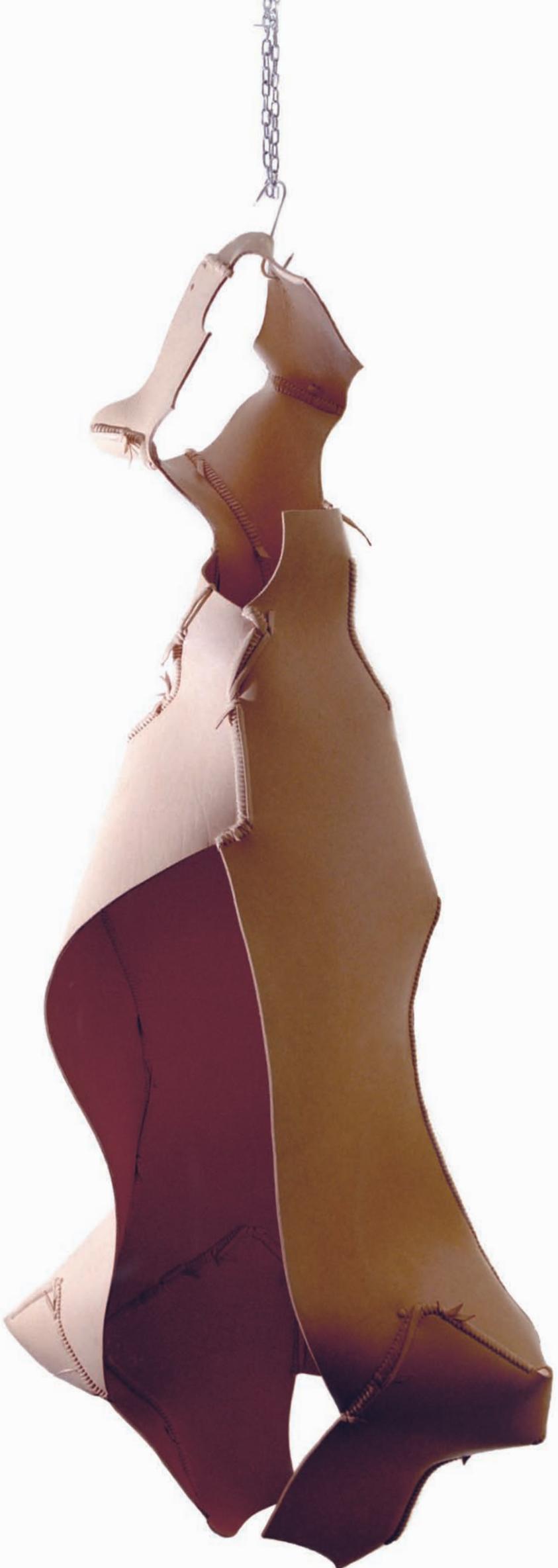


Carapace / Dai Rees / CURATED BY JUDITH CLARK



# Excess Surface / BY JUDITH CLARK

Dai Rees draws our attention to definitions by defying one. Gone is the political mantle of craftsman in support of all those working behind the scenes; behind the scenes of fashion, a world that he inhabited between 1996 and 2002. It seems now more like he was avoiding the definition designer, he was clearly reluctant to be pinned down to one medium. His skillful apprenticeship within different media, so closely associated with a perfection acquired through repetition of techniques did not guarantee this is where he would remain. He has been a ceramicist, a welder, a milliner. He was in 2003 awarded a fellowship by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain where he took the extraordinary step of teaching himself a new art, that of Marquetry – a process so at odds with the speed and slickness associated with recent fashion, one that both cleverly acknowledges the idea of a new patronage of the arts, and one that apparently goes back to its roots in 16th century Florence.

Marquetry is the craft of forming a decorative panel of veneers composed of shaped sections of wood veneer (sometimes including bone or ivory, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl or pewter, brass and fine metals) and applying it to a structural carcass. Marquetry elaborated upon Florentine techniques of inlaying solid marble slabs with designs formed of fitted marbles, jaspers and semi-precious stones. Rees has revisited this technique transferring its process to leather. The exhibition, Carapace, is the first time that the work that has been produced under the research title of Patronage, Artisan, Media and Audience: A Model for Twenty-First Century Craftsmanship' has been shown.

