THE OLD-SCHOOL HIGH-TECH OF *LOWRIDE*

Around the corner from where I used to live when working in New York at the end of 2009, there is a Brooklyn house with pineapples on the gateposts. On a recent visit to the neighborhood, I learnt that the pineapple has for a long time been the symbol of hospitality and welcome. I had no idea about this when sending the invitations for the *Vacuum* showroom – which were thus even more meaningful than I knew at the time.

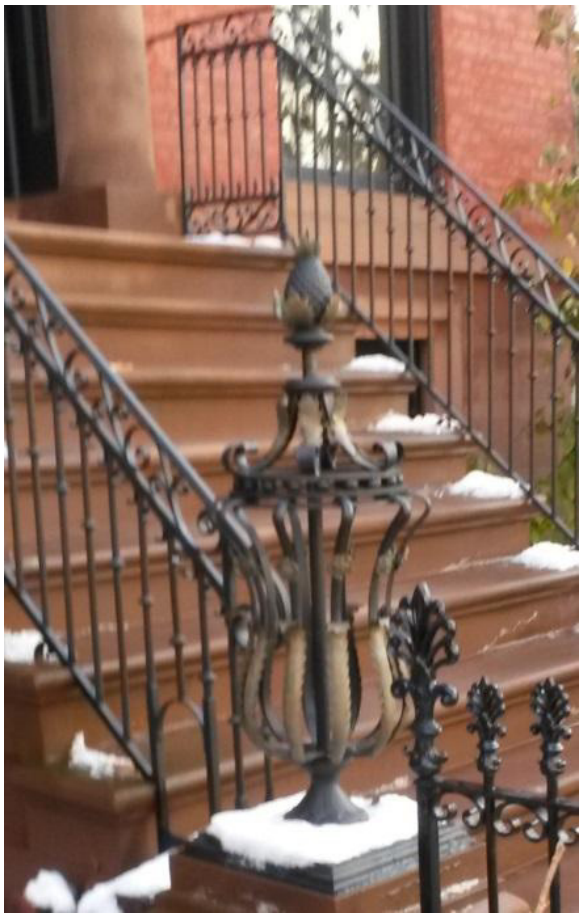


Image 61. Pineapple symbol on a Brooklyn porch

This may be no more than a silly anecdote, but it illustrates the associative jumping back and forth of the thought processes and decisions underlying and surrounding design, its presentation, its practice, and its interpretation. The collection following *Vacuum* shows this again in the choice of materials, the search for inspiration sources, and the conceptual link with earlier collections.

Old-school high-tech

The bankruptcy of my pleating company was a shock at first. I spent some time exploring the possibilities of alternative directions in the search for suitable replacement materials. I was inclined to think in the direction of recent high-tech developments, and I spent a significant amount of time evaluating the options – to the extent that I could grasp their implications. When looking at new developments in textiles, there are at least two orientations to consider. The first one involves *smart fibers and fabrics* or so-called *intelligent or functional textiles*. Put simply, what these terms refer to amounts to wearable computers which somehow, with the help of processors and sensors, interact with the wearer and the wearer's needs. In addition to military, law-enforcement, and emergency service applications, the most advanced ones relate to usefulness in caregiving settings: old people's pulse or respiration can be monitored, for instance, by the smart clothes they wear, which can then also activate a call for help if necessary. Systems are developed that work on the basis of various combinations of stimulus and response parameters (electrical, magnetic, optical, thermal, mechanical; see Hooper 2014). This is no longer science fiction, and the possibilities are virtually endless, in spite of limitations set by affordability (and the washing machine test). These possibilities, however, are predominantly defined in terms of purely practical functionalities. This is so far removed from my concern with aesthetics and the feel and texture of clothes, that I never seriously considered experimenting in this direction. Minor detail: doing so would also have been outside the range of my capacities and budget; smart textile development is an elaborate and collaborative industrial undertaking.

