

University for the Creative Arts  
Research Project Portfolios

# The Erotic Cloth

By Lesley Millar



# Project Details

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Name of Researcher:	Professor Lesley Millar
Co-researcher:	Professor Alice Kettle (Manchester Metropolitan University)
Name of Output:	The Erotic Cloth
UCARO link/s:	<a href="https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Erotic_Cloth.html">https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Erotic_Cloth.html</a>
Research centre website	<a href="https://transitionandinfluence.com/">https://transitionandinfluence.com/</a>
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component project comprising co-edited book with contributions by the researcher and co-curation of exhibition
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>BOOK Millar, Lesley and Alice Kettle (2018). <i>The Erotic Cloth: Seduction and Fetishism in Textiles</i>. London: Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 9781474286800</p> <p>EXHIBITION <i>Fabric: Touch and Identity</i>, exhibition (Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire, March 14 2020 - January 3 2021)</p> <p>Online exhibition (<a href="https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/fabric-touch-identity/">https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/fabric-touch-identity/</a>)</p>
Key Words:	Erotic, cloth, identity, touch, body
Funding:	Book commissioned and funded by Bloomsbury Publishing Exhibition commissioned and funded by Compton Verney

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# Synopsis

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*The Erotic Cloth* is a research output comprising a co-edited book and subsequent exhibition. The research was conducted collaboratively by Professors Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle (Manchester Metropolitan University).

*The Erotic Cloth* book was co-edited by Millar and Kettle and was commissioned by Bloomsbury Publishing. Millar and Kettle co-wrote the introduction to the volume and introductions to each section, and each contributed a sole-authored chapter.

The book takes a multidisciplinary approach to the subject with contributions written in a variety of styles, and by practitioners and academics. It is divided into four sections, 'The Representation of Cloth', 'Making and Re-Making the Cloth', 'The Alternative Cloth' and 'The Performing Cloth'. In addition to the Introduction there is a Foreword outlining the historical context, and Afterword which builds upon the

Japanese focus of the final chapter with an analysis from a non-Western (Japanese) perspective.

The central themes of the book were developed into the exhibition *Fabric: Touch and Identity* at Compton Verney, co-curated by Millar and Kettle. This uses contemporary and historical artworks to materialise the sensuous relationship between the body and cloth. The exhibition developed three overlapping strands: 'The Sensuous Cloth'; 'The Responsive Body'; and 'Between Cloth and Skin', drawing on the book. The final section of the exhibition was a specially commissioned installation which developed the book's Afterword.

This portfolio of supporting contextual information outlines the underpinning context and research questions which led to new insights. It includes a PDF of *The Erotic Cloth* book and images of the *Fabric: Touch and Identity* exhibition. It also includes evidence of visitor numbers, press and publicity.

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*Rūta Naujalytė*

*TITLE: 'My love, I will eat you alive'*

*MATERIALS: Crochet textile and threads photographed  
and digitally manipulated to create wallpaper*

*SIZE: Installation*

*View through to gallery*

*FOREGROUND*

*Rūta Naujalytė*

*BACKGROUND*

*Liz Rideal*

*TITLE: Terme di Diocleziano (The  
Baths of Diocletian)*

*MATERIALS: Inkjet on silk  
georgette*

*SIZE: 3 × 2.4 × 1.34 meters*





*Liz Rideal*  
*TITLE: Terme di Diocleziano (The Baths of Diocletian)*  
*MATERIALS: Inkjet on silk georgette*  
*SIZE: 3 × 2.4 × 1.34 meters*

# Context

This project draws on Millar's wealth of experience writing and curating within the field of contemporary textiles, including projects such as *Cloth and Memory* (2013) and *Here & Now* (2016). *The Erotic Cloth* developed from the 2007 exhibition *Haptic: Awakening the Senses* which Millar organised with a supporting conference *Memory and Touch: an exploration of textural communication* at RIBA London.

The relationship between cloth and the body has been discussed in depth since the late twentieth century, mainly with a focus on the socio-political and narrative particularities of textiles. With the emergence of haptic studies, the connection between the surface of the skin and the surface of cloth has been considered in the discussion of the sense of touch. However, the erotic nature of that relationship has tended to be the subtext of previous discourse, acknowledged but to a large degree unspoken. Millar and Kettle's book and exhibition are the first detailed critical examinations of the erotically-charged relationship between the surface of the skin and the touch of cloth, exploring the ways in which textiles can seduce, conceal and reveal through their interactions with the body.

