

**THE ROLE OF CLOTHING IN FEMALE AGING
- fashion, styling and the “under-represented”**

By Tina Haagenen ©

What is beauty? Is it fundamental? An intuitive emotion? Or an intellectual behavior?

It is imperative for me to first and foremost work with beauty. Beauty in terms of quality in craftsmanship, uniqueness, visibility, play, and those strange and inexplicable things which borderline the unbeautiful.



The Sakura garden (Lillehamre, 2007)

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My design embodies a feeling of catharsis, filled to the brim with strong visual impressions which can release sudden emotions, being provocative, chaotic, and loud.

At the same time, I am dependent on a calm and quiet environment to create, allowing for an emotional discharge through which I can achieve liberation from anxiety and stress.

The exaggerated richness and excessiveness of the product, versus the silence, tidiness, and labor-intensive work of the process. I believe this extreme balance is integral to my work.



Silk and embroidery (Villafranca, 2015)

The New Textile

I communicate through textiles. Feelings. Intuition. Tactility.

I look at function, appearance, grip, fibers, thickness, textures, weaving, surface, colours, prints, embellishments, draping ability, bodily feeling, and building of structure through fusing and lining. Old craft techniques are of great value and I often experiment with a mix of analogue and digital tools to create different expressions.

An important distinction for my practice as a designer is to compose and manufacture my own textiles. Where I previously had to "hunt" for finished materials that were close to my aesthetic, I have experienced the freedom of experimenting with several techniques like weaving, printing, knitting and embroidery.

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Using an old four-shaft hand loom is laborious and time consuming, and the outcome is often irregular and random, due to the warp being rolled up over the front beam, so that the inner layers become invisible, and the great surprise reveals itself when rolled out.

By using a clasped weft technique, I can continuously decide the placement and colours of the yarn, work intuitively, and not be dictated by a predetermined pattern.



Woven fabrics from Norwegian wool yarn (Private, 2020)



Plattsøm embroidery on wool
(Private, 2020)



Dopamine embroidery on vintage Kimono silk

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Fabric and haberdashery library for the MA-collection (Private, 2020)

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Silk-wool felted fabric
(Private, 2020)

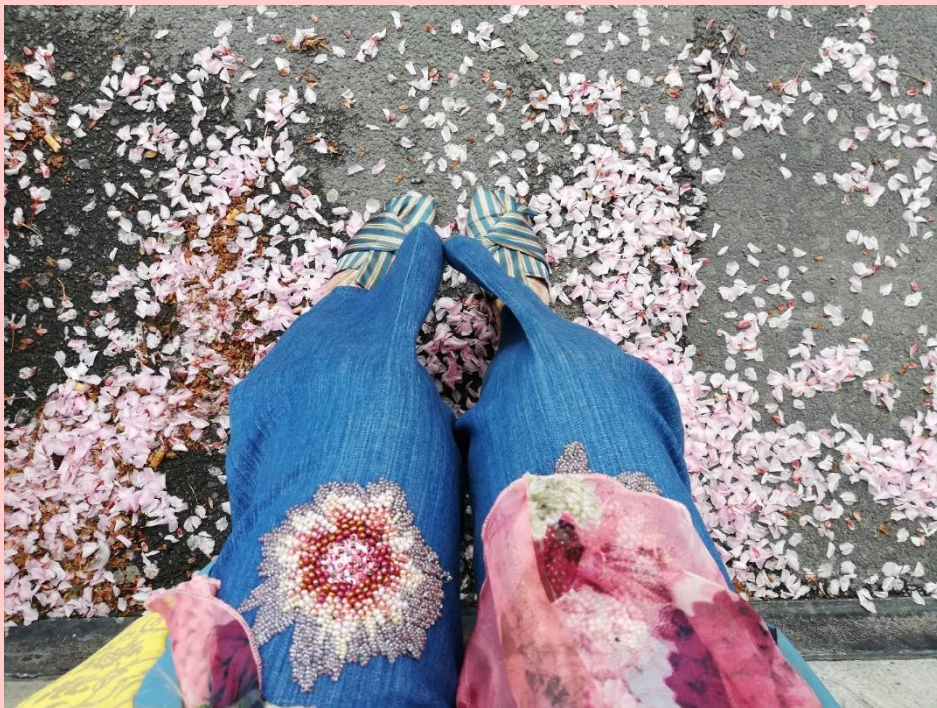


Mola-technique



Smøyg machine embroidery

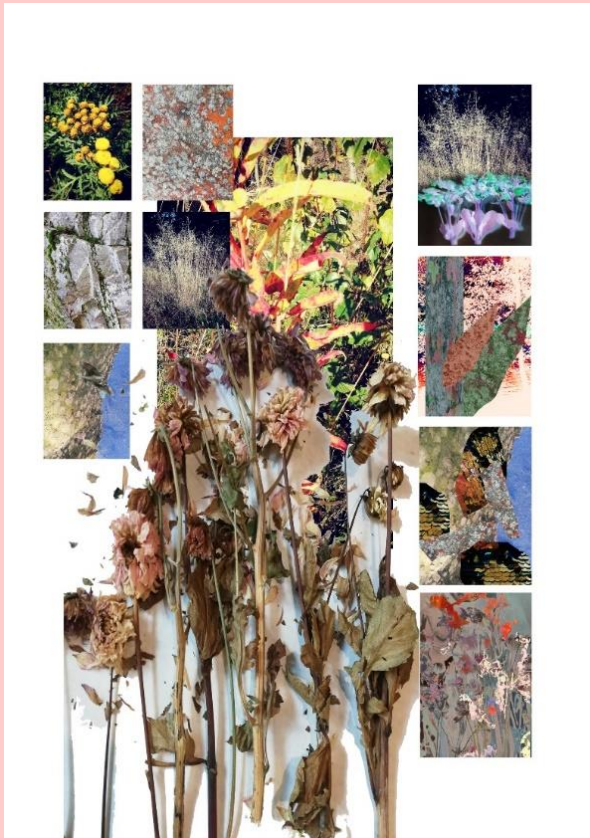
At a party in Tuscany a few summers ago, I sat at a table next to strangers and my flower tattoos came to be the topic of conversation. First, people were intrigued and curious of why I had come to cover half my body with ink, especially deciding this at the age of 50. Then, one of the guests suggested that when my skin became old, dry, and wrinkled, the flowers would go from fresh watercolor to potpourri!



Sakura Embroidery (private, 2019)

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This comment led me to the idea of beautifying decay, taking pictures of nature in late autumn and pulling the images through distortion, filters and artificial, acidic colours until the original image was unrecognizable. From a cold, gloomy landscape to something unexpected and unconventional.