A second direction, which I did consider for a while, was *3D printing*. Impressive ' wearable sculptures' have been produced with this rapid prototyping or additive manufacturing technique by Daniel Widrig (see http://www.danielwidrig.com/) and Iris Van Herpen (see http://www.irisvanherpen.com/). I was greatly intimidated by the advances already made in this field, by the technical know-how it requires, by the need to collaborate with engineers or programmers (and the corresponding costs). At the same time, the distant promise of a solution to problems I had experienced with pleating and folding techniques earlier, was appealing. Moreover, in spite of the somewhat cold look of the pieces I had already seen, there seemed to be more than enough possibilities to experiment with diverse substances to produce softness and flexibility. So I decided to contact a representative of an

important 3D-printing company. I first explained my background as a designer who liked making use of folded, wearable, and washable textiles that kept their shape. I also talked about my Japanese pleating company, the hand-made paper molds they created, the steam oven with which the desired shapes were made exclusively in thin polyester, the problems related to the time it took to make the molds, to the limited number of times a mold could be used, and to the limited maximum size of one piece of textile folded in this manner. This immediately implied a number of goals to be achieved with an alternative manufacturing technique, and a number of very specific questions:

- Would it be possible to use 3D printing to construct a mold which
    - would last longer in a comparable steam oven under similarly high temperatures
    - and would allow for the production of larger pieces of textile?
- Or would it be possible to simply forget about molds and steam ovens and to directly ' print' the kinds of textiles I had in mind, in large pieces, with a lasting folded effect?
- Would it be possible to do so in non-polyester materials?
- Would it be possible to print so-called 'placement pleats' which, unlike the repetitive structures produced with a mold, could be developed for a specific part of a specific design, in a way that would be integrated (unlike 'accessories') with the basic piece of textile used in the garment in question?

At the request of the company representative, I also formulated my questions in writing, asking him to contact me again for further consultation as soon as possible. I did not hear from him again. Probably I should have insisted, but I decided to move on, for the time being, as clearly solutions were not forthcoming at the speed at which they would have been useful for the next step in my design project. (But see Chapter 8 for a change of fortune.)

Thus, under the pressure of the circumstances, instead of embracing new technologies in a hurry, I continued my exploration of textile options of proven quality and sustainability. Therefore, for my following collection I used light cotton fabrics, cotton twills, mixtures of cotton and silk, raw brushed denims, and slow woven jersey. But I added a real *old-school high-tech* product, namely *rokuyon*, a Japanese type of cotton moleskin.

Moleskin is a roughed-up heavy cotton fabric that has been around since the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was produced in the East Lancashire and West Yorkshire districts of England. Like corduroy and velveteen, it is a so-called 'fustian' fabric which is softened on one side by raising fibers from the underlying material, but without the ribbed structure of corduroy. In addition to its softness, reminiscent of the silky fur of a mole, it is

known for its durability, washability, and for its being windproof (though not water resistent). These qualities made it a favorite for garments for heavy outdoor usage: farmers' trousers, hunting jackets, even shirts, and sometimes army wear.

Image 62. Typical cotton moleskin surface

The best varieties of moleskin are so tightly woven – sometimes over 400 threads per inch – that the process exerts so much stress on the weaving loom that most modern looms are unfit for producing them. Therefore, there are just a few mills left, either with older high-strength looms or with especially reinforced ones, where moleskin is made. Like with the slow jersey weaving which I described in Chapter 4, Japan is one of the few places where this textile is still manufactured today.

Images 63 and 64. Two versions of the Crisp Blazer, cotton moleskin.

In search of basic codes

The blazers in Images 63 and 64 have little in common with the traditional uses to which cotton moleskin was most frequently put in the past. Yet, there is nothing out-of-the-ordinary in the design. On the contrary, for my next collection I was consciously looking for the banal, for commonplace everyday shapes and occurrences. I was looking for inspiration in Nina Leen's rather pedestrian photographs of American women and adolescents in the 1940's and 50's, in school uniforms, and in British Teddy girls from the 1950's. Except for the school uniforms, I realized that my impression of the two other sources of inspiration was seriously anachronistic. The American women photographed by Neena Leen were far from ordinary at the time. And the Teddy girls in Images 65 and 66, dressed in a style similar to the Edwardian attire of their male contemporaries, the Teddy boy gangs, were consciously cultivating their looks to challenge established norms. But norms have changed, and what was meant to shock at the time (to such an extent that warnings could be found such as "Youths wearing Edwardian dress will not be admitted to the dances"[1]) has become 'normal' or ordinary. The challenge was to find some basic codes to transform a normality or ordinariness that had been

