

# Denim Deconstructed;

deconstructing the notion of denim  
through avant-garde methods

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2024

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis

Master of Design

Auckland University of Technology

# Abstract

This research investigates and responds to the wastefulness of denim through an experimental approach of deconstructing and reconstructing used denim garments. Denim is one of the most popular fabrics globally, accounting for one of the largest segments of the fashion industry.<sup>1</sup> This style of woven cotton was first created for workwear in the late 19th century by Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss<sup>2</sup> and soon became the source of one of the most prevalent garments in the history of fashion— denim jeans. Today denim is used in various subsectors of the fashion industry, from fast to high fashion, and has become a fabric that has a significant influence on the way people dress around the globe.<sup>3</sup>

However, with their versatility and popularity, denim jeans come at a high cost to the environment; on average requiring 3,781 litres of water for one pair of standard jeans, which is equivalent to filling approximately 54 bathtubs.<sup>4</sup> This environmental impact is intensified by the throwaway culture of fast fashion, including denim jeans. This thesis responds to the wastefulness of the denim industry by investigating methods for recycling denim cloth, through approaches of deconstruction and reconstruction.

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1 Laura Beltran-Rubio, "Denim: Fashion's Frontier." *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 103–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1437999>.

2 Graham Marsh, *Denim : From Cowboys to Catwalks : A Visual History of the World's Most Legendary Fabric*, rev. ed. (London: Aurum, 2005).

3 Beltran-Rubio, "Denim: Fashion's Frontier."

4 "Putting the Brakes on Fast Fashion," UNEP, December 11, 2018. <http://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/putting-brakes-fast-fashion>.

Deconstruction as intertextuality, trace and différance as constructed by Derrida,<sup>1</sup> alongside the practical analysis of deconstructive strategies in fashion design analysed by Maria Skivko<sup>2</sup> as the conflict of form, function and ideology act as guiding principles for this research.

In the process of physically deconstructing and reconstructing second-hand denim garments, draping was used as a method to explore new possibilities in how pre-constructed garments are positioned on the human body. By draping deconstructed jeans on the upper part of the body, for example, I was able to challenge the original function of each garment. This allowed me to test new forms, sculptural effects, and ideologies regarding deconstruction and reconstruction as methods. These findings contribute to the storytelling aspect of the fashion collection, which aims to prompt the audience to reflect on their understanding of denim and its detrimental impact on the environment. It seeks to encourage a deeper emotional connection to the viewer's own personal relationship with denim by helping them understand its timeless beauty as a fabric. Through this, the research hopes to extend the user's relationship with their denim garment, and the designer's relationship with denim as a durable and versatile textile, thereby preventing more denim from ending up in landfills.

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<sup>1</sup> Gizem Kiziltunali, "Reading Derridean Deconstruction on the Repetitive Visuals of an Avant-Garde Design." *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (July 2022): 1512–24. <https://doi.org/10.21547/jss.1054178>.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion as a Path Toward New Beauty Standards: The Maison Margiela Case." *ZoneModa Journal* 10, no. 1 (July 29, 2020): 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/11086>.

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# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

07 / May 2024

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to firstly thank my supervisor Jyoti Kalyanji for your consistent and generous support throughout this journey. Thank you for making the time to meet me every week, sometimes multiple times, to ensure I am on track and doing okay. You have helped me to deeply comprehend the conceptual framework of my research by understanding what I am doing, sometimes better than I do. Thank you for helping me to articulate my thoughts into words. I could not have done this confidently without your help, especially during the final weeks. Thank you so much.

Thank you to my supervisor Mandy Smith, for also making the time to meet me every week amidst your busy schedule. Your nurturing support has often felt like having a second mother. Thank you for pushing me to doubt myself less and to enjoy the process. You constantly reminded me to see the bigger picture in what I do. I sincerely appreciated your wisdom and ability to articulate ideas so fluidly. Thank you for agreeing to be my supervisor and for taking a genuine interest in my research. I am honoured to have had your contribution throughout this journey.

Thank you to my sister Miyeon: for being my 24/7 fitting model, critique and the best general support in every aspect of my day-to-day life. Thank you for bearing with me through the lows and celebrating with me the most in the highs. You have truly been like my other half in the mundane moments. Simply laughing like crazy with you has been a big part of me enduring the toughest days. Thank you for helping me never feel alone on my journey.

Thank you to my friends and organisers for “As We Watch The World Go By” show. Thank you for encouraging me to be a part of this incredible experience. Witnessing my garments

birthed from this thesis, live on real models on the runway with the most supportive audience, was surreal. This show has made my whole journey of completing my thesis so much more special and unique. I am grateful to all of you for your love and support.

Thank you Chani, for being the most understanding and patient manager I could ask for. Thank you for allowing me to take time off on weeks I genuinely could not do without. Thank you for making work feel like home and for being one of the most supportive people I’ve ever met.

Thank you Salma, for all the rides, laughs, study breaks, and for your overwhelmingly kind support throughout the last few months. I have sincerely appreciated your friendship and can only hope to return the same favour for you.

Thank you to the rest of my friends for your love, time and uplifting words throughout this journey. I have appreciated your check-ins and all the meaningful conversations we’ve had. I will never forget them.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my proofreader Ingrid Dubbelt. Thank you for being flexible with your time and taking sincere care in providing your feedback. Thank you for taking a genuine interest in my research and for your input that has better shaped the comprehensiveness of my research.

Last but not least, thank you, Mum and Dad. You have always pushed me to achieve higher and higher and have been the strongest examples of what it means to give the best effort to your work every day. Thank you for believing in me and pushing me till the finish race.

## Section One: Introduction

The focus on denim for this research was initiated while reflecting on a recent visit to South Korea and noting denim jeans as one of the most frequently observed garments worn by young Koreans in the urban fashion culture in Seoul. Subsequently, I discovered that the popularity of denim was equally ubiquitous in the global fashion industry. High fashion designers, such as Diesel<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Andersson Bell<sup>4</sup>, Junya Watanabe<sup>5</sup> and MM6<sup>6</sup> have used denim as one of the primary fabrics for their runway collections. The uniqueness in the construction and portrayal of these couture denim collections adds to the ongoing evolution of the meaning of denim in our current society. Meanwhile, fast fashion brands, such as H&M, Topshop, and Zara are continuously mass-producing denim jeans for low retail prices, leading to a shocking 36% decline in the last 15 years of how many times a garment is worn before it is thrown away.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the meaning of denim is constantly evolving, and it can either be perceived as a luxury item or a wardrobe staple bought for a low price.

The popularity of denim jeans in modern times makes one wonder about their origin and significance. Where and why were they created, and for what purpose? How did they evolve to become so ubiquitous? What role do they play in our culture today? However, perhaps more important are the environmental impacts of producing jeans. The primary question for this research is thus posed as: **How can we counteract the environmental impacts and effects of mass use of denim through innovative design and by fostering a deeper understanding of denim?**

1 Condé Nast, "Diesel Pre-Fall 2023 Collection." *Vogue*, November 21, 2022. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/pre-fall-2023/diesel>.

2 Condé Nast, "Diesel Resort 2023 Collection." *Vogue*, June 6, 2022. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/resort-2023/diesel>.

3 Condé Nast, "Diesel Spring 2023 Ready-to-Wear Collection." *Vogue*, September 21, 2022. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2023-ready-to-wear/diesel>.

4 Dylan Kelly, "Andersson Bell SS24 Finds Balance Through Unexpected Pairings." *Hypebeast*, June 28, 2023. <https://hypebeast.com/2023/6/andersson-bell-ss24-spring-summer-2024-collection>.

5 Condé Nast, "Junya Watanabe Spring 2024 Ready-to-Wear Collection." *Vogue*, September 30, 2023. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2024-ready-to-wear/junya-watanabe>.

6 Condé Nast, "MM6 Maison Margiela Pre-Fall 2023 Collection." *Vogue*, November 29, 2022. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/pre-fall-2023/mm6-maison-martin-margiela>.

7 "Putting the Brakes on Fast Fashion," UNEP. December 11, 2018. <http://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/putting-brakes-fast-fashion>.

The secondary question that guides this research is: **How can I challenge the form, function and ideology of jeans through deconstruction and reconstruction methods to fashion design?**

As a fashion design student interested in experimental, deconstructive methods of design and sustainability, I sought to explore how I could create conflict between the form, function, and ideology of jeans through deconstruction and reconstruction techniques. Through the reuse of denim, my goal was to investigate the psychology of clothing, its meaning to us, and to design a collection of looks using second-hand denim garments.

These garments were reconstructed by going against the grainline<sup>1</sup> to test new forms, silhouettes, and fabric manipulation techniques to create a deeper emotional connection between the denim clothing and the user. The research seeks to encourage other designers to recycle garments as textiles by ideating and constructing clothes through the method of draping, as exemplified by Madeleine Vionnet,<sup>2</sup> Cristobal Balenciaga,<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>Martin Margiela,<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> Yohji Yamamoto,<sup>7</sup> Rei Kawakubo (Comme Des Garçons),<sup>8</sup> Rick Owens,<sup>9</sup> and Issey Miyake.<sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> Therefore, this research aims to benefit other designers interested in upcycling, deconstructing and draping in fashion design, by providing innovative design strategies for recycling clothes.

1 The standard direction that the fibres are woven in a fabric. Pattern pieces are aligned to the grainline to achieve the natural drape.

2 "Drape: Classical Mode to Contemporary Dress | NGV." n.d. NGV. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/drape/>.