This project reveals him to be inescapably a conceptual artist with the added luxury of being able to incorporate his more personal technical skills. Avoiding the applied of applied art has freed him to make connections that would otherwise be impossible, or inconceivable. Despite the clarity of their historical references so eloquently spelled out by

Jennifer Higgin in this catalogue, the 8 pieces exhibited in Carapace are neither nostalgic nor are they about nostalgia. Dai Rees as an artist is at the forefront of the British avant-garde and yet the label of craftsman he defends so adamantly is often at odds with our assumptions about his extraordinary sense of design, and his unique intuitions about fashion.

In these dramatic pieces he has entitled 'Carapace', Rees questions what happens when we have an excess of surface. A Carapace protects, it also resists outside influence. We are seduced by the delicate leather floral decoration, and fascinated by its difficulty. What kind of deformations occur when the surface becomes armature and it is abstracted from the body, this is always Rees's starting point. The viewer is simultaneously reassured that the new shapes look rather like the carcass of a cow or a horse, preferring this to more human resemblances and distortions. They are for example reminiscent of Francis Bacon's blurring away from the recognisable figure.

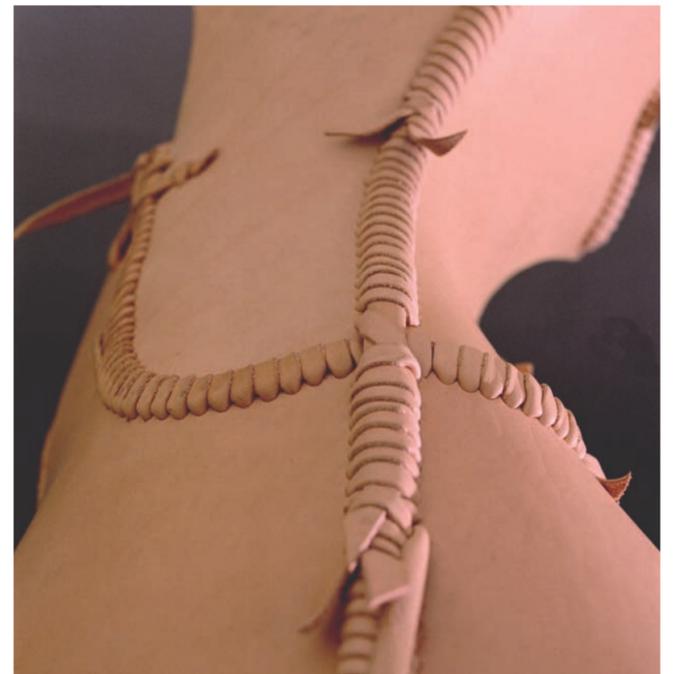
The pieces in fact form a very deliberate sequence; the first carries with it more recognisable sections of tailoring, subsequently a 1950's gown is made up in leather and pieces that are increasingly abstract: neck pieces are derived from a bodice pattern, a yolk has broguing which hung high against the light becomes almost a halo. Their individual titles are importantly suggestive: Casings 1-8, 5 is divided into 'Mother and Child' and 6-8 are a 'Triptych'. The progression is not from sketch to finished object – but almost the other way round – a more recognisable shape becomes less so – more finished within its own terms but also therefore more literally conceptual. Seams become more like scars, sometimes perfectly laced, otherwise stitched with surgical linen. Scars on the outside protect the finest hand painted marquetry inlay on the inside. The paraphernalia of the meat market, the hooks that measure the weight and worth of the meat refer to a wholly different set of practices.

Dress patterns shrink and expand through successive applications of darting, unneeded material gets folded away. Rees's shapes become non-malleable as the leather veneer is built up through lamination. As the surface is constructed he moves further away from the predictable silhouette inherent in the paper 'fashion' pattern- his point of departure – and by doing this he creates an apparent disfigurement. (We are reminded of prosthetics). If we forget that the 2D paper dress pattern would eventually be worn on an ideal body, the shapes are free to be reconfigured. So when the finished shape emerges what we are faced with is a deformed body, more akin to the Bellmer dolls that appear so alien to the marquetry handbooks in Rees's studio, the atelier on the roof of London College of Fashion's Golden Lane site.

There was a sense in which the installation created itself – the hooks and chains, that are supplied to any butchers shop in London have long been Rees's preferred method of hanging his work, creating the centre of gravity, or axis of symmetry, the chain hanging down like an imagined spine, a reminder of the weave of fabric marked so clearly on dress patterns. What I saw in the work from a curatorial point of view was the necessity of not distorting Rees's distortions, or trusting the impulses in the work but at the same time linking the work with a possible critique of fashion and the display of dress.