Dried flowers (Private, 2020)



Flower tattoos (Private, 2017)

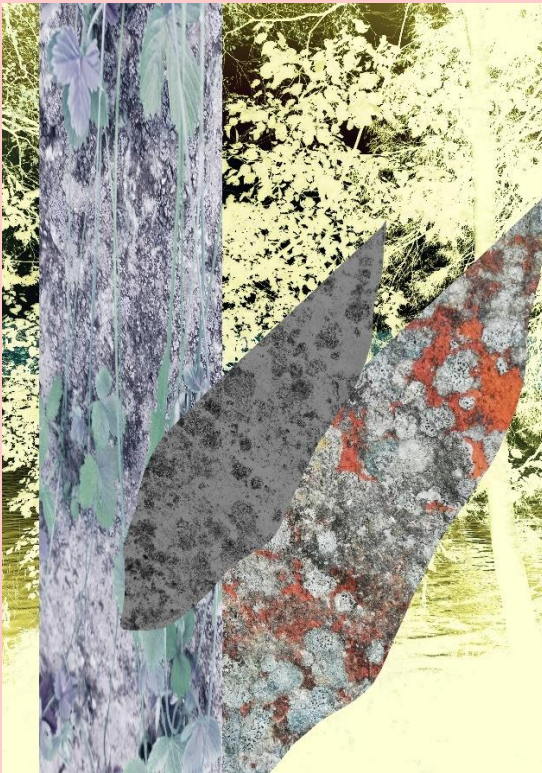
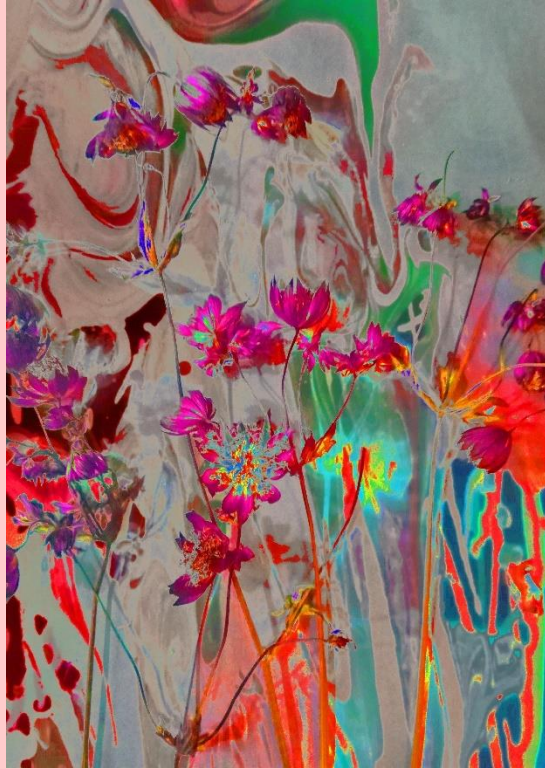
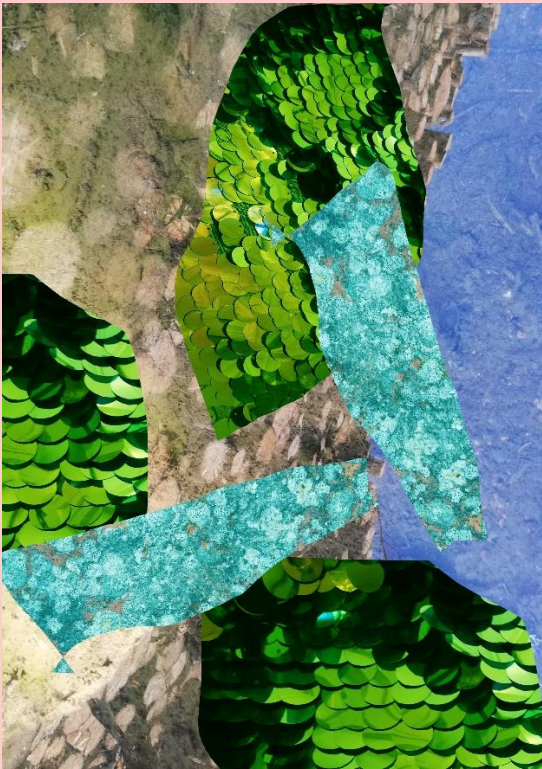


Own-design digital prints
(Private, 2020)



Flower tattoos (Private, 2020)

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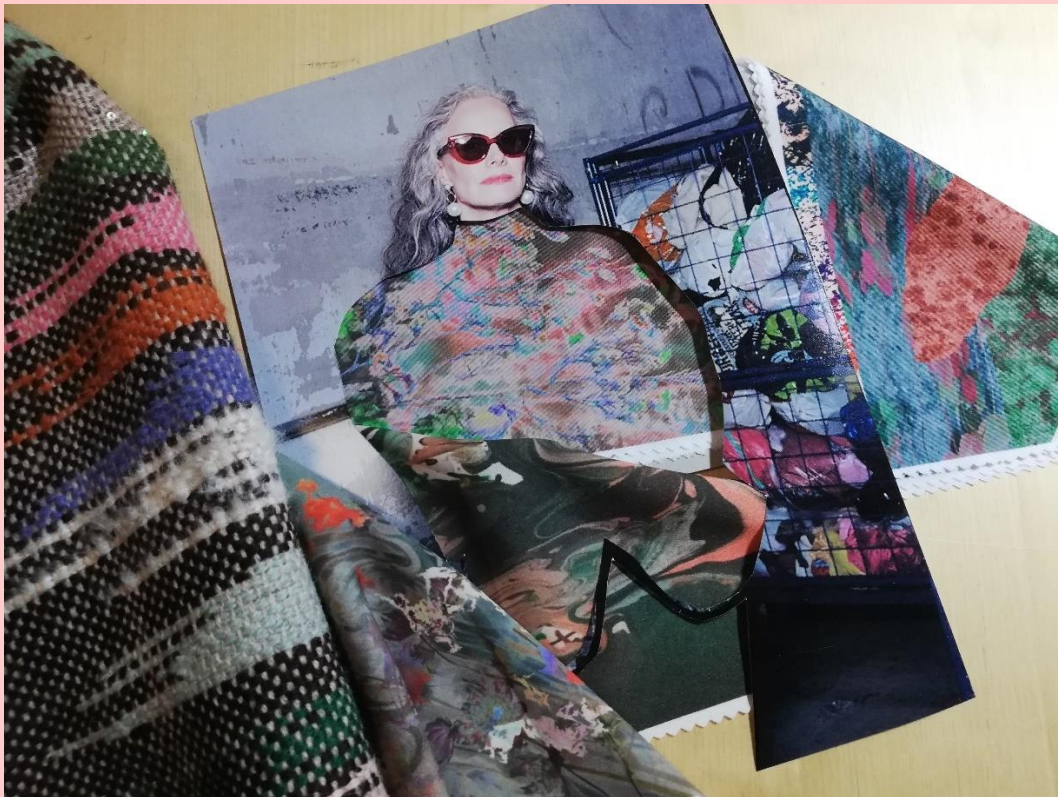