3 Suzy Menkes, "The Legacy of Shape and Drape." *The New York Times*, April 18, 2011, sec. Fashion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/19/fashion/19iht-fashfile19.html>.

4 Roger Leong, "Rei Kawakubo's Dress | NGV." May 14, 2014. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/rei-kawakubos-dress-2/>.

5 "Maison Margiela | 'Drapery Study' | French." n.d. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/80915>.

6 "Maison Margiela | Ensemble | French." n.d. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/712189>.

7 May Verner, "Yohji Yamamoto Fall 2017 Ready-to-Wear Collection | Vogue." *Vogue*, May 3, 2017. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2017-ready-to-wear/yohji-yamamoto>.

8 Leong, "Rei Kawakubo's Dress".

9 "Why Rick Owens Hand-Draped Every Garment Himself This Season." *Dazed*, March 4, 2016. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/30201/1/rick-owens-isn-t-afraid-of-fashion-s-impending-breakdown>.

10 Dana Thomas, "Why Late Japanese Designer Issey Miyake's Pleats Are Fashion History Legacy." *Vogue India*, October 25, 2022. <https://www.vogue.in/fashion/content/why-late-japanese-designer-issey-miyakes-pleats-are-fashion-history-legacy>.

11 "Issey Miyake | Ensemble | Japanese." The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/79193>.

The contextual chapter of this research discusses the background of denim, sustainability concerns of denim, deconstruction and reconstruction in design, and analyses of the collections by key influential designers Junya Watanabe and Maison Margiela. The methodology of my research uses the fashion deconstruction framework provided by Maria Skivko, which considers the conflict of form, function, and ideology within a fashion context.<sup>1</sup> The methods chapter documents the practice along with a critical review of key phases including sourcing second-hand denim garments, deconstruction, draping, fabric manipulation, and reconstruction processes. The storytelling aspect of the final fashion collection is also discussed, as it is a crucial last step for conveying the message about the wastefulness of denim to the audience. By evoking emotions and encouraging reflection on the identity of denim and its environmental impact, I aim to inspire a shift towards more sustainable fashion practices.

Section Two:  
Research Contexts /  
Contextual Review

1.  
DENIM

Historical chronology and  
context: the evolution of the  
denim jean

Denim is described as a “fashion frontier”,<sup>1</sup> and exists in every country around the world,<sup>2</sup> making it a globally recognisable item.<sup>3</sup> Created initially for workwear, denim has also become a rich part of the high fashion world.<sup>4</sup> In his article “Manifesto for a Study of Denim”, anthropologist Daniel Miller argues that denim jeans are credited with resolving major contradictions of living within the modern world.<sup>5</sup> They are one of the most habitually worn garments, taking many different forms, silhouettes, colours and weights. Denim jeans are made for different purposes for different people within society.<sup>6</sup>

Denim fabric has evolved over time, going through various forms such as “serge de Nimes”, “jean lining” or Genoa,<sup>7</sup> with different mixtures of wool and cotton. Fashion scholars now believe that denim as we know it today was developed by textile mills in Manchester, New Hampshire during the nineteenth century, when it was named the “jean”.<sup>8</sup> In this form the textile undergoes an intricate process of weaving indigo-dyed cotton yarn as the warp, and undyed cotton yarn as the weft, in a warp-faced twill pattern.<sup>9</sup>

1 Beltran-Rubio, “Denim: Fashion’s Frontier.”  
 2 Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward, “Manifesto for a Study of Denim”, *Social Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2007): 335–351. Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0964-0282.2007.00024.x>.  
 3 Ibid.  
 4 Sedef Uncu Akl et al., “Understanding Denim Recycling: A Quantitative Study with Lifecycle Assessment Methodology,” *Waste in Textile and Leather Sectors*, edited by Aysegül Körlü, Ch. 4. Rijeka: IntechOpen, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.92793>.  
 5 Miller and Woodward, “Manifesto for a Study of Denim”, 335–351.  
 6 Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, *Sustainability in Denim*. San Diego, UNITED KINGDOM: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2017. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=4882553>.  
 7 Katherine Townsend, “The Denim Garment as Canvas: Exploring the Notion of Wear as a Fashion and Textile Narrative.” *TEXTILE 9*, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 90–107. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183511X12949158771554>.  
 8 Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis : The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes*. London: Head of Zeus. Accessed February 6, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.  
 9 Deependra Sharma, *Water Footprint of Denim Industry: Sustainability in Denim* (Elsevier, 2020), 111.

Americanisation is central to understanding the proliferation of denim, with Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis from San Francisco credited for its popularity.<sup>1</sup> Davis, a tailor, made the first pair of work pants later to become known as the denim jeans; a custom order for a client who had complained about his pants continuously ripping while woodcutting. Davis met this challenge by using one hundred percent cotton-duck fabric<sup>2</sup> and metal rivets traditionally used on horse shields to prevent the jean pockets from tearing.<sup>3</sup> The rivets later became the core style of denim jeans. Typical jeans today consist of widely recognisable features: two front pockets, one coin pocket, a waistband with belt loops, two back pockets, and a yoke.<sup>4</sup>

The popularity of Davis’ jeans grew by word-of-mouth and so rapidly that they needed to be produced at a faster rate. Davis reached out to his fabric supplier, Levi Strauss, in 1872 which led to the production of Levi Strauss & Co. Today, Levi Strauss & Co remains a hugely successful apparel brand and the leading producer of jeans.<sup>5</sup>

1 Miller and Woodward, “Manifesto for a Study of Denim\*.”  
 2 Ibid.  
 3 Ibid.  
 4 Marsh, *Denim : From Cowboys to Catwalks*  
 5 Thomas, *Fashionopolis : The Price of Fast Fashion*.



Figure 1. *Mary Jane and Phil O'Reilly wear Black Sheep denims*, ca. 1970s, photograph, New Zealand Fashion Museum, <https://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/the-denim-decade/>

Denim jeans succeeded throughout the ages, adapting to suit the different needs of ever-changing cultures and various aspects in fashion—suitable attire for cowboys, musicians, fashion designers, film stars, the working class, and everyday wear.

Contributing to the evolution of jeans from workwear, within the entertainment industry denim became a symbol of youthful rebellion<sup>1</sup> and the struggle against oppressive societal norms by the previous working population of America,<sup>2</sup> exemplified by film stars Marlon Brando in *The Wild Bunch* and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Jeans also gained recognition during the Second World War in Japan; a country now renowned for its high-quality denim production.<sup>3</sup>

The unexpected decline in the growing popularity of Strauss's jeans came in the 1970s, with the birth of designer jeans. A more casual dress style created by New York's fashion designers grew popular alongside the women's liberation movement. The hippie counterculture also had an important effect on blue denim, through personalised cuts and customising; rips, tears, and frayed hems.

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1 Ibid.  
2 Miller and Woodward "Manifesto for a Study".  
3 Debika Ray, "DENIM DREAMS." *Crafts* (0306610X), no. 293 (April): 78–83.

In the 1980s, famous designers such as Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren and Gloria Vanderbilt gave further rise to the popularity of designer jeans.<sup>1</sup> They began selling at higher prices ranging from \$100 to \$200 a pair, while Levi's jeans were sold for approximately 26 dollars.<sup>2</sup>

The jean scene was also expanding in Aotearoa New Zealand as companies such as Peter Dynes Denims based in Christchurch had more than one denim label; Cody Jeans, Asphalt and Skin Jeans.<sup>3</sup> Mary Jane and Phil O'Reilly of Auckland, New Zealand also released a range of couture denim garments under the label Black Sheep.<sup>4</sup>

Through exploring the historical impact of denim jeans on social and cultural values, I have identified elements of storytelling and symbolic meaning that I aim to incorporate into my collection. This historical understanding not only sheds light on the reasons behind the enduring popularity of denim but also allows me to adapt it to suit the needs of contemporary culture. As blue denim jeans were once a symbol of democracy, uniting people across class and racial divides, I aim to imbue my collection with these same values of inclusivity and durability, making it available for everyone to interact with.

1 Cecilie Geary, "The Denim Decade." New Zealand Fashion Museum. January 2020. <http://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/the-denim-decade/>.

2 Miller and Woodward, "Manifesto for a Study".

3 Geary, "The Denim Decade".

4 Ibid.



Figure 2. Campaign for "Figure-hugging jeans" for Cody Jeans, ca. 1980s, photograph, New Zealand Fashion Museum, <https://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/t/figure-hugging-jeans/>

## 2. Sustainability Issues Concerning Denim

### 2.1 The environmental cost of jeans

Denim is one of the most popular, yet environmentally detrimental fabrics to produce. One of the key aspects of this research is to raise awareness of and encourage the reduction of the wastefulness of denim.

As of 2024, the fashion industry is the third largest polluting industry in the world, with only the fuel and agricultural sectors being ranked higher.<sup>1</sup> It is also among the top 10 industries that emit the most CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>2</sup> The European Union (EU) textile industry alone generates a staggering 16 million tonnes of waste, primarily attributed to fast fashion.<sup>3</sup> In the last 15 years, the average consumer has been buying 60 percent more clothing,<sup>4</sup> with a 36 percent decline in the number of times a garment will be worn before being thrown away.<sup>5</sup> Over half of these clothes are not recycled but end up at landfills or incinerators mixed with household waste.<sup>6</sup>

Among the fabrics used in the industry, denim is one of the most common yet wasteful, given the significant amount of cotton and water it requires, its use of toxic dyes, and the challenges of tracing its production process.<sup>1</sup> Cotton is the second most damaging agricultural crop in the world, and 25 percent of all pesticides globally are used on cotton crops.<sup>2</sup> To grow one kilogram of cotton requires on average 10,000 liters of water. Processing it requires even more: approximately 18927.05 liters for one T-shirt and a pair of jeans. If fashion production maintains its current pace, the demand for water will surpass the world's supply by 40 percent by 2030.<sup>3</sup>

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1 "Most Polluting Industries in 2024 Revealed | Heatable." Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://heatable.co.uk/boiler-advice/most-polluting-industries>.