[1] See http://www.messynessychic.com/2013/02/10/the-forgotten-1950s-girl-gang/ (last consulted 23/01/2014).

around for a long time (even if not felt to be ordinary or normal throughout) into something more modern, more abstract, lighter, more subtle, with 'relaxed' volumes and more depth. This is why the collection was called *Lowride*, a word evoking – though by no means describing or explaining – my design goals, and associatively linked with a musical composition by the same name I was frequently listening to while working on the collection, found on the 1993 debut album *Incunabula* by the electronic music group Autechre.

Images 65 and 66. Ken Russell pictures of Teddy girls, 1950's Notting Hill, London

The codes I needed for *Lowride* were in the first place simple visual principles that would be given substance and depth by the durable and comfortable textiles I had chosen, by

their texture and their color. Subtracting the material substance, texture (as described in Chapter 4), tone and color (see Chapter 5), the basic visual properties that remain are *dots* (as minimal visual units), *lines* (as articulators of form), *shapes*, *direction*, *scale* (or proportion), *dimension*, and *motion*.[2] Along all of these parameters, a designer can aim at contrast or harmony. But these two notions are themselves multilayered, and depending on the layer of meaning (or technique) involved, a single design project may tend towards different sides of this opposition. Using the distinctions made by Dondis (1973, p. 16) I would characterize my ambitions for *Lowride* as follows, underscoring the side of each opposition that corresponds most closely to what I wanted to achieve:

(CONTRAST)	(HARMONY)
Instability	Balance
Asymmetry	Symmetry
Irregularity	Regularity
Complexity	Simplicity
Fragmentation	Unity
Intricacy	Economy
Exaggeration	Understatement
Spontaneity	Predictability
Activeness	Stasis
Boldness	Subtlety
Accent	Neutrality
Transparency	Opacity
Variation	Consistency
Distortion	Accuracy
Depth	Flatness
Juxtaposition	Singularity
Randomness	Sequentiality
Sharpness	Diffusion
Episodicity	Repetition

Many aspects of the visual statement I was trying to make are easy to see in the technical drawings for *Lowride* (Image 67).

[2] What follows relies heavily on a forty years old book on principles of visual literacy that has not lost any of its relevance (Dondis 1973).

Image 67. Technical drawings for *Lowride*

The overall visual impression is one of harmony, with an emphasis on simple, balanced, symmetrical and even repetitive regularity, unity, sequentiality and consistency. Lines are mostly sharp and accented, demanding sewing with great accuracy, and giving the design its transparency. The singularity of each piece is economically understated and subtle; the few asymmetries (in breast pockets) are by no means obvious. Depth, spontaneity and activity cannot be read from the dots, lines, and shapes, but emerge only in combination with the textiles, their texture, tone and color. The *direction* of *dots* and *lines* is predominantly vertical. *Shapes* are rounded at the outer edges of the garments, predominantly square for all other attributes, interspersed with a few triangular elements. What cannot be seen in the technical drawings is the *scale* (requiring an impression of the relationship of an object with its environment), the *dimension* (though it is clear that the average human body sets the standard), or *movement* (which requires an actual body wearing the garments). Briefly, the basic visual codes for this collection are simple and subtle.

Technical drawings are particularly useful to represent the analytical properties of a design concept. But to get to the 'meaning' of a design's composition (in a sense approximating what would count as such in Kress & van Leeuwen's 2006 account of visual design), the multimodal embedding of the visual codes must be seen and appreciated. Consider Image 68.

