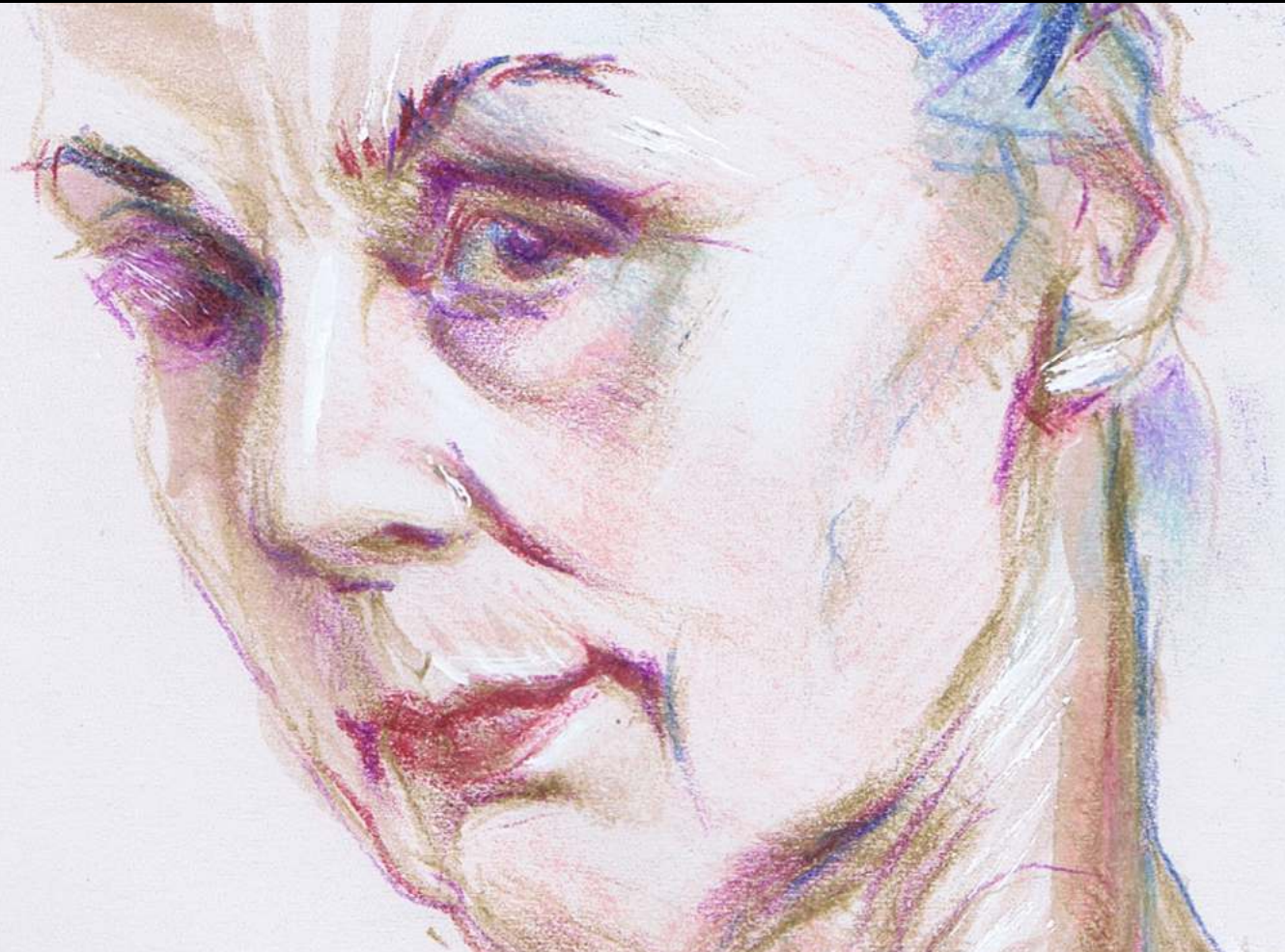




# ENVISIONING FASHION'S INVISIBLE WOMAN



# Negotiating the tension between age and fashion through the medium of fashion drawing and illustration.

Type of output:  
Annotated  
portfolio of creative  
and critical work.