2 Fatma Seda Cundubey and Sukru Taner Azgin, "Comparative Life Cycle Assessment of Denim Manufacturing: Evaluating Conventional vs. Recycled Cotton in the Context of Renewable Energy." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 434 (January 1, 2024): 140117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.140117>.

3 Reet Aus et al., "Designing for Circular Fashion: Integrating Upcycling into Conventional Garment Manufacturing Processes." *Fashion and Textiles* 8, no. 1 (November 5, 2021): 34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-021-00262-9>.

4 Sedef Uncu Akl et al., "Understanding Denim Recycling".

5 "Putting the Brakes on Fast Fashion," UNEP.

6 Sedef Uncu Akl et al., "Understanding Denim Recycling".

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1 Andrew Brooks, Clothing Poverty : *The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes*. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=5939659>.

2 Rita Kant, "Textile dyeing industry an environmental hazard." *Natural Science*, no. 4, (2011): 26. DOI: 10.4236/ns.2012.41004.

3 Thomas, *Fashionopolis : The Price of Fast Fashion*.

The 2015 statistics from Life Cycle Assessment regarding the environmental impact of a single pair of Levi's jeans found: cotton consumes 3781 litres of water (equivalent to the average American family's water use for three days), emits 33.4 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> (equivalent to 110 kilometres driven by the average American car), 48.9 g PO<sub>3</sub> 4 (equivalent to the total amount of phosphorous in 1700 tomatoes) and occupies 12 square meters of land per year (equivalent to a square formed by seven people with outstretched arms, fingertips touching each other).<sup>1 2 3</sup> The production of the denim fabric accounts for more than 80 percent of the environmental impacts of the production of a pair of jeans.<sup>4</sup> By 2027, the market for denim jeans is expected to be valued at around 87.4 billion US dollars, up from 63.5 billion US dollars in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its ubiquity, much of the discarded denim ends up in landfills, disregarding its inherent durability from its origins in workwear. This longevity means that even discarded denim still has considerable life remaining, making it an ideal material for upcycling into new garments. Tracey Panek, the company historian of Levi Strauss & Co., calls Levi jeans "the first sustainable garment." She explains that during the time of their introduction in the 1870s, miners would mend and share their denim Levi's jeans until they had no life left.<sup>1</sup>

A pair of high-quality jeans can last a lifetime, bearing the story of its wearer through the traces it carries, through being worn and the bodily forms they take on. Jeans, therefore, foster an emotionally durable relationship with their wearers. By embracing this aspect of jeans, we can promote sustainable fashion practices that not only reduce the environmental impact of the fashion industry but also foster a deeper connection between wearers and their clothes.

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1 Fangli Chen et al., "A Review: Life Cycle Assessment of Cotton Textiles," *Textila* 72 (01): 19–29.

2 Fahad Asmi et al., "Ecological Footprint of Your Denim Jeans: Production Knowledge and Green Consumerism." *Sustainability Science* 17 (5): 1781–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-022-01131-0>.

3 Shanthi Radhakrishnan, "Denim Recycling," *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability: Recycled and Upcycled Textiles and Fashion*, ed., Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, 79–125. Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2146-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2146-6_3).

4 Cundubey and Azgin, "Comparative Life Cycle Assessment".

5 Aravin Prince Periyasamy and Saravanan Periyasami, "Critical Review on Sustainability in Denim: A Step toward Sustainable Production and Consumption of Denim." *ACS Omega* 8, no. 5 (February 7, 2023): 4472–90. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acsomega.2c06374>.

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1 Thomas, *Fashionopolis : The Price of Fast Fashion*. 54.

## 2.2

### Emotional Durability in Design: Sustaining Narratives

The sustainability of clothing is closely tied to our emotional connection with it and how long we use it, as opposed to disposing of it rapidly. In Chapman's book *Emotionally Durable Design*,<sup>1</sup> he argues that humans are consumers of meaning, not matter. He explains that people maintain interest in things only when they continue to remain meaningful and can adapt to changing desires and values.

To counteract waste, this research explores recycling solely from second-hand discarded denim garments and explores the beauty and materiality still present in them. The recreated denim garments deliver a new intention, and aesthetic to the user, contrasting with the original purposes of the garments before deconstruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design : Objects, Experiences and Empathy*, 2nd Ed., (London, England; New York: Routledge, 2015). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/AUT/detail.action?docID=2011258>.

Denim is a durable and resistant fabric with its qualities enabling narrative experiences by leaving the outcomes of its prolonged use ambiguous. It allows spontaneous nuances to be reflected in it, becoming like a diary to the user. Viewed in this way, it can enable a prolonged relationship between the user and the garment.

Repurposing worn denim into a new garment may not be favoured by some people as it is so personal to the previous wearer. However, worn denim can also be of extra value as it is closer to its stage of distress, which Miller describes as “buying time”.<sup>1</sup> By understanding that purchasing a product is the start of its story, not the end, intentional design can extend the lifespan of an object. As a fabric designed to last a lifetime and therefore carry the traces of its wearer, denim is inherently personal, like a second skin, allowing for a new story to be created.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Miller, “Buying time.” In *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2020), 157–169.

### 3. DECONSTRUCTION IN FASHION

This section covers the main theories guiding the deconstruction process of this research. French philosopher Jacques Derrida's definition of deconstruction is firstly explored as the bedrock of this concept, followed by an examination of the deconstructionist techniques particular to fashion design as outlined by Skivko. An analysis of Maison Margiela's Spring RTW 1999 collection supports the visual aspects and techniques germane to this study.

### 3.1 Derrida

It is impossible to capture a fixed meaning of jeans because it is not independent of continually changing forms, contexts, and words. As meaning constantly circulates amongst signifiers, we can never be sure of it.<sup>1</sup> What jeans mean, or signify, will fade if we try to set it in place; it evolves with new cultural trends, research, and technological advancements.

Derrida explains deconstruction as the “constant process of recontextualization”, which he breaks down into three parts: intertextuality, trace, and différance.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Intertextuality means texts that reference or allude to other texts, shaping or influencing the meaning of one text with another. In other words, intertextuality can be understood as seeing nothing as unique or original. Derrida explains that the ontology of intertextuality claims that there is no transcendental signified and that the signifier points only to other signifiers—texts only refer to other texts. Derrida’s description of deconstruction suggests we can never be sure of the symbolic meaning of jeans, given their continuous change in silhouette, function, form, price, and fabric composition.

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1 Kiziltunali, “Reading Derridean Deconstruction”.

2 Ibid.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Positions. Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers*, ed. Alan Bass and Christopher Norris, revised edition, (London; New York: Continuum, 2002).

This research explores the idea of deconstructing denim through both a physical and ideological approach. The physical approach involves unravelling denim jeans, using the cloth to create new silhouettes. This results in a transformed garment that takes on a completely different form. Through this process, the denim jean is given a new meaning and identity, breaking free from its traditional role (as a pair of jeans).

## 3.2 Maria Skivko

This physical and ideological approach to deconstruction is based on a framework created by Skivko,<sup>1</sup> associate professor specializing in fashion and cultural studies, sustainable ideas and practices. She argues that deconstruction is a philosophical concept derived from Derrida. This concept was used in modern architecture to challenge the building's forms and functions. In fashion, the concept of deconstruction is used by some designers to destroy fashion standards and stereotypes. Skivko analyses examples of this method carried out specifically by the Maison Margiela brand.

According to Skivko, three main ideas constitute deconstructivist thinking in fashion design: conflict of function, conflict of form, and conflict of ideology.<sup>2</sup> The author breaks down each idea into two parts: standardized and deconstructionist fashion ideals.

The function of standard fashion garments is produced to serve a particular purpose—a mini-skirt for a party or a suit for work. To conflict the function, a deconstructionist fashion designer such as Margiela produces multipurpose, multifunctional garments—a jacket with multiple sleeves—which question and challenge the stereotypical functions of clothing.

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<sup>1</sup> Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion".

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Margiela's approach to deconstruction is best represented through conflicting the form of the garment. In the deconstructionist sense, this is exemplified through opposing standard proportions and patterns in the fashion industry. Margiela uses multilayering, oversized silhouettes, asymmetry, uneven hems, and excess elements to give a new definition of everyday clothing.

Skivko analyses the conflict of ideology performed by Margiela through the designer's ways of delivering gender-neutral, universal/all-inclusive clothes with anonymous, unglamorous strategies to exhibit his fashion items. The designer denies the idea of luxury in the fashion world by exhibiting his collections in unusual settings such as a circus tent or an abandoned metro.<sup>1</sup> He promotes the idea of anonymity by never showing himself, masking his models, and attaching no logo or brand name to his fashion items.