The book *The Erotic Cloth* and the exhibition *Fabric: Touch and Identity* explore the ways in which the qualities of cloth

to seduce, conceal and reveal have been interrogated in art, design, cinema, politics and dance. The book examines the aesthetics of cloth, which excites and disturbs through its materiality, alongside its metaphorical qualities which are seductive, erotic, intimate and at times shocking. The exhibition developed the themes of the book, and specifically the ambiguities that cloth makes possible, around identity, sensuality and gender. Both the book and the exhibition posit a variety of interpretations in which the erotic is a multifaceted state, historically and culturally connected.

## Key Texts:

Bruno, G. (2014) *Surface: matters of aesthetics, materiality and media*. Chicago: Chicago University Press

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press

Perniola, M. (2004) *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*. London: Bloomsbury

Batailles, G. (1962 [1957]) *Eroticism*. London: Calder and Boyars

# Research Aims and Questions

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Research aims:

To offer the first comprehensive analysis of contemporary thinking on the experience of the erotic and fetishism in cloth

To bring together the first-hand perspectives of artists, theorists and designers on the methods, politics and philosophies of the sensual encounter with cloth

To articulate how the erotic offers an understanding of cloth through art and design practice and theory which draws in other fields of thinking

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Research questions:

How to investigate and evidence the stereotypes of cloth through encounters with the erotic and its implicit psychology of drama?

How to analyse the designing and fashioning of the erotic where the processes of production and the actions of making are sexualised?

How does the agency of cloth allow for the exploration of identity as a sensual, gendered or political being?

What is the role of cloth in areas of transgression and in representations of life and death in experience and in cinema, in religion and political protest?

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*Nina Saunders*

*TITLE: Greta's Party (Laurent)*

*MATERIALS: wood (second hand chair), commercial fabric, 1930s fur jacket + shoes (artist's own)*

*SIZE: installation*

*Photo: Tom Sibley @ Hermes Flagship Store, NYC, USA*



*Annie Bascoul*  
*TITLE: 'Vivre et rêver... en dentelle'*  
*MATERIALS: brass wire*  
*SIZE: 1.6 metres*

# Research Methods and Processes

Millar and Kettle identified parallel research strands concerned with the sensual connection between touch, cloth and the body and co-hosted a conference (Colloquium) inviting papers around these areas of research. The conference resulted in an invitation from Bloomsbury for Millar and Kettle to write and edit a book.

The Introduction to *The Erotic Cloth* was written jointly by Millar and Kettle as a collaborative and iterative process. The research for the book's themes was divided, with Millar taking responsibility for The Alternative Cloth (including themes of death and eroticism) and for Cloth and Performance. The research was underpinned and informed by a detailed literature review and the authors' knowledge of the field. Both Kettle and Millar contributed a chapter. Millar's chapter was concerned with Cloth and Performance and was informed by two extensive interviews she conducted in London and in Pesaro (Italy) with the choreographer Masako Matsushita, and attendance at four of her (related) performances which developed as a result of the discussions with Millar.

The exhibition *Fabric: Touch and Identity* was developed directly from, and as a result of, the book. Millar has been responsible for many international textile exhibitions and both Kettle and Millar could see the potential for an exhibition which further explored the book's various themes. As with the original Colloquium, held at the Artworkers' Guild Master's Room and Hall in Bloomsbury, research for an appropriate venue concentrated on finding a location that might be unexpected, but that had historic connections or collections that resonated with the underlying ideas of the project. Compton Verney Gallery, with its idiosyncratic collection and country house setting, was approached, and discussions initiated.

Compton Verney had been planning an exhibition of the works of the painter Lucas Cranach the Elder and proposed that the exhibition developed from *The Erotic Cloth* book would be an appropriate companion exhibition. The themes of the exhibition and its title were developed in discussion with the curators at Compton Verney. The exhibition needed to evidence that it was a development from, not an illustration of, the book. The sensual nature of cloth had to be central to the exhibition, but in a way that was acceptable for the Compton Verney curators, who were keenly aware of their family audience. Together, over time, Compton Verney, Millar and Kettle developed appropriate ideas which distilled down to the exhibition sections, Sensuous Cloth, The Responsive Body, and Between Cloth and Skin.

The choice of works for the exhibition emerged from Millar and Kettle's knowledge of the textiles field and the wish to connect with the building and the collection at Compton Verney. Multidisciplinary approaches were important, particularly with the inclusion of a range of material that took in a Joshua Reynolds painting from the Compton Verney collection, contemporary paintings by Alison Watts and Bob White, and early film works by the Lumière Brothers. This film connected Liz Rideal's photographic prints on cloth with the chapter she and Georgina Williams contributed to the book. Cranach's painting of Adam and Eve from the Compton Verney Collection was a central work in the Cranach exhibition that accompanied *Fabric: Touch and Identity*. In discussion with Millar, this was taken as the starting point for two new works in the exhibition, by Alice Kettle and Beverly Ayling Smith. One of the chapters in the book examined Vivienne Westwood and the Punk Movement, and one of Westwood's iconic men's suits was included in the exhibition alongside other works examining aspects of gender identity.