*by*  
Ann Marie  
Kirkbride

Front cover image:  
Detail of constructed fashion  
muse from artefact.

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# SUMMARY

This practice-based research uses fashion drawing to explore diversity and inclusivity within the fashion community.

*Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman* involved a series of drawing-based projects designed by Kirkbride and her septuagenarian muse to inform understanding of the older woman's relationship with fashion. It contributes to the ongoing debate around the older woman and her (in)visibility within society and popular culture.

This project examines the relationship between age and fashion through the medium of Fashion illustration, so raising the visibility of the older woman in fashion. The language of drawing is used as a way of knowing to foster understanding of the physical interplay between the older woman and her clothes.

The annotated portfolio documents verbal and visual discussions on how the muse's perception of her place in the fashion community impacts on her identity, personhood and wellbeing. It demonstrates/underlines the evolving collaborative working relationship between the artist and muse during the research process, and the response of fashion audiences to the developing fashion drawings and insights revealed.

Scanned annotated portfolio can be viewed here; <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.13643123.v1>



Above: Study of the muse's face using an optical mixing technique with layered raw colour as a metaphor for a colourful life well-lived.

Although this research remains rooted in the field of Fashion, the paucity of specific research within this field necessitated a broader approach. Therefore, Kirkbride also drew upon fashion industry expertise, market intelligence data, and insights from the fields of material culture, socio-cultural gerontology, philosophy and communication.

Dissemination includes:

*'Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman'*, research presentation at the FTC Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice Conference, (2019).

*'Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman'* poster presented at *'Ageing in an Unequal World'*, British Society of Gerontology's 47th Annual conference, (2018).

Drawings and a poster exhibited in the 'Call for Makers no. 1: Honesty and Purpose' exhibition at Northumbria University (2017).

Drawings were exhibited in the 'Re-Fashion' exhibition, Discovery Museum, TWAM (2016).

“Older women continue to represent a growing proportion of the total UK population, but fashion and beauty retailers still continue to overlook this significant demographic, chasing instead younger consumers.”

(Sender, 2020)

“Self-image negativity is common amongst senior females, with nearly one in five women aged 55+ unhappy with their appearance... (and this can be) attributed to the broader media industry having emphasised a narrow definition of feminine beauty, central to which has been a focus on youthfulness.”

(Duckett, 2019)

# TIMELINE

2014 PRE CENSUS	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<p>Praxis and Poetics; Research Through Design - conference (Baltic, Newcastle); Presentation: <i>Illustrating Fashion's Invisible Woman</i>, exhibited artefact.</p> <p><i>Dressing the Ageing Demographic</i> – international cross-disciplinary symposium (The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design; RCA, London). Presenter: <i>Illustrating Fashion's Invisible Woman</i>.</p> <p>Live Drawing events - Whitby Goth Festival (Whitby); <i>A New A-Gender</i> exhibition (Newcastle); Shipley Gallery, (TWAM, Gateshead).</p>	<p>Live Drawing events – <i>Night at the Museum</i> at the Laing Art Gallery (TWAM, Newcastle).</p>	<p><i>Re-Fashion</i> – exhibition (Discovery Museum, Newcastle; Northumbria University, Newcastle). Exhibitor.</p> <p>Lecture/workshop – ‘Working with an Older Muse’ to Fashion Communication Students working on the All Walks Beyond the Catwalk Diversity project. Written qualitative feedback received on the developmental sketchbook, and the fashionability of the fashion drawings. Qualitative feedback also received via questionnaire on student attitudes to ageing.</p>	<p>Call for Makers no. 1 <i>Honesty and Purpose</i> – exhibition (Northumbria University, Newcastle). Exhibitor.</p>	<p>British Society of Gerontology's 47th Annual Conference: <i>Ageing in an unequal world</i> (Manchester). Exhibitor: poster presentation of work in progress. Feedback received from international Gerontology specialist delegates.</p> <p><i>Drawing, Dialogues and Documents</i> - exhibition (Northumbria University, Newcastle). Exhibitor.</p>	<p><i>Futurescan 4; Valuing Practice</i> – conference (Bolton University). Presenter: Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman to researchers and professionals.</p>



# RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Any ambition towards a diverse and inclusive fashion industry needs to engage with those conventionally marginalised groups such as older women.