George L. Legendre's work made me think of the essential unwearability of Rees's pieces. Confronted with the unwearable, objects which draw attention to fashion theory, precisely because they dispense with the desire to own or wear them, and depend on our ability to read or understand them, we have to reconsider the meaning of 'Carapace' and 'Casings'. Rees's work is a proof of what Legendre has called superficial space.<sup>1</sup>

Note: 1. IJP The Book of Surface's George Liaropoulos-Legendre, Architectural Association 2003, p.13



Casings 6 (details)

Laminated leather, with leather lacing, Dai Rees, 2006



Casings 3

Laminated hand dyed leather,  
leather lacing with leather marquetry  
inlay (detail, left) butchers hook and  
stainless steel chain  
Dai Rees, 2006

# Misapplications / BY GEORGE L. LEGENDRE

Sometime in the spring of 2006, fashion curator Judith Clark sent me an email to let me know that Dai Rees, an artist living and working in London, had seemingly ‘responded to our brief’. It took me a brief moment to figure out what she meant. Judith was simply referring to the slim title *Bodyline: The End of our Meta-Mechanical Body*, which featured a collection of drawing studies released by AA Publications earlier that year, along with the commentary and briefs I had originally written for the AA architecture students who contributed to the publication.

When a couple of weeks later I called on Dai’s studio to see it for myself, I immediately realised that Judith’s invitation had been prescient in an unexpected sort of way: the work in progress was extraordinary, and its starting point clearly similar to ours; but it was also clear that something about it was somewhat alien to our own experiment. This was not a matter of discussing the merits of individual achievement, of course (the exploratory diagrams of my students were no match for Dai’s mature art), but an unexpected opportunity to reflect on the scope of our disciplines at large: to assess the objective of the artist versus that of the architect; or the power of the maker, versus that of the draughtsman.

That is not an easy task. For all our good intentions, truly interdisciplinary projects are, in fact, rather rare. Surely there are architects who take an interest in dress, and fashion designers who study the form of buildings, but in both cases the overlap is limited and partial: those who look to other disciplines for inspiration won’t grapple directly with the potential (and difficulties) of the unknown field; rather, they will transpose its perceived qualities into some idiom of their own, to attain the synthesis (or compromise) we usually call interdisciplinary. The relation between Dai’s work and Kun-Min Kim’s *Bodyline* pattern included in this catalogue is of an altogether different sort. This

is chiefly because our pattern studies are not the work of architects seeking inspiration from pattern-making, but the work of architects seeking to produce patterns themselves. The result is therefore very literally similar to its source of cross-disciplinary inspiration, and it is this similarity which guarantees, paradoxically, that a rigorous term-to-term comparison will expose the essential differences underneath. Conversely, this working comparison relies on the special nature of Dai’s own art: had it not broken free from the confines of its own field to meet our endeavours halfway across the spectrum, not much sense could be made of the apparent likeness between us (and our profound differences would have undoubtedly been lost). Along with a genuine appreciation for Dai’s unique art, I very much value these differences, and I would like to point them out.

Starting with the similarities, I was extremely surprised (dumbfounded really) to find out that in some cases, Dai too begins with a ready-made pattern. For a professional who knows so much about the technique of pattern-making, the choice of an incidental pattern as a starting point of exploration seems perplexing at first. Yet, on second thoughts, it makes a lot of sense: Dai’s art is one of détournement, or subversion, misuse, and recasting of given techniques: thus a conventional point of departure like the use of a found, semi-generic pattern will only sharpen the focus on the transformation applied to it – the true objective of the said endeavour – at the expense of the inherent form and quality of the pattern itself. Hence, his is a truly instrumental exploration, in which syntactic operations rule. Like all great art – and the philosophy underpinning the amateur experiments of *Bodyline* – Dai’s work is instrumental and reflexive: it seems to be calling attention to itself and its own syntax, whose awareness is systematically heightened by the ‘misapplication’ and subversion of rules, as well as the refusal of familiar moves: we get a spinal seam

shifted from the centre-back of a 1950s dress and applied in tandem with a dart; the ‘lacing’ technique of saddlery reappearing in the guise of an elaborate –and seemingly misplaced– shoulder seam; several layers of leather dyed and laminated to produce an inlaid pattern of leather marquetry; and so on. But subversion does not apply only to technique: it also colours our basic perception and understanding of the finished piece as such, which is neither a garment, nor a body fragment, but something in between. Furthermore, the use of leather (which is skin), in tandem with its tall proportions, makes the piece look and feel like animal flesh; this strong image exemplifies Dai’s singular inspiration and distinguishes it from the rest (for all their occasional resemblance to the body, the corresponding trials of *Bodyline* remained decidedly anthropomorphic).