### 3.3 Margiela – 1999 Spring RTW – looks 26 and 27

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<sup>1</sup> Sakshi Rajesh, "Where Are the Great Ideas? At Margiela, John Galliano Knows How to Go Big | ISTITUTO MARANGONI." Institution. ISTITUTOMARANGONI. Accessed February 1, 2024. <https://www.istitutomarangoni.com/en/maze35/game-changers/where-are-the-great-ideas-at-margiela-john-galliano-knows-how-to-go-big>.



An example of Margiela's conflicting function, form and ideology relevant to this research is the 1999 Spring RTW collection. The collection featured pants made by deconstructing jeans worn as aprons or trains. This challenged the traditional way of wearing jeans on the lower part of the body by placing them on the upper body. In look 26, a long apron top was constructed using asymmetrical seams and paired with bottoms that looked like a combination of pants and a skirt. The apron top was held up by a wire around the shoulders, which was an atypical material for garment construction. In look 27, an apron top was made by laying out the back and front of jeans vertically across the upper body of the model, instead of horizontally on the legs. The rips of the jeans were left raw and untouched, deliberately showcasing that the garments were repurposed from old denim. Different colours visible in these reconstructed denim pieces further emphasise the asymmetrical seams on the body. Seams from the previous garments were still visible, serving as a decorative feature for the new outfits. Raw edges celebrated the beauty of imperfection and the work of deconstruction and reconstruction involved in creating these garments. The use of these techniques challenged the conventional ways of repurposing/upcycling pre-used garments.

Understanding key elements involved in the method of deconstruction in fashion aided in selectively adopting methods and techniques relevant to this research. Deconstructionist thinking serves as a practical and philosophical framework to my design process, reinforcing sustainable practices by giving new life to waste. For example, the process of upcycling involves a literal act of deconstruction and reconstruction. Following these three ideas of conflict of function, form, and ideology through the upcycling process, is the framework for this research practice.

Figure 3. Condé Nast, *Maison Margiela Spring 1999 Ready to Wear Collection*, look 26, October 2 1998, photograph, Vogue Runway, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1999-ready-to-wear/maison-martin-margiela>

Figure 4. Condé Nast, *Maison Margiela Spring 1999 Ready to Wear Collection*, look 27, October 2 1998, photograph, Vogue Runway, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1999-ready-to-wear/maison-martin-margiela>

## 4. Reconstruction

This section covers various movements and techniques which support the reconstruction stage of this research practice. As formulated first by Martínez's definition of avant-garde fashion, deconstruction, reconstruction and un-construction, are discussed as outlined by Bradley. The philosophies of wabi-sabi and mak and bium work as aesthetic constructs for this research, as a detailed examination of Junya Watanabe's Spring RTW 2002 illustrates their practical application.

## AVANT-GARDE FASHION

Martínez defines avant-garde fashion as a practice that aims to “create situations of creative resistance”.<sup>1</sup> This form of creativity is rooted in concepts of authorship and uniqueness and seeks to challenge the mainstreaming notions of its own artistic and creative sector.

Adam Barnard, a writer and director in theatre, film and journalism, argues that the general public becomes standardised, passive and neutralised by the mass and commodity culture forms.<sup>2</sup> Martínez cites Adam Barnard's definition, which characterizes avant-garde fashion as a form of artistic expression on a human scale. Its purpose is to challenge dominant forms of consumption and to produce cultural, artistic, and political forms of resistance.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Javier Gimeno Martínez, “Selling Avant-Garde: How Antwerp Became a Fashion Capital (1990—2002).” *Urban Studies* 44, no. 12 (November 1, 2007): 2449–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980701540879>.

2 Martínez, “Selling Avant-garde”.

3 Ibid.

## ARCHITECTURE IN RELATION TO FASHION DESIGN

In chapter 3 of *The Fashion of Architecture*, author and educator Bradley Quinn discusses the concept of “dressing the void” in fashion design.<sup>1</sup> He argues that there are three spatial concepts when thinking about clothes from an architectural standpoint: deconstruction, reconstruction, and un-construction. These concepts are tools that can transform and flip the structure of a garment, creating new creative possibilities for expressing ideas and meaning through fashion.

Aligning with the belief that fashion and architecture are interconnected, Quinn explains how both practices can crossbreed in innovative ways when thought of hand-in-hand: “The construction of both garments and architecture creates spaces that are denied from sight, generating fantasies of inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>2</sup> In architecture, the void is the land, while in fashion, it is the body before it is clothed.

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1 Bradley Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture*. (New York: Berg, 2003).

2 Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture*. 64.

## WABI-SABI

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese philosophy and aesthetic that celebrates beauty in imperfection, embracing the traces of wear and tear, asymmetry, and unfinished elements of an object.<sup>1</sup> Wabi-sabi embraces three main concepts: nothing is perfect, nothing is finished, and nothing lasts forever.<sup>2</sup> When applied to humans, it makes us humble in realising that perfection does not exist in nature.

Wabi-sabi is often associated with methods of restoration, such as the kitsungi techniques, which leave traceable imperfections, such as cracks. In this project, worn denim is given new life by being transformed into a new form of clothing. The resulting garments often have unfinished, raw edges, asymmetrical silhouettes, and visible distressing and fraying. This embraces the notion of wabi-sabi, celebrating the imperfect visual elements of an object and promoting aesthetic sustainability.<sup>3</sup>

Objects which adhere to wabi-sabi philosophy depart from conventional ideals of beauty, which are often associated with fleeting trends and a low degree of sustainability.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic pleasure of wabi-sabi is contrary to "normal" experiences of beauty, instead seeking to turn expectations upside down and embrace the unconventional. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of denim jeans, visual elements are often left raw and visible to the viewer, embracing imperfection and challenging traditional expectations of garment finishing.

<sup>1</sup> Kristine H. Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability : Product Design and Sustainable Usage*. Routledge Studies in Sustainability. Abingdon, Oxon; (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Nobuo Suzuki, *Wabi Sabi : The Wisdom in Imperfection*, ed. Hector Garcia and Russell Calvert, (La Vergne: Tuttle Publishing). <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/AUT/detail.action?docID=6462552>.

<sup>3</sup> Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## MAK AND BIUM

Similar to the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, Korean art and culture also values the aesthetics of mak and bium,<sup>1</sup> which are explored in greater detail in the methods section of this research. Mak and bium represent imperfection and emptiness in Korean aesthetics. In Korean, mak is a verb that translates to "just" or "simply". As an aesthetic, it embodies informal spontaneity and produces a sense of emptiness known as bium, which is more than just an absence of physical matter. It represents the state in which an artist, like a potter, works with rapid fluidity, making impromptu decisions that foster a sense of honesty between the creator and their work. This aesthetic is evident in my own approach to draping as I relied on my intuition when reconstructing the disassembled denim.

<sup>1</sup> Byoung-soo Cho, "Mak and Bium: Imperfection and Emptiness in Korean Aesthetics." *Architectural Review* (blog). January 26, 2018. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/mak-and-bium-imperfection-and-emptiness-in-korean-aesthetics>.

4.1  
Junya Watanabe – Paris Fashion Week  
2002 Spring/Summer RTW Women's



An example of the wabi-sabi characteristics is shown in Junya Watanabe's 2002 Spring/Summer RTW Collection. Watanabe, known for his avant-garde style and experimental spirit in clothing design, communicates a different story or idea through each runway collection.

Figure 5. Junya Watanabe Spring 1999 Ready to Wear Collection, ca. 2002, photographs, FirstView, [https://firstview.com/collection\\_images.php?id=18639](https://firstview.com/collection_images.php?id=18639)



The 2002 collection featuring repurposed denim highlights Watanabe's experimental spirit. He delivers diverse necklines and garment silhouettes through voluminous layering emerging out of the body. This is accentuated through the asymmetrical seams, layering, flat-felled seams, raw edges, and detailed colour-spraying present in each look. Techniques such as pleating, ruffling, or flaring appear at random parts of the body. The long skirts, dresses, and pants of the collection cover the models' legs, accentuating themes of excess and drapery. The divisions within each garment have been highlighted through the white weft of the denim fabric, sprayed over with yellow, which draws attention to the geometrical quality of the garments. These geometrical aspects are further emphasised using flat-felled seams, which are more visible than the standard seam. The consistent colours used throughout the collection evoke a sense of nostalgia and antique quality. These colours, especially the hints of yellow, are emphasized through the raw, fraying edges, making the garments appear more worn and deconstructed.

Watanabe's exploration of cutting concepts, ingenious use of colours, and innovative draping techniques align with the important theme of deconstruction and inspires this research that works with upcycling old denim jeans and garments to counteract waste. By embracing the wabi-sabi philosophy, which recognizes the imperfection, incompleteness, and transience of all things, he defies the conventional methods of garment construction in a collection that presents a fresh perspective on repurposing denim in fashion design. This departure from standardised expectations challenges the notion that denim garments, including jeans, must adhere to strict guidelines, offering a new aesthetic construct that celebrates the beauty of imperfection.

Figure 6. Junya Watanabe Spring 1999 Ready to Wear Collection look 4, ca. 2002, photographs, FirstView, [https://firstview.com/collection\\_images.php?id=18639](https://firstview.com/collection_images.php?id=18639)  
 Figure 7. Junya Watanabe Spring 1999 Ready to Wear Collection look 6, ca. 2002, photographs, FirstView, [https://firstview.com/collection\\_images.php?id=18639](https://firstview.com/collection_images.php?id=18639)

In summary, avant-garde in fashion, the interconnections between architecture and fashion and the aesthetics of wabi-sabi and mak and bium, have all informed the reconstruction process of this research. Viewing fashion as a medium for storytelling, this research hopes to convey the beauty and timelessness of denim fabric, despite its wastefulness. Through in-depth analysis of key theories, aesthetics and fashion collections, a personalized and targeted deconstructive strategy was developed to create distinctive and meaningful garments. The thesis aims to express the imperfect beauty of nature (wabi-sabi), specifically through the dishevelled, aged look of second-hand denim. To achieve this, I employed avant-garde practices that challenge the dominant understanding of clothing and human perception.