Image 68. Blizzard Coat from the *Lowride* collection

Here the design of the Blizzard Coat, schematically presented in the upper left corner of Image 67, loses all of its 'basicness'. Here we see a garment made by a traditional tailor on Japan, with some hand-finishing detailing and richness (and to be handled with care – for dry-cleaning only). Added modalities are not only the rich textile and color and the delicate craftsmanship, but also the wearer of the coat, the carefully styled combinaton with other garments, the background, and – last but not least – the tongue-in-cheek name: wearing the coat in a blizzard is not highly recommended, even if *Lowride* is a Fall/Winter collection.

Design in its surroundings

When commenting about the visual dimension of *scale*, Dondis (1973, p. 56) says: "Scale can be established not only through the relative size of visual clues, but also through relationships to the field or the environment." Maybe this is the fundamental reason why visual coding can be kept minimal: the environment may do the rest. This idea always reminds me of one of my favorite Japanese retail companies, MUJI, and Kyoto University's Professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory, Hiroshi Yoshioka, explains why:

> "The name 'MUJI' is the first part of 'Mujirushi'(no-brand), but it also is an everyday Japanese word meaning 'no pattern' or 'no figure'when we talk about clothing. Absence of a sign can itself work as a powerful sign when surrounded by other signs. In a similar manner, lack of design may itself be a new and highly sophisticated design when considered in the context of competing designs." (Yoshioka 2013)

In design, without the right environment, nothing really 'works'. This is no doubt an experience that moved to the foreground while working on *Lowride*. Looking for literature around this theme soon leads to Gallagher's (1993) *The Power of Place.* As Gallagher points out, environment is not only spatial but also temporal. Temporal environment, moreover, is cyclical, and cyclicity is too often forgotten. This observation has a three-fold relevance for fashion. First of all, patterns, aesthetic norms, and tastes have a tendency to return at regular or irregular intervals, and so do preferences of techniques and materials. With *Lowride* I clearly embedded my own design in a form of cyclicity by falling back on old-school high-tech solutions. Second, in the field of fashion seasonal fluctuations should be obvious. Seasons in fashion, however, are sometimes merely commercial habits that have lost their soul. That is

why some designers courageously try to break the pattern by detaching their creations from this commercial cycle. But maybe they miss the point: following seasons should be much less a matter of mechanical market patterns than a genuine attempt to get a design tuned in with a moment in time. No doubt, there is creativity involved in getting placement and timing right – which is why I felt rather satisfied when looking at the silhouette in Image 69, a simple but balanced picture breathing the air of a mild autumn or winter.

Image 69. *Lowride*'s Fuse Sweatshirt, Fuse Hat, and Gentleman Jeans

Third, the best-made clothes carry temporality in them. Thus my denim pieces, for instance, are accompanied by the following information for the wearer: "This garment is made from organic wool denim (or, in the case of cotton denim: from authentic Japanese selvage denim)

from Okayama prefecture, which is known for producing the best Japanese denim; the fabric will age beautifully." In other words, the prospect of ageing is part of the design.

Gallagher connects such ideas to the Chinese notion and practice of *feng shui*, a method – based on art, psychology, folklore, and common sense – of "harmonizing people and places" (Gallagher 1993, p. 141) by balancing internal states with external environments. *Feng shui* practitioners, whose principles attract architects and designers, are "convinced that when it comes to stimulation levels in the modern world, within the bounds of reason, less is more" (Gallagher 1993, p. 144). This should be reminiscent of Yoshioka's account of MUJI design. And it also reminds us of the Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic which emphasizes simplicity and austerity, even roughness, in its ideal of 'flawed' beauty (an ideal which is nowadays also championed for the rich by interior decorators such as Axel Vervoordt).

Looking at the role of spatial environments, there are two opposing dimensions involved: there are large spaces or landscapes, but there are also small and intimate spaces. Both are important for design and its surroundings. Just compare Image 69 with Images 70 to 73.