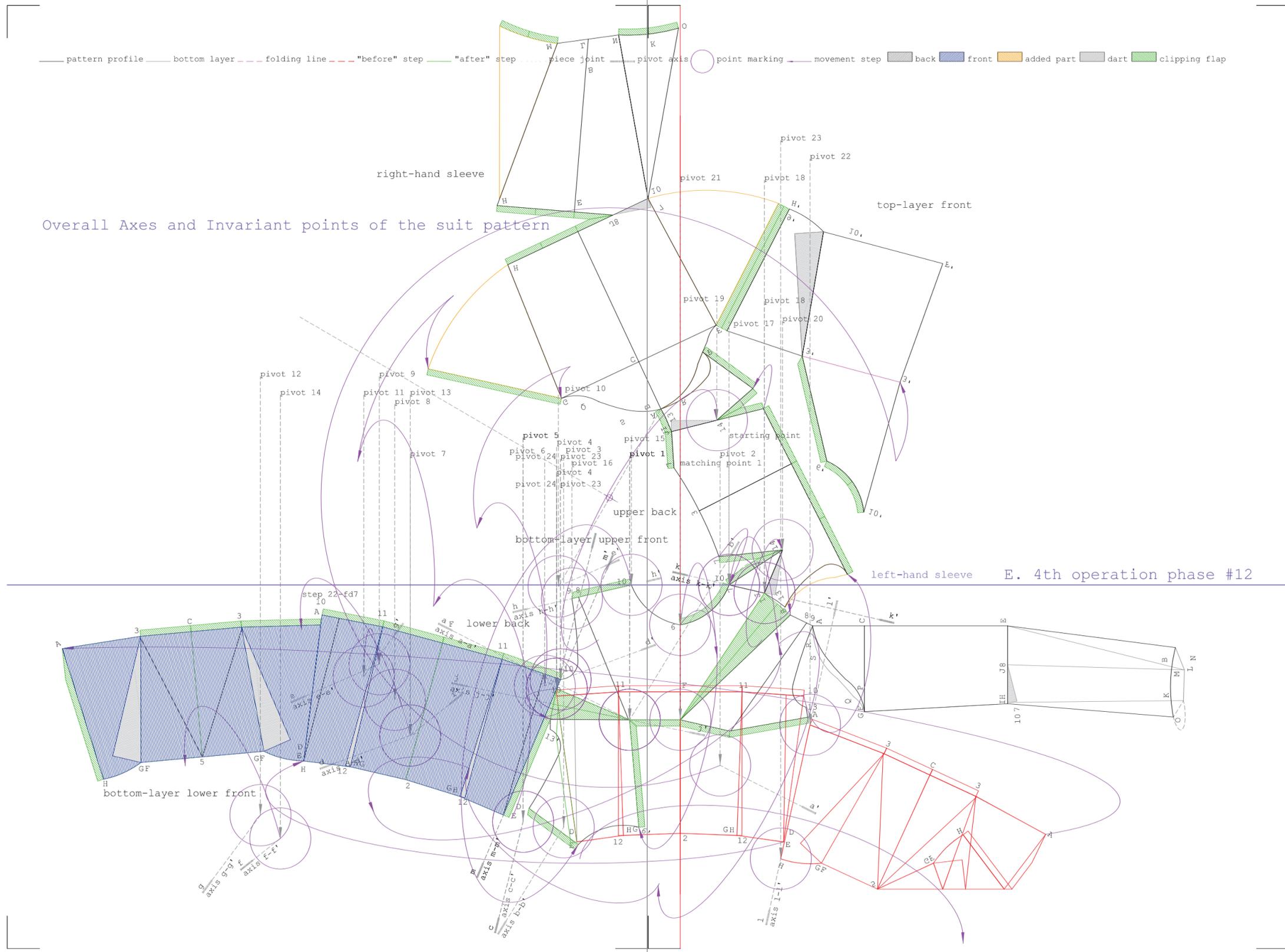
Yet the greatest difference between Dai’s art and our own ‘misapplications’ of pattern cutting has to do with the impact of materiality. Unlike ours, Dai’s work is profoundly physical, and its aura depends on the singular harnessing of material effect. When looking at his work, one experiences the weight of the chosen material, its pliancy, and the physicality of first-grade leather patches dyed to a dark shade. While roaming in his studio, I looked in vain for pencilled annotations, or any mark on the preparatory patterns that would betray some kind of abstract intention on the part of the artist, far removed from the direct, empirical manipulation of the material itself. I could not find many, which is hardly surprising: Dai knows the properties of leather and does not need to pre-rationalize its eventual alteration, in writing or otherwise. And in his own words, he even ‘relies on chance’, which is the privilege of the empiricist who will ‘try things out’. The diagrams of *bodyline* work the other way around: they illustrate a rationalist strategy of pre-defined alterations, developed a-priori and independently of the very qualities of the material to which they are eventually applied (our own material,