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# METHODOLOGY

This research project aims to address the issue of wastefulness in the denim industry by using three deconstruction concepts in fashion: conflict of function, form, and ideology.<sup>1</sup> These methods serve as a framework for the hands-on making process of the final fashion collection.

The conflict of form is investigated by deconstructing and draping old denim garments, mainly jeans. During the deconstruction and draping process, creative decisions are made spontaneously (mak and bium) through draping on the mannequin and exploring the fabric physically with my hands (Dansaekhwa).<sup>2</sup> Fabric manipulation is used to achieve new forms, silhouettes, and decorative elements for the reimagined garment. The conflict of function is explored in how the redesigned garment is worn on the body. The reconstructed garment goes against the standard grainline of the old garment, contrasting with its intended function. The final stage of this research methodology is to cause a conflict of ideology by distorting the audience's belief of what jeans are and challenging the standard processes of recycling denim garments.

The following sections outline the physical methods involved in the design process, from sourcing the denim to deconstruction, draping, fabric manipulation, and reconstruction. All these methods required an iterative and reflective process assisted by supervisors and peers' advice. The final exhibition is also discussed--the garments aim to tell the story of this research which seeks to raise awareness about the wastefulness of denim, inspire people to rethink their relationship with it, and ponder ways to prolong its lifespan.

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<sup>1</sup> Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion".

<sup>2</sup> Yeon Shim Chung et al., eds. *Korean Art from 1953: Collision, Innovation, Interaction*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2020).

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## Methods: an Introduction



Figure 8. Ha, Chong-hyun. *Conjunction 20-16*. 2020. Oil on hemp cloth. Paris • Brussels • London • New York • Shanghai. Almine Rech. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ha-chong-hyun-conjunction-20-16>.



Figure 9. Ha, Chong-Hyun. *Conjunction 94 - 134*. 1995. Oil on hemp cloth. Busan, South Korea. Gallery Woo. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ha-chong-hyun->

The initial approach to this practice was inspired by the relationship between the mind and body in the creative process exemplified by the Dansaekhwa movement. Specifically, I was drawn to the Korean modern painting movement of Dansaekhwa and the works of artist Ha Chong Hyun, who utilised hemp and paint to create his pieces. (Figures 8,9). His resulting paintings compel the viewer to consider the material as the agent of the artwork, rather than the human artist.<sup>1</sup> Dansaekhwa as a philosophy in art is the emphasis on the material (in this case, paint) as the agent of the artwork, rather than the human artist. Dansaekhwa artists focus on the beauty of the material itself, presenting beautifully simplistic paintings that invite the viewer to observe the textures and meditate on the experience.

Painting, for Dansaekhwa artists, is a form of meditation that allows them to connect with their mind and body. In the aftermath of the Korean wars, many Korean artists turned to painting to heal from trauma. This reflective state of mind is achieved by painting without an intended purpose for the outcome. By celebrating the beauty of the material through their artworks, Dansaekhwa artists offer a unique perspective on the relationship between the mind, body, and creative process.

<sup>1</sup> Chung. *Korean Art from 1953*



Figure 10. Milan Jeon. *First Dansaekhwa inspired fabrication by Milan Jeon*. Japanese Eco dye on Silk Canvas. Photograph. 2023.

The artworks I created (Figures 10,11) feature ink pressed over a layer of bojagi, a traditional Korean patch-working technique that utilises scraps of materials. Bojagi has a rich history dating back to ancient Korea, specifically the Joseon Dynasty, when women were relegated to the confines of their homes. As a result, bojagi served as a form of meditation and a creative outlet for Korean women seeking to express themselves.<sup>1</sup> Bojagi and the Dansaekhwa painting philosophy worked in tandem to help me reconnect with my mind and body through this phase of my reflective practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Cook, *Bojagi: Design and Techniques in Korean Textile Art*, (London: Batsford, 2019).



Figure 11. Milan Jeon. *Second Dansaekhwa inspired fabrication by Milan Jeon*. Japanese Eco dye on Cotton Canvas. Photograph. 2023.

My original intention was to create garments using the Dansaekhwa and bojagi philosophy.

However, as the project progressed, I shifted my focus to using second-hand denim to create new designs. Despite this shift, I remained true to the concept of physically engaging with the material, even as I worked with second-hand denim.

My design process revolved around manipulating the fabric through draping, creating new forms on a mannequin, and relying on the physical feel of the textures of denim. Instead of preplanning through sketching forms on paper, I let the tangibility of the deconstructed denim inform how the cloth would be arranged on the body. I aimed to shift the audience's perspective from the functionality of denim as a fashion item to its materiality, emphasising its wastefulness and excess in the current global environment. Additionally, I wanted to evoke a sense of appreciation for denim's durability, timelessness, and adaptability to fashion trends that have contributed to its unceasing popularity over the years.



Fig 12. Milan Jeon. *Second-hand denim purchased from Auckland op shops*. Photograph. 2023.

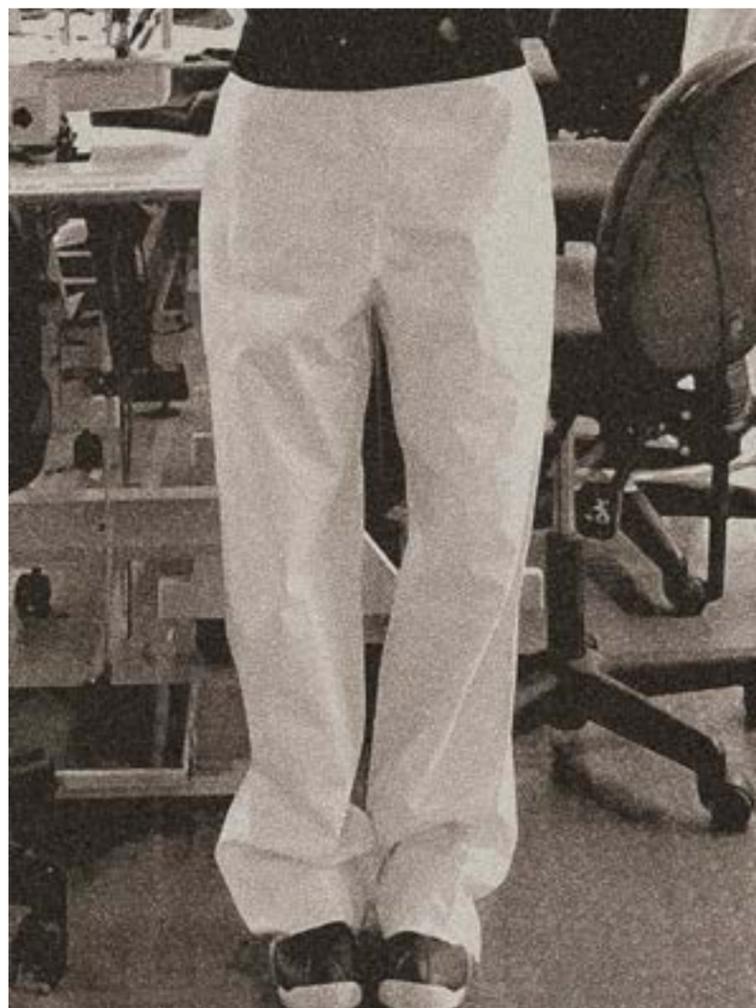


Figure 13. Milan Jeon. *Calico jeans prototype*. 27 October 2023. Photograph. Auckland.  
Figure 14. Milan Jeon. *Denim jeans prototype*. 27 October 2023. Photograph. Auckland.