Own-design prints, based on decayed plants (Private, 2020)

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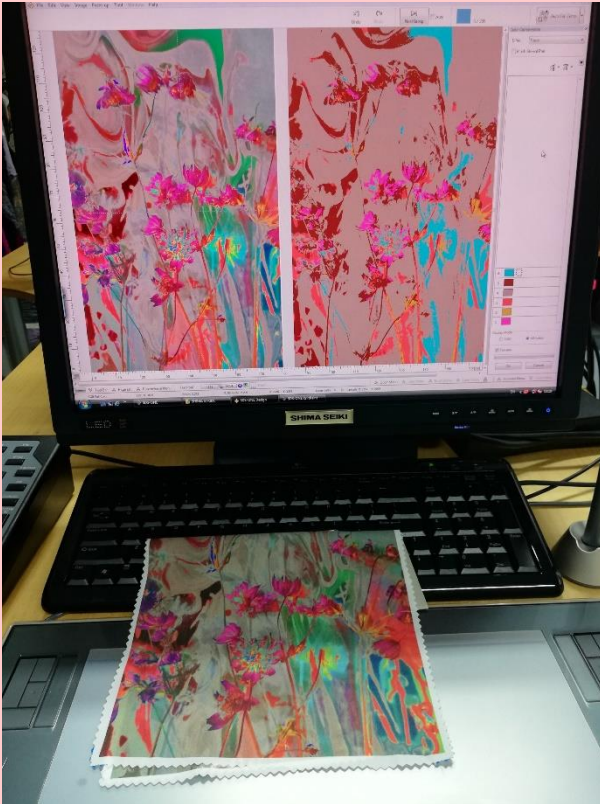
Masque collage of own-design print (Private, 2020)



Model Nina and my own-design fabrics (Original photo Martin Rustad for Krogh Optikk, 2020)

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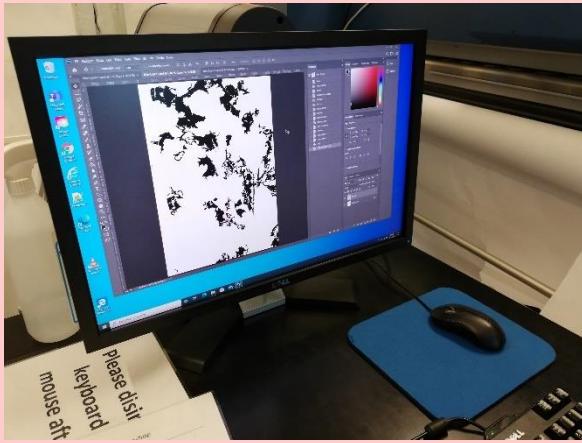
The digital prints are translated to digital knit, experimenting with scale and proportions



Own-design merino wool digital knits (Private, 2020)

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Digital knits are translated to silk screen printing, reducing to 3-layer frames



Own-design silk screen print (Private, 2020)

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Prints are translated into hand knit, colour and pattern interpretation of stone landscape



(Private, 2020)

Growing up as the youngest of 4, hand-me-down clothes led to an interest in upcycling, emphasizing on antique and vintage Japanese silk kimonos; a material that show signs of wear, which I believe adds to the value of the finished garments. When removing the hand sewn stitches, one after the other, I reflect upon the elaborate artisan work put into the whole process of these beautiful and valuable garments, from weaving, dying, hand décor and hand seam - while I have the privilege to reinvent these precious materials into contemporary fashion.

I believe that *time* is an important aspect, as we live in this hyper-efficient world with countless tools meant to streamline our everyday lives. But we move at a high pace from one to the other. My experience is that people need a place to calm down and work with something tangible, close to meditation, such as the repetitive movements in weaving and knitting.

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Can storytelling in design highlight the way we dress, and be an amplifier for what we stand for through what we choose to wear?

Can clothes communicate specific values? Is fashion a form of language?

How can we establish an emotional connection towards garments?

A few years ago, I was approached by a lady in her eighties. In a low voice, she told me that she admired my colourful outfit and look, and how I dared to be so visible. She admitted her own interest in clothes and art, and since a young age she would have wanted to let it reflect her look, but her surroundings would never allow her to dress bold and flamboyant!

When we parted, she left me rather puzzled and our brief meeting made me think about women, age, and dress.



Bunad shirt made from Vintage Kimono fabrics.
(Private, 2020)



Jacket and apron made from Vintage Kimono fabrics.

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Maximalism + aging = minus + minus = plus!

While minimalism in fashion is a design-approach characterized by silence and rigor, maximalism is less enshrined, as it lacks the cultural weight of having started out as an art movement.

With its clashing and competing elements, maximalism is basically a celebration, a generosity of inviting things *in*, asking us not to take life too seriously.

Vivid colours in bold combinations, patterns upon patterns, a myriad of textures, qualities of threads and yarn, matte against shiny, layers and volumes - the more that adds together, the more it blends.

Is maximalism morally reprehensible?

Ornamentation is excess and extravagance, but if ornamentation has no practical purpose, and maximalism leans towards vanity; what is then the content of value?

A physical embodiment of identity?

A way of communicating, and seek to those who speak the same “visual language”?

To express who you are as an individual, and what you love?

To show that dressing up in bold design is a statement of being radical, provocative, daring, and independent - traits connected to youthfulness?

To create an atmosphere of enigma?

To own something exclusive, unique, and self-determined?



Illustrations of own-design fabrics (Private, 2020)

At the other end at the scale, there is *fast fashion*!

“Personally, I don’t like the churn and pace of high street clothing range ... I am becoming more conscious about ethical practices in the fashion industry. There have been too many stories about exploitation of poorly paid workers in terrible conditions in developing countries working long hours, not getting a living wage. I guess I like to know who made my clothes and that they are appropriately compensated. An issue is in relation to fashion industry and environmental damage of production and disposal. I am all for making less better, reusing, recycling. Reducing impact on the environment is a significant factor fashion industry must address.”

(Tina interviewing Silvana, 64, influencer with 20K IG-followers, part of Advanced Style)

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Replaceable or irreplaceable

There are several emotional and environmental issues linked to fast fashion, and one is the lack of attachment to disposable garments. Unique, tailor made pieces consist of the experience and knowledge of fabrics, draping, patternmaking, cutting, sewing, and finishing.

An understanding of proportions, lines and volume. Locally produced, bespoke garments require hours of hands-on artisanal work, intended to be cherished and worn for life, as opposed to something replaceable.

