

## *Marina- A Call to Save Our Ocean*

### **Byron Ashfield-Smith**

The aim of my brief was to design and produce a corset that is inspired by ocean life, and the various threats associated with humankind's impact on the ocean. Growing up in a rural Queensland town and having snorkelled reefs across Australia, I have always been fascinated by marine life, particularly due to its diverse and entirely unique nature. Over the past few years, I have become increasingly aware of the impact of human activities upon ocean ecosystems, with a large focus on over-fishing, pollution, and coral bleaching as a result of man-made climate change. Our ocean ecosystems are not only completely unique in terms of the diverse flora and fauna found beneath the surface, but the ocean and its inhabitants are fundamental in regulating the Earth's climate, yet our acceleration of climate change and overfishing are vastly wiping out underwater life, which in turn is only further increasing the dramatic warming of the Earth. It is so important to conserve these ecosystems, therefore I wanted to communicate this message in the unique format of fashion design rather than other conventional art forms such as drawing, painting or sculpting. Since many ocean creatures die as a result of pollution, such as being entangled in netting, I wanted to abstractly convey the idea of 'constriction' or 'being caught' by creating a corset, since these garments are stereotypically depicted as causing the wearer to struggle to breathe or cause pain due to the tight lacing.

To develop my concept, I first started by assembling a mood board, consisting of images which I found inspiring which mostly connected with the thematic elements of my brief, such as bleached coral, oil spills and fish caught in netting/pollution, alongside their healthier and flourishing counterparts. After doing this, I explored colour theory, specifically colour schemes and colour psychology while also investigating how it is employed within the medium of fashion design. Using my newfound knowledge of colour theory, I then selected key colours from my mood board and altered these slightly to create a split complementary colour scheme (blue-green, red, and yellow orange). This created a colour scheme which was cohesive since I used varying shades of teal blues with subtle pops of contrast using orange and red. After doing this I explored the history of corsetry to contextualise the purpose of corsets, in which I learned that the depictions of corsets within the media being dangerous are false and rooted in misogynistic stereotypes about vain women, despite corsets largely being regarded tools of the Victorian patriarchy. Upon understanding the historical view of corsetry and components of early corsets, I then began to focus through case study's, on the work of revolutionary fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen and Iris Van Herpen, both of which have explored ocean life within their respective 'Plato's Atlantis' and 'Sensory Seas' fashion shows.

After exploring these collections, I decided to apply the fundamental design motifs of their works to corsets to build a greater understanding of how these designers manipulated the design elements to produce highly effective collections of work. With this knowledge I was ready to start focusing once more on how I could construct the base of my corset by exploring different corset construction techniques, and the qualities of particular fabrics and textiles which are needed within effective corsetry. This helped me to understand the basic form and function of corsets better, so that I could achieve a strong foundation to add decorative elements on top of.

A key part of my design process was interviewing Paul Vasileff, the owner and lead designer of Paolo Sebastian - an Adelaide-based fashion design company. Within his work Vasileff focusses on traditional garment construction techniques, many of which are employed by couture fashion houses such as Dior, Chanel, Givenchy, and Schiaparelli just to name a few. During the interview, Vasileff encouraged me to further envision my theme and bring it to life through creating a collection of pieces which work together to communicate my idea.

Moreover, he showed me a behind the scenes look at his design process and techniques used to create his signature collections, such as embroidery and tambour beading. Upon leaving the interview with Vasileff, I dived into researching and applying these aforementioned techniques to create my own scene detailing, which depicts the impact of human activities upon the ocean, as demonstrated within the contrast between healthy and unhealthy marine life. Doing this also helped me to incorporate key design elements such as unity, texture, colour, and shape within my work. Moreover, I explored and applied fabric manipulation techniques reminiscent of the ocean to add variety within my embellishments. With all the knowledge I gained during this stage of my folio, I then rendered my final corset design sketch using pencil and water colour paints.

Within the conceptualisation process I did not encounter any significant issues; however my problem-solving abilities were tested throughout my practical work. My first practical piece was a ruched velvet skirt, which required me to extend my technical sewing abilities through incorporating new techniques which I had not explored before, such as ruching and draping. These were easily solved through following YouTube or web-based tutorials which taught me the basics that I could then apply to my own work. I then decided to create a headpiece and a makeup look to build my collection of pieces, which required me to understand the mechanics behind headpiece construction, particularly methods to balance and distribute weight within large headpieces as I was using heavy embellishments such as shells and branches. Upon completing smaller practical pieces, I began the mammoth task of producing my corset, by first creating a mock-up or toile as they are referred to within fashion design. To do this I explored pattern grading techniques to create a custom-fit corset, rather than using a generic corset pattern. This meant that I needed to learn new skills which I was able to pick up with a little bit of trial and error. I decided to test the pattern by creating a corset using a double-layer construction technique, however I found that this mock-up did not fit correctly and was a bit too bulky for my liking, so I decided to change to a single-layer corset construction technique and adjust the first pattern. After fixing the issues within the mock-up I created my corset by first constructing the base. This was quite time consuming as it was meticulous work, much of which required hand stitching during certain steps. I then began the largest, most-time consuming part of my corset construction which was creating the embroidery motifs for the scene detailing. Since I was using couture hand embroidery techniques, this process took a substantial amount of time to complete. After adding my motifs to the corset, alongside further bead and sequin work I put my practical pieces on a mannequin and identified missing components, such as adding a train and netting to the back of the velvet skirt to help communicate my theme. During this process I also added beads to the skirt which read 'Save the Ocean', which further reinforced my concept.

Since my concept by nature focused on the idea of sustainability, it was important for me to integrate sustainable practices within my work to reduce the impact that my work would have upon the environment. To achieve this, I bought materials second-hand where I could, such as on Facebook marketplace or within Op-shops. Moreover, within my actual corset construction I used a single-layer technique which helped me to reduce the amount of fabric scraps/waste I was producing, which in turn helped me to incorporate sustainability within my practice. All my beadwork and embroidery were done using second-hand beads and embroidery thread, while the shells I was able to source from the beach. I also knew that I wanted to use netting within my design however it was important to me not to buy netting as nets are highly unsustainable and make up most of the pollution within the ocean. Eventually after inquiring with people who regularly collect beach trash and sell it on Facebook marketplace to be reused, I was able to find some old crab nets which I recycled into my design by cutting and spraying the netting gold to be used for embellishment. Moreover, rather than using steel bones, I used sturdy industrial zip ties that I had at home for the corset bones. Furthermore, another effect of incorporating sustainability was a reduction in costs required to complete my work, since I was recycling and reusing old products.

I was able to achieve a highly effective body of work which addressed my brief and communicated the importance of preserving marine life and reducing human impacts on ocean ecosystems. To achieve this, I worked meticulously and literally put hundreds of hours into my construction process, which definitely paid off. In my opinion my work far exceeds that of a high school level as my diligence, physical application of couture techniques such as corsetry, beadwork and embroidery, alongside in-depth conceptualisation makes my work truly unique and highly memorable.