# Research Contribution and Impact

*The Erotic Cloth* book and the subsequent exhibition *Fabric: Touch and Identity* drew from the fields of art, design, film and performance, evidencing a range of insights which contribute to the debates around human erotic encounters with cloth.

Through the research Millar and Kettle were able to explore how the erotic lies in ambiguous, unnamed anticipation. It is varied and inconsistent, much like the multiple characteristics of cloth. By responding to the materiality and gestural possibilities of cloth, in the book and particularly in the exhibition, the researchers laid the pathway to an appreciation of our erotic desires and impulses, which in turn may reflect back on our cultural histories.

The pairing of *Fabric: Touch and Identity* with Compton Verney's Cranach exhibition resulted in new audiences to both, and particularly to the textile exhibition, drawing audiences more familiar with art history into an exhibition on contemporary textile art and its relationship to other areas of creative practice. Many of the art critics who visited to review the Cranach exhibition commented on their pleasure in discovering the textile exhibition.

For Compton Verney, this exhibition provided the opportunity to link textile themes across their permanent collections. Importantly, this was also the first time they had been responsible for the importing of artworks from overseas to their exhibitions.

For the artists involved, *The Erotic Cloth* provided an opportunity to further their creative enquiry. Dancer and choreographer Masako Matsushita's performance 'Undress', subject of Millar's chapter in the book, was first performed at *The Erotic Cloth* Conference in 2015 and subsequently at the book launch at Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham. It was significantly developed over the following 2 years, was given a Creative Europe award for performance in 2019, and has been performed in Paris, London, Nagoya and various venues in Italy

Reiko Sudo, Beverly Ayling-Smith, Maxine Bristow and Suzumi Noda have all created significantly different and new work as a response to the exhibition themes.

## IMPACT

This research underpins the Impact Case Study Innovative Textiles Curation: Enabling Arts Organisations to Deliver Institutional Strategies.

The Senior Curator at Compton Verney stated that the gallery 'were delighted to be able to play host to this exhibition which, despite the challenges of 2020, helped us to consider our collections in new ways, and reach out and engage with new audiences. Particularly exciting for us was the international character of some of the exhibits, which we feel developed the breadth of our offer.'

*Suzumi Noda*  
*TITLE: 'Woman washing her hair'*  
*MATERIALS: knitted urushi thread*  
*SIZE: 8 × 3 meters*





*Alice Kettle*  
*TITLE: Adam and Eve*  
*MATERIALS: Print, thread and*  
*beads on cotton sateen*  
*SIZE: 2m x 3m (2 pieces)*

# Research Dissemination and Recognition

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## Dissemination:

*The Erotic Cloth* launch event and performance with audience discussion, Midlands Arts Centre, 10th February 2018

Conference Manchester Metropolitan University, 14th February 2018

*The Erotic Cloth* launch event and seminar, Art Workers Guild, 23rd February 2018

*Fabric: Touch and Identity* exhibition Compton Verney Art Gallery, March 14 2020 - January 3 2021. 2,641 visitors in person (impacted heavily by Covid-19)

Video tour of the exhibition on Compton Verney website - 7,558 views on website with further extensive engagement through social media, nearly 19,000 views in total.

The exhibition has been widely discussed. Notably, the exhibition was reviewed on BBC Radio 4 Saturday Arts Review by Charlotte Mullins and Bob and Roberta Smith (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000gksg>) and Reiko Sudo's installation was featured in Japanese *Vogue*.

## Follow-on-activities:

The book is currently being translated into Chinese for confirmed publication by Chongqing University Press

### PRESENTATIONS

Millar was invited to present the research at:

Veiling the Body: Cloth, Skin, Membrane, 11/12.06.20, University of Manchester, UK