Images 70 to 73. More *Lowride* garments

As Spirn (1998) tells us, there is a language of landscape that must be understood in order for an architect to successfully build anything. In much the same way, a designer must ask how clothes fit into a landscape which, in my case, is mostly urban. While there are trees in the background in Image 69, the picture is clearly taken in a city context. And even if the stone structure which the girl is sitting on cannot be identified by the viewer, it clearly suggests implicit story lines that the design is connected to. The picture also shows that landscape is not just 'scenery':

> "To see landscape as mere scenery gives precedence to appearance at the expense of habitability and risks trivializing landscape as decoration – landscaping – concealing the significance of senses other than sight and of parts hidden from view, the deep context underlying the surface." (Spirn 1998, p. 24)

Design, like architecture, joins an ongoing dialogue between its products and the world they fit into. Garments should ideally provide relevant responses, avoid rude interruptions, while making a real contribution by somehow standing out while blending in. If this is the purpose, it does not only apply to large spatial environments, but also to intimate spaces. It is those that

are illustrated in Images 70 to 73, images that illustrate Bachelard's (1994) view of the house as a place for daydreaming, a place for imagination, to which I would add: clothes must support imaginings of the self, and they do so inside as well as outside. Focusing on the experience, inside and outside are of course never complete opposites. They are connected, by doors for instance, but maybe even more by the essential intimacy of clothes that is preserved throughout, no matter whether outer circumstances serve as incentives to put on or take off extra layers.

Image 74. Sunday sweatdress

Image 75. Flou shirtdress

Blending out

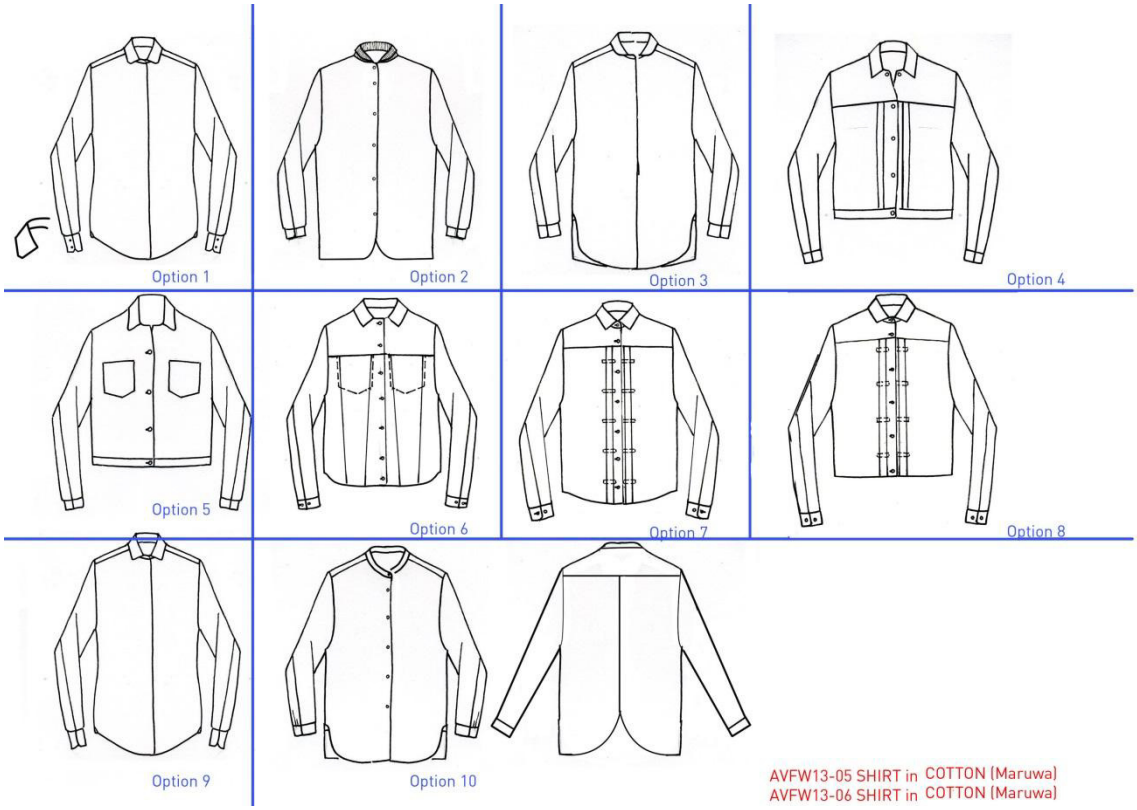
When asked to describe my 'style', I have always been hesitant to do so. How can a beginning designer pretend to really have a style? Is it possible to do anything but searching? The foregoing paragraphs, however, may get as close as I ever will to an adequate account of what I am doing when doing fashion design. Could 'blending out' be an accurate characterization of my design ambitions? A combination of blending in while standing out, or standing out while blending in? Images 74 and 75 may certainly suggest this. They also illustrate how the principle applies both inside and outside.