Being in conversation with the customer is also an essential part, allowing personal services like fittings, alterations and repair to ensure the emotional value, integrity, and longevity of each piece. All this is excellence, of which fast fashion can never compare.

It is far more emotional to part with a garment that has memories in each stitch, rather than something untraceable which we mindlessly buy, store in our closet, and toss out the door, unused.

“As the internet grows, the world gets smaller. When we were young, we were lucky to get to travel to big cities around Europe! Shopping for clothes and accessories was different then, as it was more about experience of exclusivity.

When you bought a dress at Biba, you knew that you would not see it on absolutely everyone! Now, with social media, there is a vast tendency to dress the same, regardless if you are in Norway, America, Iceland, or Italy. The explosion of goods around the globe is causing enormous distress on the Planet. But it's also the thief of individuality.”

(Tina interviewing Danielle, 66, artist).



(Korneliussen, 2020)



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Fast fashion and misogyny

Only one in five companies worldwide are led by a female top manager, and this marginalization of even the most powerful women in the garment and fashion industry - models, designers, and other leaders - underscores the challenges that women are at the bottom of this industry.

80 percent of the 75 million people working in fast fashion outside Europe and the US are women. They face exploitation and unethical practices, such as long hours, low pay and unhygienic conditions.

Due to democratizing of fashion, the access to cheap clothes has also attracted aging women, making self-enhancement through fashion possible. And as women constitute most of the consumer base for the fashion industry, there is a unique opportunity to contribute to fellow women’s improved living and working conditions by demanding insight into how our clothes are made, and to be conscious when purchasing clothes.

(Rahman, 2018)

Feminism and gender inequality - can women ever win

By living in a world of male domination, in addition to ageism, older women also face the term **gendered ageism**, which connects age and gender bias: two disadvantaged groups.

Also, **lookism** is discrimination based on a person's appearance, placing excess value on physical looks, while physical unattractiveness is associated with negative things.

In sum, these unfair treatments are highly damaging to women. Judging by the look is something which is done in everyday life, as success being measured by appearance.

Racism also plays into this, by favoring and uplifting traditionally white features, as **Eurocentric beauty standards** have taken away different cultures’ own values of beauty.

Women who have better financial status also have more time and money to spend on appearance, which creates social differences.

(Tranchina, 2015)

(Zeilinger, 2015)



(Jones, 2019)

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Obsession with Beauty and Youth

A composer travels to Venice for health reasons. There, he becomes obsessed with the remarkable beauty of a young boy, a pure embodiment of aesthetic. Rejuvenated by the presence of Tadzio - though they never exchange words - he visits the barber who, in his words, "returns to you merely what has been lost", tinting his greying hair black and whitening his face and reddening his lips to try to make him appear younger. The attempt to take back his youth is pitiful and distressing, leaving the viewer in discomfort.

(Visconti, 1972)



(Warner Bros., 1971)

Visconti quote:

"It (Death in Venice) is a very delicate story, with not many facts but rather psychological events. It is a story of an intellectual that is following Beauty, the absolute Beauty in the world, and when he finds it; casually in life, in a young boy who lives at the Lido at the Hôtel des Bains, then he touches with his hand that the absolute Beauty exists. And like you know; to put the eyes on Beauty, is to put the eyes on Death".

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In history, feminine clothes, rich fabrics, shoes and makeup has influenced both male and female style up until 1800s, and from there, the divide became more prominent.

The male suit has since then moderately changed with the waves of fashion, but with status as an established code. For women, trends have changed in a much larger scale, and at a much faster pace.

The obsession with female beauty in Victorian times often came at the expense of people’s health, fashion deforming women’s bodies due to products including toxic ingredients like lead, mercury and arsenic.

The beautification of sickness and death in paintings was frequently depicted in art, tuberculosis was idealized as the most romantic and purest form of dying, and the condition was also considered a beauty ideal - the pale and dewy skin and feverish roses made the fragility an asset to women, turning tuberculosis into the ultimate motif of beauty.

(Boyle, 2018)



(Lavery, 1928)

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Today’s ingredient lists are now a legal necessity, and contemporary wearers tend to approach makeup as a conscious method of self-expression and creativity.

Still, it is hard to miss the parallels to contemporary beauty tips dispensed by bloggers, and the potentially risky treatments like Botox.

(Zarelli, 2016)

Plastic surgery is another common procedure.

For less invasive transformations, we add beauty filters when we display our already made-up faces. *Snapchat dysmorphia* is a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder characterized by an obsession with “flaws” in physical appearance, and plastic surgeons are requested to make patients look like their "filtered" pictures.

(Beutel, 2018)

(Ramphul, K., Mejias, S.G, 2018)



(Private, 2020)

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Women in aging, and the disconnect between biological and mental age

The icon Madonna, Queen of Pop, is known for her uncompromising work as a businesswoman, an artist, a composer, producer, and a chameleon trendsetter.

She is a self-proclaimed “bad feminist”, due to expressing her sexuality, regardless of criticism from the “good” feminists.

*“If you’re a girl, you have to play the game,” she declared at the 2016 Billboard women in music awards. “You’re allowed to be pretty and cute and sexy. But don’t act too smart. Don’t have an opinion that’s out of line with the status quo. You are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don’t own your sluttiness. And do not, I repeat do not, share your own sexual fantasies with the world. Be what men want you to be, but more importantly, be what women feel comfortable with you being around other men. **And finally, do not age. Because to age is a sin. You will be criticized and vilified and definitely not played on the radio.**”*

(Billboard Women in Music, 2016, 3:42)

(Churchwell, 2018)

In relation to the topic of aging, she insists on not being dictated based on a number, but at the same time, we can ask if she does not want to look aging?

By being active on social media, showing her ever-increasing cosmetic operations of face and body openly, she provokes strong reactions. There are those who criticize her for being desperate by not aging naturally, but also those who claim that the critics are anti-feminists for not supporting the rights of decision over one's own body.



(Meisel, 1984)



(Madonna, 2020)

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Another aging icon is fashion designer and activist Vivienne Westwood, soon to turn 80, who claims to enjoy the aging process. Looking back on her career that spans over half a century, she is too – as Madonna – uncompromising in running her independent company. They are both radical and provocative, self-reliant, strong, and hard-working. But there are also elements where they divide; in looks, and their views on feminism. While Madonna seems to combat visual aging with cosmetic procedures, Westwood has stressed that she has never performed cosmetic procedures, or retouched pictures of herself. Her design is based on sexuality, as her initial style was characterized by bondage and provocative dress, and she reinvented the corset which has become her key piece. Still, she dresses herself as a “modest rebel”, leaving “youngness” aside, yet still with tongue-in-cheek sex appeal, and she most certainly does **not** “dress her age!”



(Westwood, 2020)



(Teller, 2009)

What about aging women’s sexuality

Fashion is physically and emotionally connected to the body, and intimacy sells - something also the fashion industry knows how to benefit from.