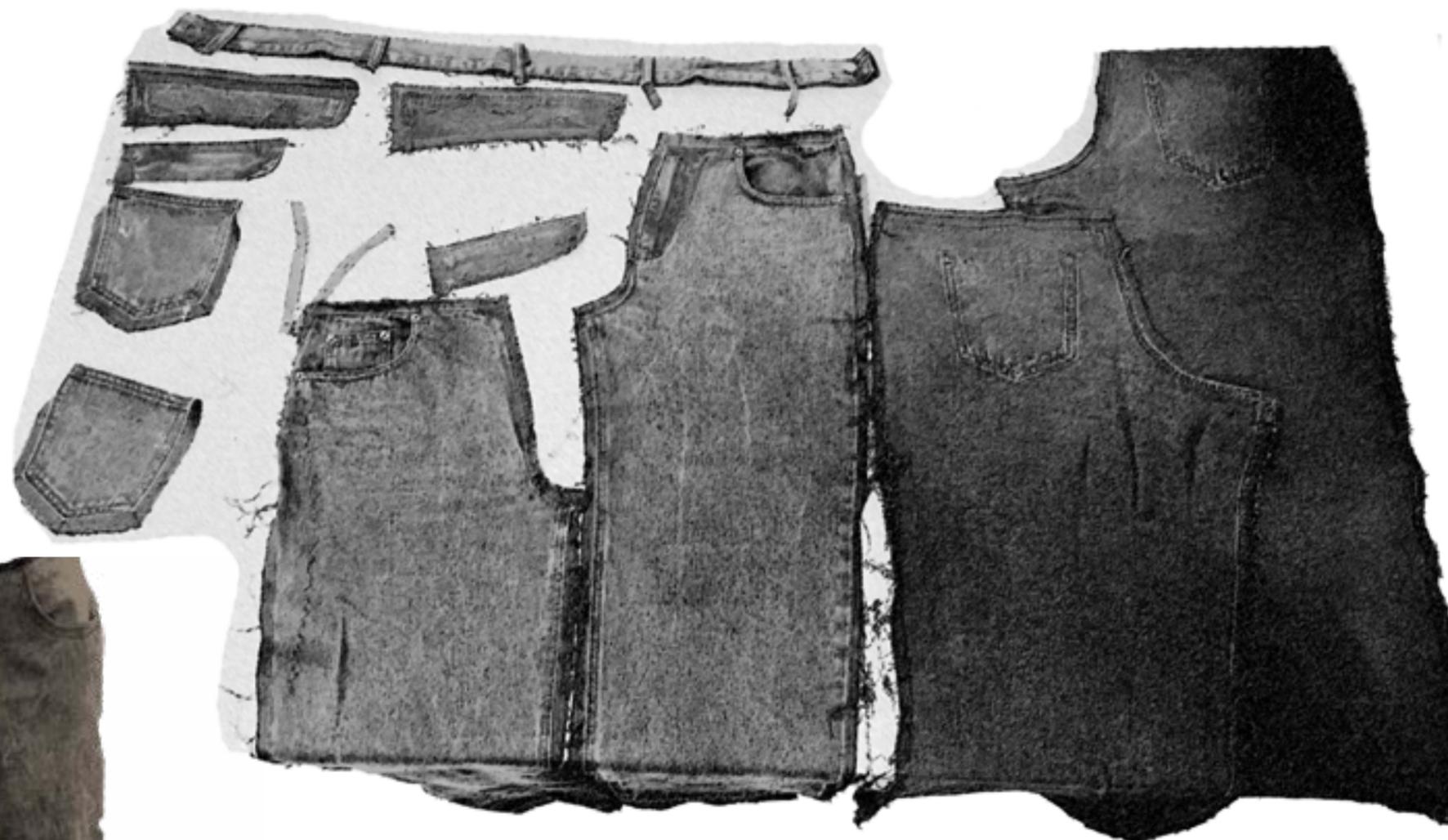


Figure 15. Milan Jeon. *Old jeans dissected*. October 2023. Photograph. Auckland.

The research process and development of garments progressed through several key phases. I first spent time considering the form and function of the fundamental components of jeans. This was supported by the creation of jeans and the dissection of old denim pieces to better understand the construction and material composition. I researched contemporary fashion collections to gain insight into the various silhouettes and construction methods that can be achieved with denim. Through observation, I discovered several key techniques, such as leaving raw edges on garments, incorporating deconstructed jeans in unconventional ways to a fashion collection, using unique materials for garment construction, and creating asymmetrical, voluminous, and geometric silhouettes with denim.

To begin my design process, I utilised deconstruction techniques on old denim garments and relied on my instincts to determine when to stop before moving on to the draping process for reconstruction. The varying lengths, shapes, weights, and colors of the denim pieces guided my decisions on how to reconstruct them on the mannequin, resulting in a completely new garment at each iteration.

Draping is a crucial step in manipulating and challenging the original form, function, and ideology of jeans in the reconstruction phase. Video documentation played a significant role in this stage of my design process, as it helped me recall how the garments were draped and pinned after they were removed from the mannequin. This was particularly crucial because the 3D form looked entirely different when viewed from a 2D perspective. Since my design process was based entirely on draping, this was an essential tool that enabled me to explore a new method of designing, relying solely on the 3D form to guide my design decisions.

During fittings, I had the opportunity to evaluate how the garments moved and looked on a human body, as opposed to a still mannequin. I discovered that denim behaves differently when worn on the skin, compared to when it is in contact with a mannequin covered in fabric. As a result, the fittings with a human model allowed me to identify that the denim garments required tighter alterations, especially for the top garments that needed to achieve sculptural silhouettes. In addition, I received valuable feedback from my supervisors and peers, which helped me to make pivotal changes to my overall garment collection.

The exhibition of three garments in a fashion show run by young designers to create a platform for emerging talents is discussed as the final phase of this section. It provided me with an opportunity to narrate the story behind my garments, about the wastage of denim, to the audience. During this stage, I had the chance to witness the physical movements of the garments when they were worn by the models on the runway, as well as the reaction of the audience.

The second opportunity to exhibit my garments will be held in a gallery space, inviting visitors to closely interact with the pieces. It welcomes careful observation of the materiality of denim and notice the significant number of old denim pieces that have been used to reconstruct the garments. The documentation will be added following the examination.

# 1.

## Sourcing the denim



Figure 16. Milan Jeon. *Denim rack in Hip St Shop in New Lynn*. 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

In my quest for second-hand denim, I scoured various thrift stores around Auckland, New Zealand; SaveMart in Northcote, Red Cross on Dominion Road, and Salvation Army and Hip Stop shop in New Lynn. When selecting the denim, I considered several key factors. First and foremost, it was imperative that the jeans had been previously used, as my research focuses on repurposing old denim to combat waste. Additionally, I sought out jeans that were non-stretch, of good quality with plenty of life left in them, and dyed in lighter shades of blue to maintain a cohesive colour scheme for my final fashion collection.

The prices for denim jeans were surprisingly higher than I anticipated, ranging from \$10 to \$20 per pair. During my exploration of vintage denim, I stumbled upon distinctive design elements that are seldom seen in contemporary jeans, including fluctuating yoke and pocket sizes, as well as unique branding. These intricate details were instrumental in my reconstruction process, which entailed manipulating the fabric and draping it in new ways to create a fresh garment that challenged the original form, function, and ideology of the pre-owned item. Moreover, the fascinating features in the secondhand denim provided me with a plethora of shapes and textures to experiment with in my reconstructions.

## 2. Deconstruction: Deconstructing jeans

The strong woven structure of denim results in a distressed but stable material to manipulate.<sup>1</sup> During the deconstruction process, I was able to identify traditional construction methods for working with denim, such as flat-felled seams, overlocked seams or selvedge denim seams. Through repetitive deconstruction, I was able to familiarise myself with the essential elements of jeans, including the front pockets, coin pocket, back pockets, waistband, belt loops, jean zipper with fly shield and fly piece, yoke, and the legs. This knowledge was crucial in determining the pattern pieces needed to drape them on a mannequin. Access to a varied array of elements from deconstructed jeans enabled me to explore more innovative ideas for reassembling them into a new garment that deviates from their traditional form, function, and ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> Townsend, "The Denim Garment as Canvas".



Figure 17. Milan Jeon. *Deconstructive Look 2 on a human figure*. 24 March 2024. Photograph. Auckland.



Figure 18. Milan Jeon. *Deconstructing denim jeans*. 2023. Photograph. Auckland.

I relied on my instincts to stop deconstructing the pair of jeans at different stages. This allowed me to approach the draping process with a fresh perspective at each iteration, creating a new form worn on the body due to its different lengths and 2D flat shape (new restrictions working on the mannequin). This resulted in new design features in each garment, such as using the waistband as a decorative aspect to hang at the hem for an upper body garment (see Figure 17).

In Figure 19, a single pair of old jeans was deconstructed only through the inside part of the legs, which were then pleated at random points and wrapped around the waist horizontally, going against the original form and function. I named this design the “caterpillar skirt”.



Figure 19. Milan Jeon. *Front view, Caterpillar skirt*. 13 March 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

This approach allowed me to create diversity in my overall final fashion collection, introducing different forms and ideas on how jeans can be recycled and redesigned as something new and previously unseen. Incorporating a visible element of deconstruction into the final fashion collection was a vital aspect to me, as it epitomised the driving force behind the design process and was significant in telling the story of deconstructed jeans. I strived to showcase the raw nature of the used denim fabric in the garments, rather than conceal it.



Figure 20. Kim Western Arnold. *Maison Margiela Fall 2018 Couture Look 9*. July 4 2018. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-couture/maison-martin-margiela>

As noted previously, Margiela questions beauty notions by incorporating atypical materials, silhouettes, models, and settings to create a unique and unfamiliar fashion collection and bring new perspectives, perception and prompt contemplation. Margiela's creations encourage audiences to pause, reflect, and seek an understanding of the story behind the designs.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion".

The theme of deconstruction in my collection aims to make the spectator (my audience) think about the life cycle of denim and how it can be continually reused after the original garment is discarded. I want the viewer to understand how it is possible to separate the idea of the denim jean--its fundamental form stripped back to focus on the materiality of the denim fabric--and to explore what else the material can do on the body, by conflicting its original form, function and ideology. To this end, I wanted the viewer to witness the raw process of the pairs of denim jeans being deconstructed and other denim garments being reconstructed.

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### 3.

#### Reconstruction:

#### Draping



In the context of zero-waste design, Rissanen and McQuillan note that there are multiple workflows, with some designers opting to work directly with cloth on a mannequin to develop their designs.<sup>1</sup> The process of draping is sometimes a preferred starting point over the traditional method of sketching for designers as it offers an opportunity to create distinct forms and textures using just fabric and pins<sup>2</sup> that may not be easily captured within an initial sketch.<sup>3</sup>

This approach was adopted in this research; draping deconstructed denim garments, primarily jeans, being the key method for creative ideation of garment designs.