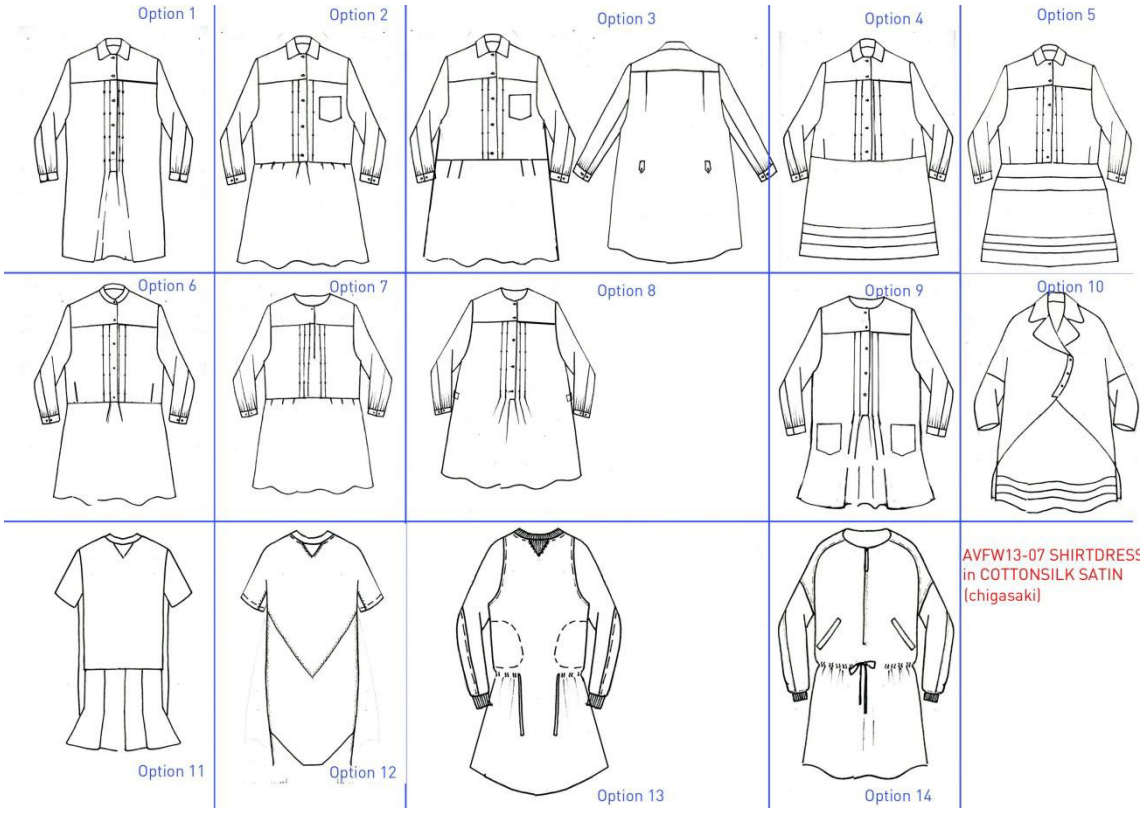
If this interpretation is correct, by this point it may be clear that my design has started to lead a life of its own, to follow its own logic, a logic that leads back to the original project as I conceived it when starting a doctoral program, while at the same time departing from it or even positioning itself in opposition to that original formulation. The experience is similar to what Spirn (1998, p. 8) describes in the following terms:

> "I use practice to develop and test theory, and theory to critique practice, alternating between engagement and detachment, passion and dispassion. Making things happen is a messy process full of unforeseen obstacles and opportunities, disappointments and joys. Unexpected events challenge theory, demand revision; refined, theory holds."