Being surrounded by hyper-sexualized media, an extensive issue in the clothing industry is retailers advertising daring clothing to kids and tweens, resembling adults.

On the completely opposite end, a term named *The Second Childhood* describes a non-sexual form of dress.

By treating the elderly as if they were children, they are patronized and infantilized.

Children and elderly share some common features, such as poor judgment, lack of fertility, loose teeth, instability, and tendencies to fall – all stereotypical descriptions of bodily and mental characteristics that becomes part of the old person's identity.

Both age groups are dependent on help, but whereas the baby dependence reduces, increasing dependence develops in elders.

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Clothes directed towards older people in nursing homes are asexual and resembles toddler wear. The fit has extra ease, the colours and patterns are childish with cute décor as buttons, bows and ruffles. The fabrics are not “skin friendly”, as they mainly consist of dry, synthetic fibers that do not breathe. Function over comfort, “easy wear, easy care”. Pull-on garments, long sleeves and legs for cover-up, elastic waistbands, focusing on comfort in the same manner as for babies and young kids, completely lacking any sexual connotations.

(Twigg, 2013, s. 27- 28)

Aging women often feel excluded when they see how young people are presented and conveyed in the fashion media, so it makes them abstain from buying the products. By leaving older people out of the fashion conversation, the brands are missing opportunities from this growing and spending demographic.



(Buck and Buck, 2020)



(Lebon, 2020)

Social criticism can lead to shame, hiding and invisibility in society.

People intrigued by fashion seem to have had this interest since an early age, but what happens when *the self* changes due to age, and we enter a new stage in life?

A contradiction is that while we observe the physical decay in natural aging, such as loss of colour, greying hair, wrinkles, sagging skin and smooth contours, and the extra kilos that keeps adding on, we are not necessarily in agreement with our biological age on a psychological level. There are certainly opportunities to slow down an aging look with the help of workout, makeup and cosmetic procedures, but what happens mentally when we realize that decay is set in motion? Shame and dislike of oneself is the introduction to withdrawal and becoming invisible, due to worry of a judgmental society, embarrassment and criticism.

When even fashion magazines aimed at mature women tell you to steer clear of “*the fashion mistakes that make you look older*”, it is a given to become aware and anxious.

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Worrying about what others might think can keep us from being brave in the way we dress. By not conforming and sticking our heads out, we run the risk of being rejected, so disapproval might be a good enough reason to stick to what is safe. Group pressure might also be an aspect of worry, and maybe just as evident among mature women as in teenagers.

My grandmother was a tailor by profession, and very aware of her clothes. The same way as cooking and baking was influential in her life, so was dress. She had specific outfits hung together in the closet, which meant she rarely crossed items; certain blouses went with certain dresses and two-piece suits. She had a very strict dress code, which alludes to a need for control, to stay within some limits.

Inside or outside The Box

How do we use fashion as communication?

And how will people react upon visual appearances not within "the standard"?

The definition of "normal" is conforming to the usual and expected, while abnormal is described as weird, bizarre, and different.

But who decides what defines “dressing normal”?

At what time do we cross the line between normal and abnormal?

How come people get confused and provoked by seeing others dressing outside this so-called normal standard, also known as “The Box”?

Who invented these boxes?

Are there several boxes for each abnormality?

If there is only one box of normal, but several versions of abnormal boxes – which is the largest, and dominant, when added up - The Normal, or The Abnormal?

The Originals

I am interested in where we draw the line between the traditionally beautiful, and where it becomes excessive and over the top, pushing “beauty” into the tasteless and gaudy.

Even so, I believe there is value and beauty of its own in becoming a character; building an identity or a persona through self-expression – even in defiance of what is commonly regarded as beautiful.

An interesting observation is how some aging people have achieved almost a cult status, despite them leading miserable lives. People who have inspired fashion designers, stylists, and photographers with their narratives, like “Little Edie” Beale and Ethel Granger - aging women who were considered eccentric without any kind of fashion status while living in obvious misery and collapse.

(Edith Bouvier Beale, Wiki)

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To “Little Edie”, every day was a fashion statement, to escape the monotony of daily life. On her famous “revolutionary costume”, she said: *“This is the best thing to wear, you understand, Because I don’t like women’s skirts. And the best thing is to wear pantyhose, or some pants, under short skirt, I think. Then you have the pants under your skirt, and then you can pull the stockings up over your pants, underneath the skirt. And you can always take off your skirt and use it as a cape. So, I think this is the best costume for today ...
... I have to think these things up, you know ...”*.

(Singer, 2015)



(Getty Images, 1972)



Ethel Granger began her body alteration after marrying her husband, astronomer William Arnold Granger. The latter was drawn towards extremely tiny waists, high-heeled shoes, and numerous body piercings. Ethel has the record of the smallest waist, 33 centimeters, which she deformed using corsets day and night to please her husband’s vision of fashion and femininity. In 2011, the late model Stella Tennant fronted the cover of Vogue Italia, dressed and styled as Granger, lensed by Steven Meisel.

(Ethel Granger, Wiki)



(Meisel, 2011)



(Getty Images, 1957)



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“Tanten”

The Swedish term “Tanten” (transl. The Aunt) could easily be my grandmother, with whom I lived together with for years. Her younger sister’s house was across the yard, and they met every day for a chat or a coffee break. Often, they were quarreling about trivialities, as sisters often do, such as baking or cooking - things that would look rather insignificant to most outsiders, but which was of great importance to them.

In the book “*De sista Tanterna – från husmor til modeikon*” (*The last “Aunts” – from housewife to Fashion Icons*), there is an entire chapter devoted to coffee meetings, and prestige through baking.

(Bremmer, 2011, s. 65)

The concept of *Tanten* describes a cultural phenomenon of women born between 1910 and 1930, who sprung out from the working class. Trends were never a part of their lives, not even in their vocabulary.

They were housewives throughout their adult lives, caring for the home, husband, and children. Their identity reflected the way they dressed, always appropriate for the occasion. They focused on practical, sturdy and simple clothes, and were never seen outside the house without their coat, hat and purse, expressing correctness and frugality.

Many associates *Tanten* with a warm person, with generous hugs and time for other people, but *Tanten* has also been connected to negative associations. By some younger people she is seen as grumpy, bitter, and complaining, often also viewed as bland and uninteresting.

Tanten is an endangered concept, but there are still a few left who continue to care for the household and perform activities like needlework and dance groups in their free time.

But despite not following trends herself, she most definitely operates as a trendsetter!