which is plain paper, is simply chosen for its ease of use and lack of physical resistance to folding). Unlike Dai’s, our patterns are therefore all annotation, and no matter.

What does that mean then? Since a pattern is, after all, nothing but a prop, i.e. a means to making a garment and not the garment itself, it would appear from my modest comparison that we are more interested in the status of the work in progress than in the final result. This is true. We are architects, and despite the common misconceptions about the true finality of our profession, the fact is that we do not build things, we just draw them (which is hard enough as it is). We do not, in other words, experience the urge to figure something out by material means, as Dai – an artist and a maker at heart – is doing so well. Our anxiety is to consign a thought to some form of writing, to encapsulate it into signs and symbols, so that others may cope, as Nabokov once wrote, with the ‘blessed shiver’ of the original idea. Our ‘architectural’ emphasis on the work in progress has its advantages too. In this case it allows us, for instance, to truly appreciate the reflexive and syntactic qualities of Dai’s consummate art. In my latest discussion with him, I even got the feeling that, by choosing to leave at least one piece unfinished (and exhibiting it as such), he would not be averse to the ultimate celebration of the instrumental nature of his work. Doing so would be anathema to the artist and craft person he undoubtedly is – and a boon to the lover of his work’s instrumental essence. Having already subverted the use of traditional crafts and techniques, as well as the corresponding perceptions of garment and flesh, he could now subvert the finality of his own artistic endeavour – and give out the secrets of the great conjuror along the way.

— pattern profile — bottom layer — folding line — "before" step — "after" step — piece joint — pivot axis — point marking — movement step — back — front — added part — dart — clipping flap

Overall Axes and Invariant points of the suit pattern



E. 4th operation phase #12

# Dai Rees / BY JENNIFER HIGGIE

Like the beautiful mutant offspring of Francis Bacon and Hans Bellmer, large, tattooed beasts swing from the ceiling of Dai Rees' small London studio. Moving gently in the breeze they are oddly more alive than many other living things, despite the fact that they are made from the skin of dead animals; oddly graceful despite their bulk. They are curved, twisted and legless, at once elegiac and joyful, the resonant vessels of something that once breathed. (Life here is more ephemeral than sculpture.) They reference a dizzy range of subject matter, yet are utterly original: ghosts of dresses from the 1950s merge with delicate carcasses, saddles, amputees and corsets; half-remembered details from the carved wood and inlay of renaissance furniture butt up against vague reflections of classical Greek battle masks; an arm fuses with the rump of a cow. Dai Rees loves the mad imagination of the flower and the dreamlike displacement of surrealism; variations on the flower's infinite shape emerge at unexpected moments. An almost tangible hum of violence is hushed with ferociously elegant restraint. (Such graceful disarray encourages non-sequiturs: out of nowhere I think of a slim white hand entering a kid-skin glove.)

Time here piles up, is rearranged and rejoices in its disarray, yet excess is tempered by the rigorous restraint of these sculptures. They demand a thoughtful gaze, a generous imagination, playfulness even (art at its best resists the assumed logic of the everyday). There is nothing to be understood here if you are in a rush; these are objects that have been allowed to ripen in their own time, and, as if understanding their provenance, encourage reverie – the state they have sprung from.

