bags from the French Ministry of Culture, "Francophone Culture".
6. Raincoat made from 11 plastic bags from Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume.



The Paris Art Gallery Guide,
The Restaurant Quai Ouest

The Paris Art Gallery Guide, The Restaurant Quai Ouest

Model presenting "In-formation" – "Internet Software" dress. The
ribbons were sewn onto toile, as representations of circuits in a microchip.

Raincoat made from 17 plastic bags from Flammarion, the Pompidou Center.

Urban Reality

When she launched the Urban Reality (March 1995) and Extensions (October 1995) collections, Myrvold hoped that the fashion world would see that there were alternatives to using exploitative practices. The inexpensive materials showcased in Winter Rose, for example, promoted an appreciation for simple, organic fabrics, which could also be combined with recycled materials and synthetics. The recycling method promoted in In-Formation also carried an environmental message. 'I let others know that I refused to use cheap labour in Asia, and that I refused to compromise the environment', Myrvold explained. 'I begged them not to support a process that enables privileged people to rob workers of a dignified life so that they can get richer.'

Da hun lanserte kolleksjonene Urban Reality (mars 1995) og Extensions (oktober 1995), håpet Myrvold at moteverdenen ville innse at det fantes alternativer til å utnytte andre. De billige materialene som ble brukt i Winter Rose, satte for eksempel søkelyset på bruk av enkle, organiske tekstiler som også kunne kombineres med resirkulerte og syntetiske materialer. Resirkuleringen hun gikk inn for i In-Formation, hadde også et miljøbudskap: "Jeg lot folk få vite at jeg nektet å bruke billig arbeidskraft i Asia, og at jeg nektet å være med på å sette miljøet på spill," forteller hun. "Jeg bønnfalt dem om ikke å støtte en prosess som tillater privilegerte mennesker å frarøve arbeidere muligheten for et verdig liv, bare for at de selv skal bli rikere."

The Urban Reality project.

Clockwise from top left:

Vest and miniskirt in wool with plastic bag identities.

Myrvold used this "deconstructed jacket" for different expressions, here white wool with staples as decorations.

Deconstructed jacket, black wool with feathers.

Hand knitted skirt and sweater, in black wool and recycled plastic strips.

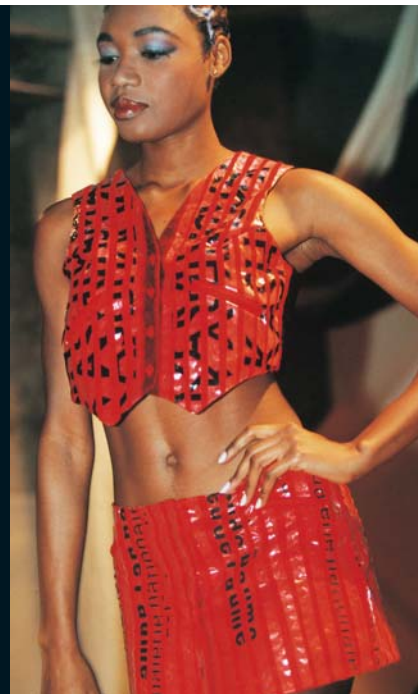
Evening dress and stretch bodysuit ensemble with infrastructure lines, representing the Internet.

Bodysuit with black nylon and red toile trench coat. Pia Myrvold was one of the first people on the

Paris Calendar to use stretch materials, as well as the juxtaposition of transparencies.

Hand knitted woolen dress and jacket.

Jacket and skirt with fake fur collar and toile sleeve extensions.



Extensions

Left: Silk tie dyed dress with hologram detail and infrastructure lines, representing the Internet.
 Second from top left: White silk bias cut blouse with fluorescence silkscreen detail of fractal image.
 Second from bottom left: Sculpted tops, with freehand drawings, crochet silk thread.
 Third from left: Evening jacket in halogen material, and infrastructure lines, representing the Internet. Cotton and silk jacket, pants and scarf, tie dyed and silk-screened with metallic paint. This attempt to achieve a high tech feeling, ended up producing a kind of "primitive" association. As a result, Myrvold gave a sub-title to this collection; "African Cyber Punk Dandy".
 Second last: Dress and pants on hand painted cotton and silk, with fluorescent fractal motif silkscreen.
 Right: Silk and cotton bias cut dress with flap detail in back.





Myrvold continues the theme of "Paris Identity" in the "Extensions Collection".
 She often reintroduces the same pieces in several collections.
 From left to right: "Le Monde" top with multi logo skirt.
 Dress using bags from a music store in Pigalle called "Back Stage". The text translates
 "If you do not have the same bag, you have lost your money".
 Multi logo skirt and top made of plastic bags.
 Deconstructed jacket with multi logo.
 Models lining up for finale of the "Extensions" presentation.
 Pia Myrvold with models greeting the public at the finale.