(Wennman, 2011)

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Mom jeans, Dad sneakers and Granny Chic

Textile shops used to be a common sight in the cityscape before WW2, but gradually in the years that followed, companies began outsourcing production to low-cost countries, causing readymade confection to end up cheaper than fabrics, and sewing became superfluous. However, during the past couple of decades, vintage and secondhand shops have flourished largely because of society's overconsumption of fast fashion, but also due to the excitement of “treasure hunting” for pieces that *Tanten* used to wear.

Millennials are adopting older people's way of dress. “Mom jeans”, “dad sneakers” and “granny chic style” are all being copied among both designers and high street shops, but vintage pieces are unique and have a value that modern wear lacks.

This is not the first time we see this concept as a trend, as Tavi Gevinson launched her blog at the age of 11 in 2008, and four years later founded her magazine *Rookie*.

Looking like *Tanten* reincarnated, with her blue-grey hair, hats, glasses and frumpy outfits, she was a curiosity that became a fashion mascot, appearing in magazines and social media as well as front row of numerous fashion shows.



(Getty Images, 2008)



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Fashion is obsessed with youth, which mature women cannot identify with

According to WHO, there are 600 million people aged 60 plus worldwide today - a number that will double by 2025, and reach two billion by 2050, leaving people aged 50 and up to be the expected main consumer of fashion.

(WHO, 2020)

However, fashion ads are lacking older models who speak directly to these customers. This is an age group whose income is stable, and the potential of these consumers is enormous, being the biggest spenders on fashion by a wide margin.

When I enter a shop together with my 24-year-old daughter, we both realize that the shop's concept and ads are directed towards her age group, while the power of the older generations has been completely ignored by most beauty and fashion brands, simply because old is not *in Vogue!*

The aging influencers has arrived

Do mature women in general identify with style icons and famous supermodels?

Is there a difference between flamboyant elders who stand out, and the larger group who do not identify as fashionable, and who are uncomfortable attracting too much attention?

For the past years we have seen a growth in older models, mainly lithe and tall, with white or grey hair. And when older models are cast or interviewed, they are for the most part icons from other industries, famous bloggers or supermodels from past times, representing a rather distant and unattainable lifestyle for most readers.



(Slater, 2018)



(Advanced Style, 2015)

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For the older models who do not fulfill any of those requirements, a spot in the fashion industry can be a tough reach, and they are rarely seen on magazine covers or in ads by prominent brands. Is there a political correctness and a devious form of PR, a symbolic value, when placing one stand-out aging model among several young people in advertising campaigns?

A message can be hard to express in a picture alone, without a following explanation. In 2008, I made a collection including 3 models of different ages, based on the narrative of an older lady, looking back on her life, and “the younger selves” resembled her past. Reading something is different to viewing. How do we interpret a textless message?



(Private, 2008)

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If we can agree that the consumer seeing the advertisement will be more inclined to purchase the product if they can relate to what is depicted, why then are the fashion companies lagging and voluntarily losing money by not representing this major customer group?

Today, Western cultures fetishize youth, and fashion and beauty companies are chasing people from 20-40, even inventing mantras such as “60 is the new 40”, as though aging remains the biggest taboo. While the body is becoming older, and therefore changing, the beauty and fashion industry is still stuck being fixated on youth.

Isabella Rossellini was 40 years old when she got fired from Lancôme, after years of fronting beauty and skin care products as the highest paid model in the world. She was told that she was too old. 23 years later, she returned.



(Alamy Stock Photo, 1990)



(Demarchelier, 2017)

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In June 2020, UK Vogue presented the first ever cover with an older non-model; Judy Dench, 85, being the oldest person ever to grace the cover of the magazine.

“It’s wonderful that Judi embraces her age, even though she grumbles about growing old,” explains Phelan. *“She hasn’t gone out of her way to change her wrinkles. Her beautiful character really shines through. That is an important message for women today. We shouldn’t be so terrified of age. We need to focus instead on living a life that is full and rich.”*

(Phelan, K. 2020).



(Knight, 2020)

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Masking the older body with garments

Should we “conceal” the aging body and make it appear more youthful, the way we use makeup to enhance our features, or filters to smooth out what we do not want to expose? Is decorating something equal to disguising it?

An improvement of the body can be both negative and positive, depending on the context and intention; it can be both masking, but also a celebration of individuality and self-expression.

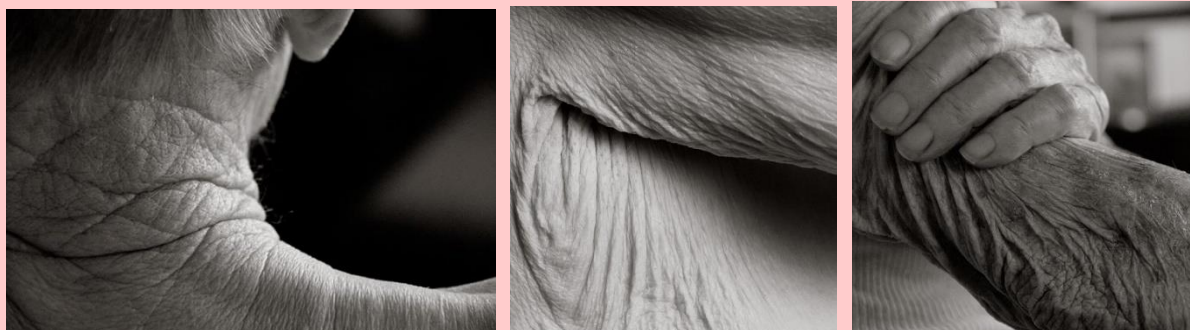
While young fashion models appear in sexualized pictures on magazine covers, our culture does not seem to be disturbed about showing skin, if it is airbrushed into a smooth, tight version, which is not even natural for young people.

How would we react if we swap the 20-something year old with a mature or older model?

Photographer Anastasia Pottinger’s presented her project “Centenarians”, documenting 100-year-old aged bodies with grace and respect. Her photography focuses on small, intimate details, exploring the unconventional beauty of the human frame.

(Veles, 2014)

The thin, soft, paper-dry, excess skin makes me think of fabrics - textured, fluid, stretchy, flexible, rough, creasing, loose.



(Pottinger, 2009)

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I say: a loud NO! to “appropriate” dress

Judgement of women “dressing their age” is a common problem in society.

Fighting ageism is about acceptance - not about pressure or judgement from society.

A critical - and somewhat ethical - question, is whether to dictate how mature bodies should dress, or rather; leave room for individual choices which allow comfort, quality and aesthetics.

How do textiles and clothes behave on older bodies that are declining, and how do we "help" older bodies to make them more beautiful, through design, construction, and fabrics?

And is it morally legitimate, as decorating something can possibly read as a signal that what already *is*, is not good enough?

Designing for the aging body

Do we have to take certain issues into consideration when designing for mature to elderly people? And what does that mean in practice?