<sup>1</sup> Timo Rissanen and Holly McQuillan, *Zero Waste Fashion Design*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=7279944>.

<sup>2</sup> Timo Rissanen and Holly McQuillan, *Zero Waste Fashion Design*.

<sup>3</sup> Monica Melek, "Draping: What It Is, Who Does It, and Why You Need to Try It!" The Masters Institute of Creative Education. Accessed December 11, 2023. <https://tmice.edu.au/blogs/journal/draping>

Figure 21. Milan Jeon. *Timelapse of draping a garment*. 7 January 2024. Screenshot. Auckland.



Figure 22. Milan Jeon. *Deconstructed jeans draped on the upper body*. 28 February 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

The tactile experience of physically manipulating the fabric on a mannequin allowed for the exploration of forms and silhouettes that responded to the behaviour of differences in each pair of jeans; age, density, weight, surface abrasions and colour. The deconstructed components of the jeans could also be repurposed for different functions. For instance, a waistband separated from a pair of jeans could be transformed into a bag strap or a neck accessory. In figure 22, the waistband has intentionally remained attached to be utilised as a decorative detail across the collarbone of the wearer.



Figure 23. Milan Jeon. *Partially deconstructed denim jeans*. 28 February 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

Reimagining the garment in a different position on the body, such as it being placed in various angles across the upper body instead of the lower body, further challenges the form, function, and ideology of traditional jeans. Draping in this way has provided a creative gateway for exploring new forms and silhouettes as well as different openings and closures, which question the wearability and functionality of traditional fashion garments.



Figure 24. Byungsoo Cho. *The columns of Haeinsa Temple in South Gyeongsang Province*. Date unknown. Photograph. South Gyeongsang Province, South Korea.

Mak and bium can be considered as methodology expressed through the spontaneous process of creation, strongly harmonious with the present research's draping process of design.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, a wabi-sabi object is governed by randomness. The random expression can occur when the artist or designer engages with the materials in a "dialogue" during the creation process, advocating for the material to "lead" rather than imposing an overarching, conceptual idea.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of this research, the draping process has been conducted without a pre-designated plan to achieve a specific visual outcome. Instead, the material guides the design in a spontaneous and organic process; the artist not imposing their human imperative, and thus celebrating the philosophy of Dansakehwa (the material becomes the agent).

<sup>1</sup> Byoung-soo Cho, "Mak and Bium: Imperfection and Emptiness in Korean Aesthetics." *Architectural Review* (blog). January 26, 2018. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/mak-and-bium-imperfection-and-emptiness-in-korean-aesthetics>.

<sup>2</sup> Harper, *Aesthetic Sustainability*.

The traces of wear on already worn, second-hand denim, work as painted marks on the canvas. These traces (hints of distressing, holes, faded colours, abrasions), inform the impromptu process of transforming the deconstructed material into a garment, through draping. The resulting garment is imperfect in form (celebrating the notions of wabi-sabi, alongside mak and bium and Dansaekhwa), beauty in imperfection, simplicity, embracing asymmetry, crookedness, unevenness, and unfinished elements as valuable aspects of aesthetic sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ibid.

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#### 4. Fabric manipulation and the avant-garde



Fashion designers frequently derive inspiration from architectural elements, leading to designs that are not only sculptural but also architectural in nature. Quinn's book, "The Fashion of Architecture," delves into this idea in depth, particularly in the chapter on deconstruction, unconstruction, and reconstruction in fashion design. By incorporating spatial concepts into their work, designers can analyse the space between the body and the garment, resulting in avant-garde shapes that challenge the limits of fashion.

Figure 25. Milan Jeon. *Pinned and draped design on mannequin form*. 7 March 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

In this research, spatial concepts were investigated through experimenting with draping and fabric manipulation.

The fashion industry mostly relies on traditional pattern-making methods for creating tailored garments, resulting in comparatively fewer clothes made through draping. Pattern-making ensures accurate body fitting and professional seams, while draped clothes can be created through spontaneous design decisions, allowing for unexplored silhouettes and textures.

Fabric manipulation, defined as the modification of a basic fabric to create a new innovative fabric surface, was utilised in this research to create decorative areas of interest on a garment, or as an integral part of the garment structure.<sup>1</sup> The process of physically working with the fabric on a mannequin, aided in creating new three-dimensional geometric forms and silhouettes. The use of techniques such as pintucks and pleating aided in creating sculptural, voluminous forms, exemplified in Figures 17,19,22 and 25. This was essential in achieving the main goal of the fashion collection, which was to introduce avant-garde fashion aspects cohesively recognised as deconstructive fashion.

<sup>1</sup> Angela Burns, "Rethinking Fabric: The Application of Fabric Manipulation Techniques in Fashion Design Education," *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 41, no. 1 (2022): 66–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12375>.



Left to right:

Figure 26. Fabio Iona, *Comme des Garçons Spring 2014 Ready-to-Wear, Look 1*, September 27, 2013. Photograph. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2014-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>

Figure 27. Filippo Fiori, *Junya Watanabe Spring-Summer 24 collection - Look 34*, 30 September 2023. Photograph. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2024-ready-to-wear/junya-watanabe>

Figure 28. Yannis Vlamos, *Rick Owens Fall/Winter 2015-2016, 22 January 2015*. Photograph. Paris. <https://www.rickowens.eu/en/US/collections/women-sphynx-fw15>

According to fashion and textiles academic Angela Burns, the art of intricate fabric manipulation through physical touch is dwindling due to the increasing use of mechanisation in fabric manufacturing. Additionally, the skills required for precise fabric manipulation to achieve proper fit are becoming obsolete with the advent of synthetic fabrics like Lycra that offer stretch, as well as the ongoing advancements in pattern-making techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Burns also notes that the restriction of colour options can enhance a designer's ingenuity in crafting unique three-dimensional textures by eliminating any concerns of colour discordance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it was determined at an early stage that I would exclusively utilise old denim jeans in varying shades of blue. I discovered that this approach allowed me to focus on the structure, size, shapes, and fit of my clothing, which was greatly enhanced by manually manipulating the denim.

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<sup>1</sup> Burns, Angela. "Rethinking Fabric: The Application of Fabric Manipulation Techniques in Fashion Design Education." (2022)

<sup>2</sup> Burns, "Rethinking Fabric".



Exploring the tactile nature of denim and manipulating its surface opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me. I developed a unique relationship with the fabric that I had never experienced before. The challenge of working with denim jeans, which are not typically pleated or manipulated, made the process even more intriguing. Seeing and feeling denim in a new way was refreshing, beyond its usual distressed or ripped state. Unlike woven cotton, such as poplin, which drapes when pleated, denim's density and weight allow pleats to create volume and hold their shape without the need for interfacing. This made it particularly effective for creating geometric silhouettes, evoking avant-garde and deconstructive fashion themes.

Figure 29. Milan Jeon. *Back view of trail skirt for Deconstructive look 3*. 25 March 2024. Photograph. Auckland.

## 4.1 Layering

The process of layering has been recognized as a significant strategy in the creation of fashion collections, specifically within the realm of deconstruction fashion.<sup>1</sup> This has been exemplified by many contemporary fashion designers; Junya Watanabe, Rei Kawakubo<sup>2</sup> and Yohji Yamamoto.<sup>3</sup> (Figures 30,31,32). In the context of communicating the theme of deconstruction, layering has proven to be an effective method of creating distinct silhouettes, volume and a sense of amplifying excess in the fashion collection; different styles of layering create variations in dimension and distinction between individual outfits.



<sup>1</sup> Soon-Ja Lee, Mie-Jung Kwon, and Ju-Hyun Kim. "A Study on Deconstructional Fashion Design Through Fashion Magazine." *Fashion & Textile Research Journal* 1, no. 4 (1999): 349–357.

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay King, *The Language of Fashion Design: 26 Principles Every Fashion Designer Should Know* (Beverly: Rockport, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, "The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion." *Fashion Theory* 8 (2): 195–223. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270404778051771>.

Top to bottom:

Fig 30. Marcio Madeira. *Comme des Garçons Fall 2009 Ready-To-Wear Collection*. March 6 2009. Photograph. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2009-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons#review>

Fig 31. Daniele Oberrauch. Yohji Yamamoto Fall-winter 2022-2023 - Ready-to-Wear. March 3 2023. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2023-ready-to-wear/yohji-yamamoto>





Figure 32. Author unknown. Junya Watanabe Spring / Summer 2002 Ready-to-Wear Women's Collection. 2002. Photograph. Paris. [https://firstview.com/collection\\_images.php?id=18639](https://firstview.com/collection_images.php?id=18639)

The final decisions on the style of layering and overall look were arrived at through multiple fittings with a human model. By testing the garments on a real human body, I could evaluate the garment's natural fall and determine the appropriate alterations for an accurate fit. I also ensured that the garments had appropriate closings that would allow the wearer to comfortably get in and out of them.

By layering parts of the jeans in different ways, such as vertically, horizontally, or diagonally, against their original grainline, I was able to create garments that were foreign yet refreshing to me. Conflicts in form and function were furthered by utilising every part of a deconstructed pair of jeans, including the waistband, belt loops and pockets.

Layering thus played a pivotal role in creating interest in the garments and developing a more complex, deconstructed and multifaceted collection.