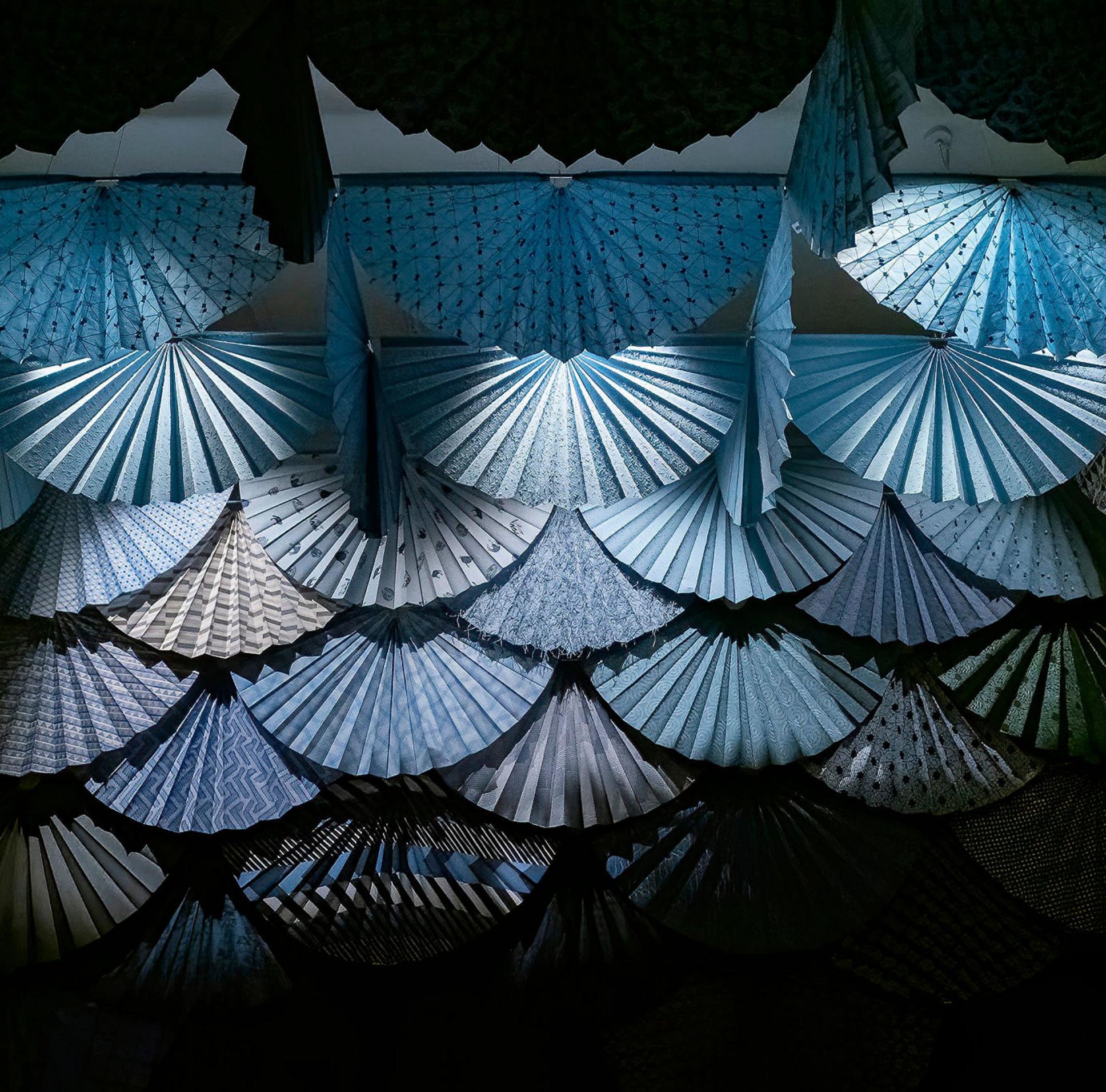
European Textile Network Bi-annual conference, 28.07.19 - 1.08.19, Haslach, Austria

The Joys of the Erotic: Building Human Connections, 29.06.18 - 30.06.18, Palermo, Italy

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*Artist unknown*  
*Haori Kimono detail*  
**MATERIALS:** Silk  
**SIZE:** 0.96 × 1.4 metres



*Reiko Sudo*

*TITLE: 'Ogi no mai / Japanese fanfare'*

*MATERIALS: Cotton, Linen, Ramie, Silk, Paper, Nylon,  
polyester all dyed in indigo*

*SIZE: Installation*



*Masako Matsushita  
TITLE: 'Undress'  
Performance at Erotic Cloth Book  
Launch Midland Arts Centre  
Birmingham.*



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*FRONT COVER*

*Susie MacMurray*

*TITLE: 'After Shell'*

*MATERIALS: Mussel shells stuffed  
with silk velvet*

*SIZE: Installation*

*BACK COVER*

*LEFT*

*Nigel Hurlstone*

*TITLE: 'What Pleasure'*

*MATERIALS: Cotton organdie, cot-  
ton and burmilana thread, digital  
print, couching*

*SIZE: 1.25 × 1.50 metres*

*RIGHT*

*Vivienne Westwood*

*TITLE: 'Men's red bondage suit'*

*MATERIALS: Wool*

*SIZE: Jacket (Center Back Length):  
0.85 meters Trousers (Length):  
0.99 meters*



1811  
1812  
1813  
1814  
1815