To consider high-cut neckline and back? The perfect volume and length, to cover the upper arms, knees, and pelvis? To emphasize proportions and lines that will make the body look longer and slimmer? To straighten the back, lift a sagging bust, and to make the increased waist appear smaller? To place gussets and darts, and provide extra ease of movement in a body that needs comfort, such as the back of the shoulder seam, at the elbows and knees?

Next, to consider how the fibers in the fabrics feels against the skin, the texture and thickness. Does the fabric have a heavy feel to it, or is it lightweight? Does the fabric have draping ability, or is it crisp and stiff? Will the fabric need layers of fusing for structure and support? Do we have to consider the effect of colours? Of patterns? What is the appropriate lining for comfort, and to avoid the garment to cling to the body?

Is this older customer group more complicated and demanding to dress than a younger one?

Or can all these practical elements also contribute to trust between the customer and the designer, to create the best physical object and the best emotional experience?

If these women have the power to purchase, and are willing to do so if offered a customized service, would it then be possible to target a fashion brand specifically towards an older demographic?

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How about an experiment

Garments which contain a structure and volume where body forms and “flaws”* are over-exaggerated, will obviously look stylish and cool on a young, slim body, but very differently on an elderly body.

How would we look at clothes that build on top of the flaws that are already there, which are normally camouflaged?

Is magnifying flaws a more honest way of counteracting ageism, without hiding the obvious? What happens when fabrics imitate sagging and wrinkled skin, when drapery imitates folds and flabs, and the garment’s structure imitates hunchbacks and forward-leaning, crooked shoulders?

Will we perceive it as almost grotesque and monstrous, and even disgraceful, seeing an older person wearing exaggerated constructions, emphasizing a body crooked by age?

Will we loathe the sight, simply due to the sight of it, or perhaps because of our fear of the inescapable ticking clock towards our own decay, and end?



3-D draping on the form. Digital knit merino wool.
(Private, 2020)



Hand-felted wool and silk.

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The Danish designer Karoline Kjeldtoft presented a collection of “LBDs” on models past the age of 80, as a demonstration against the commercial, youth-oriented fashion industry.

Exhibition 86 / 77 / 96 at DOGA, 2007.

(Det Nye, 2007)



(Kjeldtoft, 2007)

Mature and older people should be individuals, not “invisuals”

There are expectations connected to clothes, and about how we visually present ourselves to the world, that will do something for our self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-image.

Is there a difference between wanting to feel comfortable and confident in your body, regardless of age, compared to deliberately trying to achieve a more youthful look?

I believe that still finding joy in dressing nicely and according to one's own wishes, is a form of resistance to ageism as well.

How can we avoid joining “the grey mass” where we gradually become invisible? When we move to this next stage in life, do we make sure to give ourselves *time*?

Time to reflect on how we want to colour our lives. Do we prefer a grey lead pencil? Or maybe a box of crayons? Or maybe we want to paint with bold, wide strokes, using all colours in the vivid chart? And to emphasize dress as identity, to assess the question who I am NOW, and bring forward “the next me”?

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“In most of my adult life I worked in a professional capacity with members of the public, colleagues, senior staff, politicians etc. In these roles there have always been expectations and in later years “Dress Code” about what was acceptable and what was not acceptable attire, accessories etc. I always aimed to be professional, and the degree of “formality” depended on my diary, who I was meeting and what activities I was to perform. I did wear colours, my clothes were more structured and my accessories smaller in scale, number, and impact. Since my retirement and connecting with the Advanced Style Movement started by Ari Seth Cohen, I have given myself permission to wear whatever I like and what makes me happy. I think as we age many of us decide that what other people think about us is less important. I dress for me. My clothes are an expression of the freedom I feel for letting go of other people’s and my own expectations about what is ‘acceptable’, appropriate for someone of a certain age.”

(Silvana, 64, influencer with 20K IG-followers, Advanced Style)



(Riley, 2020)

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Is attitude towards age, considering norms, traditions, codes, and rules, what is holding us back? Are we afraid of embarrassment? What is it that prevents mature women from finding their inner brave girl, and to be fully confident in themselves, to be visible and claim their rightful space? What does it take to break through?

“When I want to provoke and shake things up, it is by using my personality. What I say. The questions I may ask a person who does not want to be asked those questions. The arguments I start. But I always do this while well-dressed. Nothing outlandish or over the top...unless it is a gorgeous fashion statement of some kind...but then, when I'm dressed like that, I am in no mood to provoke. I am in the mood to please! To light up your world...even a little bit!”

(Ruth, 71, writer)



(Yunker, 2020)



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What is ageless and non-conforming?

Author and activist Ashton Applewhite suggests in her book *This Chair Rocks*, that age could be referred to in the same way as gender: **fluid**. One's own age is difficult to define, and the years towards old age do not move forward in one straight line. Many still feel young, others do not want to acknowledge their age. By following a gender-nonconforming example, the focus on age becomes insignificant for oneself and others.

(Applewhite, s 50)

The term **ageless** figures frequently as Instagram hashtags, linked to the maintenance of youthfulness. But viewed with a critical eye, it can also encourage people to deny who, and what, they are, which is an absurd and unreasonable task.

(Twigg, s 46)

Society's view on older people's dress is rather limited.

When older, trends take the backseat in favor of personal style. Some go flamboyant, but the majority goes beige and grey, decent and classic, not being in anyone's way.

Except for the most robust individualist, few of us want to move too far away from the herd. By emphasizing our personality in the way we dress, clothes are an amplifier of what we stand for, through what we choose to wear. Clothes can communicate specific values because fashion is a form of language. Also important is the emotional connection we have to the garments, how it speaks to us and how it makes us feel by wearing them.

“I have always dressed for me. Now I can do so exuberantly. In fact, I find people compliment me and engage in conversation much more now than when I wore more structured professional attire. I however know of other women who struggle to find a ‘voice’ when it comes to personal style. I often get comments like ‘I wish I could wear colours’, or hats or whatever else.

Middle aged women have much to contend with, menopause with hormonal and physical changes; changed family life, grown up children, divorce, caring for aged parents; career changes etc. I think many of us women derive our identity from roles we perform. Once those are gone or changed, we struggle with our identity. Some feel invisible and if their self-esteem is not boosted, they will want to become invisible.

I also get many women thanking me here on IG publicly and privately for being their inspiration to change their clothes and their lives. My living and being free has given them courage and ‘permission’ to come out of their shell and open up to new possibilities.

(Silvana, 64, Influencer with 20K IG-followers, and part of the Advanced Style movement)

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Fighting ageism is about acceptance, and research that promotes values counteracts discrimination towards older people in society. So maybe it is time to turn aging into something more positive and focus on the resources in older people.

Applewhite suggest the word *agefulness*; to celebrate everything we have done and been, what makes us who we are.