In the following chapter, I will try to sketch how I tried to further develop a logic of fashion design in a fifth collection, *Pulse*, the last one to fully figure in the search recounted in this book.

Sketching for *Lowride*


Option 1
Option 2
Option 3
Option 4
Option 5
Option 6
Option 7
Option 8
Option 9
Option 10
AVFW13-05 SHIRT in COTTON (Maruwa)
AVFW13-06 SHIRT in COTTON (Maruwa)


Option 1
Option 2
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Option 10
Option 11
Option 12
Option 13
Option 14
AVFW13-07 SHIRTDRESS
in COTTONSILK SATIN
(chigasaki)


Option 1
Option 2
Option 3
Option 4
Option 5
Option 6
Option 7
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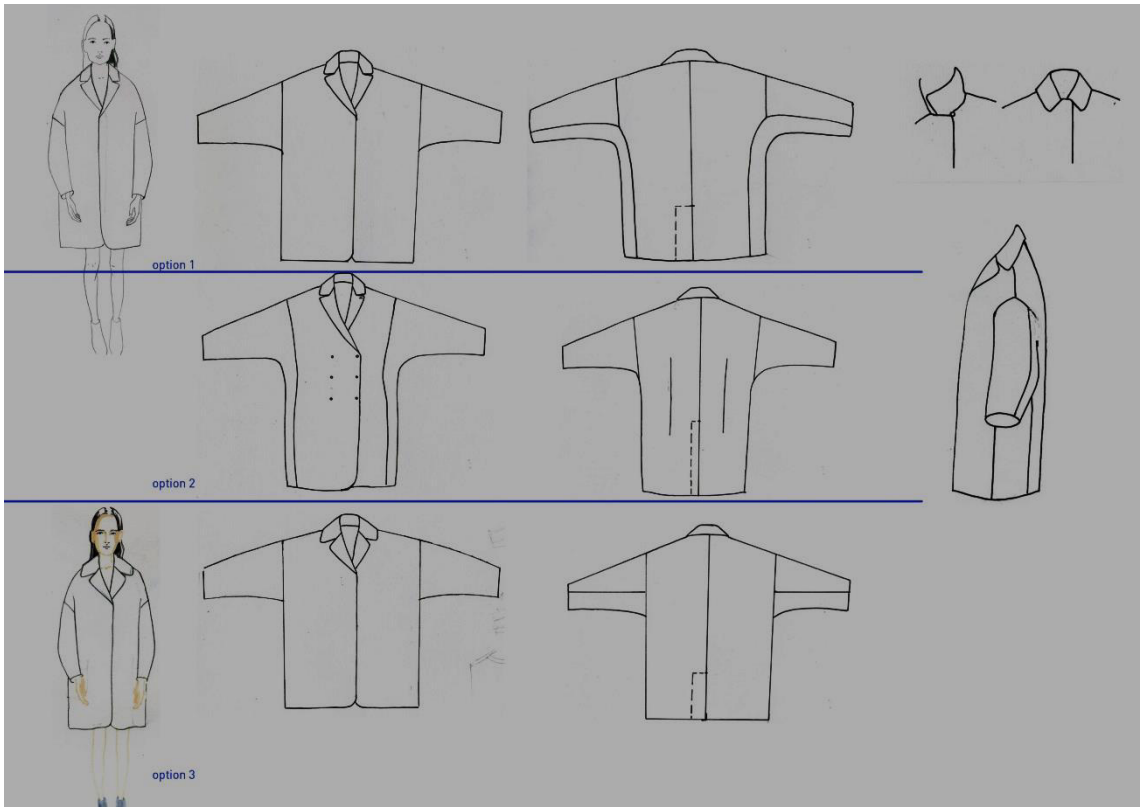
Option 10
Option 11
Option 12
Option 13
Option 14
AVFW13-13: SWEAT DRESS in TOK-I-SENI
SLOW WOVEN SWEAT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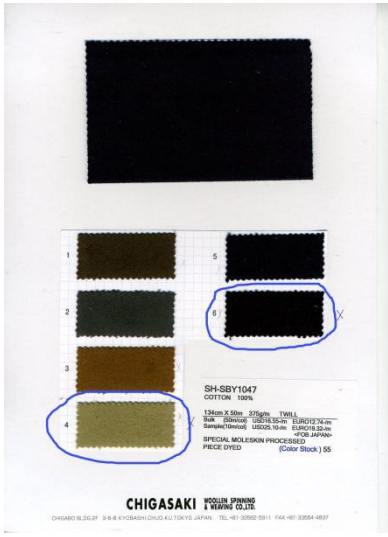
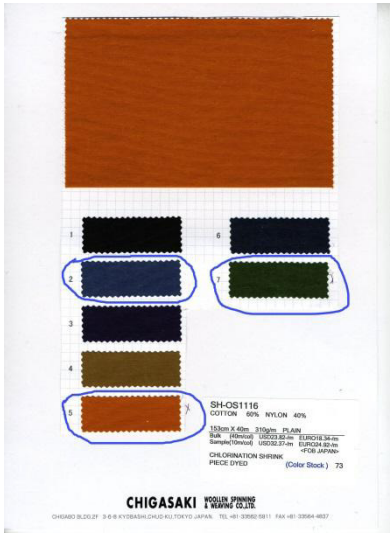
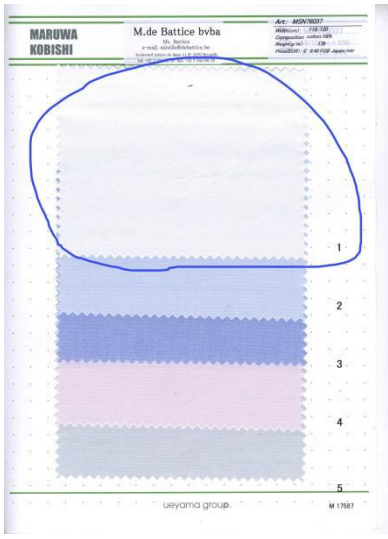
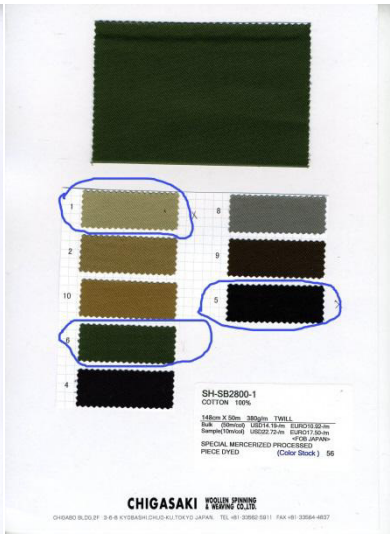
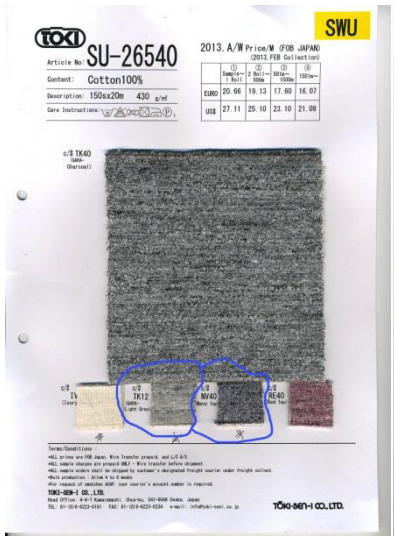
Fabric scans for *Lowride*











Lowride showroom invitation

Lowride on diplay (Opening Ceremony, Japan)

More *Lowride* looks