Figure 33. Condé Nast Archive. *Comme des garçons* Spring Ready-to-Wear 1988 Collection. ca.1988. Photographs. Paris. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1998-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>

## 5. Exhibition

I had two opportunities to exhibit my garments. In this first instance, I had the privilege of showcasing three looks in the “As We Watch The World Go By” fashion show held in Dunedin. This public event was organised by four young New Zealand designers to help other young emerging fashion designers in the country gain industry exposure. The event was part of the ID Dunedin 2024 fashion festival calendar, and 24 other designers showcased their collections. This opportunity allowed me to gain valuable insight into how the garments interacted and moved with the body. Additionally, I was able to observe the audience’s reactions to the garments.



Figure 34. Riley Smith. *Back view of Look 1 by Milan Jeon*. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.

As I dressed my models, I also took note of the time and effort required to put on and take off the garments. Choosing eyelets as the closures for my designs presented certain advantages, such as the ability to accommodate a wider range of sizes. However, it also posed some challenges in terms of the time and effort required to put them on and take them off. Nonetheless, the use of eyelets allowed for more personalised fitting on the models, as I could adjust the tightness of the closures at different points. This was crucial in achieving the desired silhouette for each look in my collection. Feedback from the models and careful observation of the runway indicated that the garments did not impede movement or cause discomfort when walking or performing.

During the fittings prior to the show, I decided to cover the models' faces. This technique has been used previously by designers such as Jun Takahashi, Maison Margiela, Rei Kawakubo and Junya Watanabe. My designs are visually complex, and I felt that exposing the models' faces would distract from the aesthetic and narrative of the garments. As my collection aims to raise awareness about the surplus of denim and its environmental impact, masking the models' faces drew greater attention to the clothes that adorned them.

This was crucial as my garments blatantly displayed the deconstruction and reconstruction process of old denim. I wanted the audience to focus on the intricate details of the garments, highlighting the amount of old denim used in the collection (9 pairs of jeans, 1 denim jacket, and 1 denim shirt). My goal was to emphasise the amount of denim discarded and provoke thoughts on how it can be used to tell a story by being transformed into artful forms for the body.



Figure 35. Riley Smith. *Look 1 by Milan Jeon*. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.



Figure 36. Riley Smith. *Look 2* by Milan Jeon. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.



Figure 37. Riley Smith. *Left side view of Look 2* by Milan Jeon. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.



Figure 38. Riley Smith. *Back view of Look 2 and Front view of Look 3* by Milan Jeon. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.



Fig 39. Riley Smith. *Look 3* by Milan Jeon. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.

To my surprise, despite its divergence from the standardised clothing found in the commercial fashion industry, people found the garments to be visually captivating and were fascinated by the innovative use of denim. This information was gained through conversations with the audience and other designers after the show.

The reconstructed clothing will be showcased again in a gallery setting, offering visitors close interaction with the garments. Models will wear the pieces to showcase the transformation from deconstructed jeans, while a few pieces will be on display for visitors to examine the materials and craftsmanship in more detail. Ultimately, the hope is to raise awareness around the wastefulness of mass-produced denim and encourage in viewers a renewed understanding of it. By examining the garments, viewers will have the opportunity to explore the tension between the original form, function, and ideology associated with denim jeans, as well as appreciate the materiality of the denim fabric. Following the examination, the final collection, exhibition, and reflections will be documented.

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Summary of Reflection of  
Practice:



Figure 40. Milan Jeon. *Back of Look 3* by Milan Jeon. 6 April March 2024. Photograph. Dunedin.

I had a brief but impactful experience creating fabrications guided by the philosophy of Dansaekhwa. However, I realised that it was pulling me away from my core discipline of fashion design. Nevertheless, this encounter proved to be invaluable in the later stages of my practice. It allowed me to liberate myself from any other desire or intention than to create something meaningful to me. I discovered that creating in a way that enables me to reconnect with my mind and body is a beautiful process that is enriched when it is free from human motives. This is especially pertinent in an era where technology provides us with endless information, and capitalist doctrines perpetuate the myth that more leads to greater happiness.

Consequently, my approach to materiality as the agent of my work has enabled me to see discarded denim in a new light, appreciating its materiality. Through the process of deconstructing and reconstructing, particularly through draping, I have come to appreciate and realise my craft in a new way. This has changed my perception of denim, especially in its most ubiquitous form—jeans. I have learned that the final form does not need to embody perfect finishes to be considered beautiful. There is a greater beauty and honesty in appreciating imperfection.

Overall, this has enabled me to establish a new relationship with my craft—one that facilitates a state of meditation and true presence when I am creating. In this way, I hope to create something that is refreshing and mentally challenging, awakening a sense of awareness and meaning at a personal, individual level.

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**Conclusion:**

This research is a response to the negative environmental impact of denim production and its wastefulness despite the potential for extended use of the fabric. It is crucial that we do not ignore the sustainability issues surrounding denim garments, particularly denim jeans, due to their rapid throw-away culture despite their enormous cost to the environment in production and decomposition. Fast-fashion companies' mass production of jeans comes at a cost that we cannot fully comprehend, not only on the environment but also on the people who make the garments.<sup>1</sup> By understanding the sociological, environmental, and historical contexts of denim, it is possible to embrace a fresh, unique, and personal relationship with denim and recognise the rich world of its materiality.

The process of engaging with the materiality of denim through hands-on work has led to a meditative experience of appreciating denim as a material, independent of the identity attached to denim jeans. Dansaekhwa's philosophy has offered a new perspective in appreciating the rich life remaining with denim found in the discarded denim garments from previous owners. This allowed me to value it as a textile to create something new and artful for the body.

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<sup>1</sup> Mônica Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu, Fabiana Nogueira Holanda Ferreira, and João Felipe Barbosa Araripe Silva, "To Be or Not to Be Sustainable in an Emerging Market? Conjoint Analysis of Customers' Behavior in Purchasing Denim Jeans." *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 26 (3): 452–72. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-05-2020-0097>.

The process of creating a new form contradicts the original form, function, and ideology (Skivko) of denim jeans through the deconstruction (Derrida) and reconstruction (draping, making and mending) process. Wabi-sabi serves as an aesthetic to embrace the imperfection of the ageing denim, which becomes more apparent after the denim garments undergo the deconstruction process. These traits of imperfection, such as rips, frays, and raw hems, aid in compelling the audience to observe the denim fabric's materiality, rather than focusing on the standard functionalities of garments for warmth or protection.

The imperfect aesthetic, visually apparent in my garments, aims to deconstruct the preconceived mainstreaming notions (Barnard) of denim in the audience's mind. By deconstructing preconceived notions of this ubiquitous fabric, the designs offer a fresh perspective and invite individuals to develop a deeper connection and understanding of denim's material culture. Due to the environmental concerns associated with mass production, it is essential to evoke an emotional connection with denim to promote a sustainable relationship with our clothing. Additionally, my hope is to inspire other designers to embrace denim's rich materiality and create innovative designs through recycling, thereby reinterpret and challenge its consumer-driven form, function, and ideology.

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## Appendix: Denim Deconstructed - Documentation of Exhibition

The showcased exhibition, held at the AUT WM Gallery in Auckland CBD, New Zealand from the 18th to the 22nd of July 2024, comprised three central elements. Firstly, a film was presented that showcased the interaction between the human body and the garments, emphasizing the movement and fit. Secondly, a slideshow of photographs depicted a human body adorned with the models, highlighting the sculptural aspects of the garments. Lastly, individual garments were displayed, demonstrating their detached and rearranged forms after the deconstruction and reconstruction process from second-hand discarded garments.

The primary aim of the exhibition was to evoke a novel experience for the audience, challenging them to perceive denim garments, particularly jeans, as potential subjects for innovative re-creation and recycling. The intent was to transform garment recycling into an inclusive and exhilarating practice, counteracting its misconceived status as a niche activity. Furthermore, the exhibition aimed to redefine the perception of denim's materiality, diverting attention from its luxury brand associations and showcasing the visible deconstruction of denim in the hanging garments.

The deliberate display of the garments, focusing on their sculptural drape rather than their human body-centric 3D frames, sought to emphasize the non-human perspective from which the garments were created. This emphasis on emotional connection and authenticity, as opposed to commodification or mass production, underscored the unique ethos of the exhibition.

The exhibition garnered favorable feedback, with attendees appreciating the comprehensive portrayal of the garments' lifecycle, including their pre-deconstruction appearance, the draping process, post-reconstruction forms, and interaction with the human body. These varying viewpoints effectively conveyed the conflicts between form, function, and the prevailing ideology associated with denim, especially denim jeans.

The multifaceted approach of the exhibition deconstructed conventional perceptions of denim, fostering a heightened emotional connection with denim garments to extend their utility and decrease environmental impact. The individual display of the garments allowed a deeper contemplation of their materiality and the intricate process of denim deconstruction.

VIDEO LINK: [https://youtu.be/Bdn\\_W7h1NX0](https://youtu.be/Bdn_W7h1NX0)



Appendix Figures 41, 42. Milan Jeon. *Denim Deconstructed Exhibition*. 14 June 2024. Photograph. Auckland.



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## **Denim Deconstructed: Screenshots from Exhibition Film**



Appendix Figures 43, 44, 45, 46. Jinwoo Park, *Exhibition Film for Denim Deconstructed* by Milan Jeon, 8 June 2024, Screenshots. Auckland.







# Denim Deconstructed: Lookbook Photographs

## Look 1





Look 2





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Look 3







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