(Applewhite, s 49)

What happens when aging people riot and dress “inappropriate”, exposing old and wrinkling skin in skimpy outfits, colours and shiny decorations? Criticism towards women not “dressing their age”, those who are claiming space and showing their identity through dress, who dare to think outside the box without being dictated by society?

All women should be able to express their style, whatever way they want.

People have different views on how to present themselves to the world, whether it means being seen and heard through an eccentric and flamboyant approach, feeling confident in showing off body and skin or to cover up and appear modest.



(Baddiewinkle, 2020)

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So, we are now entering the term *ageism*

The term was coined in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler, to describe discrimination against seniors and patterned on sexism and racism.

(Ageism, Wikipedia)

Age discrimination unfolds differently, depending on socioeconomic factors like race, ethnicity, gender, access to medical attention, education, occupation, income, wealth, and social status, as well as aspects like stress, obesity, and smoking.

(Jenkins, 2016, s. 22)

The culture of aging

Common for all who are getting older, is the physical change in the body.

It is inevitable, as we will lose strength, speed, endurance, balance, and flexibility.

But depending on genes, maintenance of muscles and lifestyle, physical aging will turn out differently for people. Keeping in shape is considered a positive investment for health, as a 90-year-old fit person will have less risk of developing preventable diseases than a non-trained 60-year-old.

However, a strong posture and a fit body can also testament discipline and be a conscious resistance to acknowledging one's age.

“In developing countries, seniors stay in work longer which means that, on the one hand, they remain integrated and actively contributing members of society but, on the other hand, they are often exploited.

We tend to romanticize other cultures as valuing the elderly more than we do, but if we look closely at the evidence, it presents us with scenarios we find confronting.

For example, the Inuit's value older people highly. So much so that they put them out to die in the snow – at their own request.

Ageism has been found to be all-pervasive across eastern as well as western cultures, including Confucian-based Asian cultures where respect for elders and filial piety are social norms.

It is possible that ageism is one of the main features of global ageing among modern, capitalist nations in which individual social views predominate over traditional collectivist views.”

(Baum, 2018)

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Young people and Gerontophobia

Gerontophobia is the fear of age-related self-degeneration, a dislike towards older people, or a hatred directed towards elderly, because we are reminded of life's end.

We live in a time where a successful body is tight and muscular, slim, and healthy, with aging and decline in stark contrast. Age is a provocation in our society, and as older people are viewed as useless, inefficient, unattractive, and an expense and burden to society.

Prejudices towards older people are highly prominent.

(Gerontophobia, Wiki).

In a survey directed towards young people's possible career within elderly care, the content shows an extensive discomfort around physical and mental decay, and what young people see as disadvantages associated with this kind of work: from low pay and physically strenuous work, to be in close contact with unknown naked bodies through bodily care and washing.

Additionally, the notion of illness, witness of death, or just having to touch wrinkled, old skin.

While babies and small children also need care and nurturing, they are considered smooth and clean, while elderly in an approximately similar situation represent the opposite.

(Sykepleien, 2011)

People are in need of control, but older people seem to lose it

Control decreases the older one gets, which gradually leads to loss of status.

Abandonment and moral decline are terms associated with old age, manifesting itself through external appearance such as worn and shapeless garments, sloppy and messy attire, missed buttons and creased textiles with stains and holes.

(Twigg, 2013, s. 16)

Ridicule towards older people

Mockery of older people is highly present in daily life. Human beings seem, in general, to be afraid of aging and of losing control. And a way to beat the anxiety of aging is to joke about it.

We see it in birthday cards, portraying aging people as repulsive, irritable, and far over the hillside. We blame “*senior moments*” when being forgetful, and “*we feel 100 years old*” when tired. We embrace products that comes with a promise of - though unrealistic - baby skin in a jar ... “*you look great ... for your age!*”

All rather innocent but adding the numerous examples of pointing out age as a general problem is not as harmless as it might appear.

The consequences are to be viewed in a negative context - even incapacitated – as these signals mirror people who are battling everyday tasks due to reduced mobility and mental capacity.

When something involving older people does not work, we often blame the person and not the circumstances or the environment. When an object is not fit to interact with the body, we jump to the conclusion that the declining body is the problem, and not the object.

If we dare to examine how things in society lacks facilitation, can we influence the way we look at aging in a more positive way?

And what sense does it make to discriminate against a group that everyone is going to join?

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Everyone can be ageists - even older people, due to upbringing and repeatedly being exposed to ageist information, without even being aware of it.

Ageism seems like an extension of our ever-expanding consumption society, a culture that views almost everything as disposable. Can we put ageism into the perspective of sustainability; to slow down and look at the values and quality of aging?

Where does this leave me

During my MA, I have emphasized several fields of interest, from beauty and aesthetics, maximalism and originals, to old and extinct handcraft techniques.

It may seem like a divergent group of topics, but to me, they are all intertwined, stitched together like a fabric of richness and a celebration of possibilities.

Age discrimination found its way through maximalism, as a protest towards society's dictation of dress and age.

By researching the topic of ageism, I have gained valuable awareness of the many problems in the fashion and clothing industry, and it has motivated me to put my “ageism-glasses” on and investigate the possibility of creating a platform for anti-ageism in fashion, and to consider this group as my main target audience.

For the upcoming semester, I want to emphasize own-design fabrics, and continue focusing on developing unique textiles. The pandemic has brought new ways of thinking and problem solving, due to facilities being closed. I am rethinking “old-school” tools and techniques, such as stencil print, plant print, hand painting and hand dyeing.

I am also considering anti-ageism slogans and statements in a soft and beautiful way, and I have experimented with new digital fabric prints of my own wrinkled and tattooed skin!



My own palm and tattooed hand, made into “wrinkled skin” prints.



Build-out forms on mannequin, “Sinking Bodies” (Private, 2020)

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I am in dialogue with a stylist and a model, who - in my opinion - both cover the aesthetics I am looking for, in addition to being in the age group, which I believe can spark a conversation.



Model Nina dressed in my “wrinkled skin” prints (Original photo Martin Rustad for Krogh Optikk, 2020)

I want to celebrate that there is “still life after 40!” In my opinion, the most important step towards ending ageism is to be mindful of its existence, and to be active and vocal about it.

I hereby consider myself as a newborn anti-ageism activist!



Dress up party, TINA HAAGENSEN design (Hoffengh Dagsavisen, 2017)

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(Theo Barth: Thank you for your comment: *I upcycle old age – not only old garments!*)

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* In hindsight, I realized that I myself had used a word of which contributes to reinforcing a negative formulation of a topic of which intention was to highlight as problematic: *Flaws!* Due to this unintended incident, I chose to impose on myself the challenging task of using flaw as inspiration for my upcoming MA-collection. Being engaged in ageism, I believe it is a natural continuation on the subject - as a comment on age discrimination in fashion.