Dai Rees has also created hats (a small word for objects that seem more like masks, disguises or halos). Made from a giddy range of material – from gilded goose and pheasant quills to embossed leaves, a sheep's pelvis, lilac viscose flock, lacquered peacock feathers, gilded twigs, Czech crystal and painted

wings – they perch on heads like flirtatious armour or shiny archaeological finds. Like his sculptures, they feel both very new and very old; they could be ancient objects from the future. Rees is not an artist interested in fast fashion; the gestation time for a piece of haute couture can be longer than a pregnancy. His ideas evolve organically, easily accommodating leaps of faith and reason. Words in response to such complexity are clumsy approximations.

Dai Rees sews and sews and sews, laboriously pushing the large needle and leather strips through hundreds of neat holes until his objects emerge victoriously whole, held together by exquisite scars. The surface hums with inlay – intricate patterns of enamel painted leather. Rees spends hours and days honing details that glow like soft meaty jewels.

I ask Dai Rees to send me some information on his recent work. He sends me digital folders that not only contain images of his extraordinary sculptures, but information about his exhaustive research into the collections of the British Museum (inlay, wooden and marble sculptures; the grand curve of the reading room); cemeteries (headstones, wreaths); corsetry (how tightly can a body be strapped and still retain its beauty?); selections of Leigh Bowery's fantastic creations, costumes that treated restraint with the disdain it so often deserves. Flowers take their place alongside Francis Bacon's wild and true distortions of the human form and mind, while details from the work of Grinling Gibbons, the 17th century woodcarver whose life-like cascades of fruit, leaves, foliage, fish, and birds still appear to breathe.

Dai Rees tells me his dogs bark and growl at the strange animals he has created; he thinks they suspect they are alive. His studio smells like a stable. Standing in it, I realise it has never occurred to me until now that an abattoir can be tender. Like concrete poems, everything is on the surface here, and what a surface it is – and what depths such surface alludes to.

Casings 2 (detail)

Laminated hand dyed leather,  
leather lacing, with hand etching  
Dai Rees, 2006



(Left) Casings 4

Laminated hand dyed leather; surgical stitching with linen thread, hand painted leather marquetry inlay, butchers hook and stainless steel chain  
Dai Rees, 2006



(Right) Carapace installation

(From left to right: Casings 3, Casings 6, Casings 2, Casings 1, 2006)  
Carapace installation trials at Judith Clark Costume Workshop, London, Summer 2006



Dying tulips

Carapace work in progress, 2005  
Photographs by Dai Rees

Acknowledgments

Carapace is a British Council Exhibition supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London.

The British Council would like to thank the following partners for their generous support to the Guest Country of Honour Programme at the Cervantino International Festival: Astra Zeneca, BP, British Airways, Diageo, HSBC, The Anglo Mexican Foundation.

BRITISH COUNCIL MEXICO

Director  
Clive Bruton  
Assistant Director Arts & Scholarships  
Kate Arthurs  
Arts Projects Manager  
Tanya Melendez  
Arts Assistant  
Rocio Bermejo  
Cervantino Project Assistant  
Daniela Gutierrez

The British Council Mexico thanks:  
Professor Dai Rees, AHRC Research Fellow in the Creative & Performing Arts  
Judith Clark, Circe Henestrosa, Gloria Maldonado, Federico Ramos, Guillermo Santamarina, Ulises Torres, Areli Vargas, Festival Internacional Cervantino, Universidad de Guanajuato, El Eco.

LONDON  
Project Manager UK  
Circe Henestrosa  
Curator  
Judith Clark  
Graphic Design  
Charlie Smith Design

Photography  
Gavin Fernandes  
www.gavinfernandes.com

Carapace research project conceived in collaboration with Simon Munro

Golden Lane Technical staff:  
Tracy Kench, Pui Tsoi, Janet Hanlon

With special thanks to:  
Chloe Burrow, Jennifer Higgle, George L. Legendre, Dr. Rob Lutton, Adam Phillips, Lou Taylor, Dr. Louise Taylor, Professor Helen Thomas, The Worshipful Company of Leather Sellers

Front cover image:  
Casings 6, Dai Rees, 2006

Back cover image:  
Abstracted tulip, Carapace work in progress, Dai Rees, 2005

ISBN 1-903456-06-7  
ISBN 978-1-903456-05-0



LCF100 FASHIONING THE FUTURE FOR ONE HUNDRED YEARS