This investigation employs fashion drawing as the means to explore the tension between age and fashion, rendering the older woman visible to fashion audiences, so positioning her within the fashion community.

The first challenge is to navigate the dichotomy between age and fashion drawing successfully, when the codes for each are so opposed. For many western women, age is something to be feared, fought or avoided. Signs of ageing are considered flaws, and a fashion artist is trained to convey a (flawless) ideal.

**'I am here'** is the traditional response to the Zulu greeting **'I see you'**, in a society where being visible to others is a validation of personhood and the foundation of self-worth.

(Nepo, 2000)

Below: Chart showing conflicting codes between fashion illustration and ageing.

FASHION ILLUSTRATION CODES	CODES OF AGEING
elongated, or exaggerated bodyline	weakened posture or shapeless figure
idealistic representation of the person	lack of individuality
aspirational visual narrative	typecast or normative narrative
youthful complexion and flexible body	wrinkles, puffy, sagging skin and stiff body
attitude	passive
desirability	sexless
visual presence	'invisible'
creative energy	slow/static
vibrant colour	faded colour/grey

The second challenge is to bridge the schism that exists between age and fashionability in order to achieve attitudinal change and potential benefits to the economy, the fashion industry (Sender 2012, 2020), and the wellbeing of the older woman (Twigg 2013).

Traditionally the characteristics of fashionability relate to exclusivity, rather than inclusivity, although fashion can also be used to build social and cultural bridges as well as fences (Douglas & Isherwood in Barnard 2002). The annotated sketchbook visually explores the semiotics of age and fashionability to engage with the 'fashion vs style' debate, examine whether older women and their clothes can be fashionable and, if so, how this might be illustrated. Triangulated feedback from the illustrator, the muse and those audiences with whom it has been disseminated, determined whether the illustrations successfully achieved fashionability.

“...as a woman in my 20s I mainly know a lot of these ‘signs’ (of ageing) because I have been shown so much advertising and media that markets these signs as ‘bad’ and ‘undesirable’ throughout my life. I am conditioned to feel scared of these signs of aging so I buy into the wrinkle cream, the hair dye, etc! If I wasn’t brought up to perceive these factors as undesirable I could look forward to getting wrinkles and grey hair as we look forward to growing boobs etc., after we hit puberty – imagine the alternative world!”

Student feedback from qualitative questionnaire.



# CONTEXT

Market intelligence identifies a relatively untapped market in the aged 55+ female fashion consumer, supported by an increasingly ageing female society, a longer working life and greater longevity due to better diet and healthcare. The fashion industry recognises it needs to better engage with this under-represented consumer, but the age 55+ woman struggles to recognise herself in the promotional images that are supposed to attract her. She feels disconnected from the fashion community.

Research on age and dress is well documented in the fields of sociology and gerontology, but there is little but there is strikingly little published on age and fashion, and certainly little co-created research with a muse from a design-led, or practice-based perspective. Therefore, the new knowledge arising from this research is relevant to the fields of design, socio-cultural gerontology, fashion image-making, communication, business and marketing.

Julia Twigg's work on fashion, age and dress in later life (2013) was instrumental in understanding the socio-cultural issues faced by older women in terms of dress as a social construct and helped to frame the research for cross-disciplinary dissemination opportunities in the field of socio-cultural gerontology.

Right: sketchbook study of secondary muse; negotiating issues of visibility.



Two key texts informed a shift in the focus of the research beyond the field of fashion design:

Ben Barry's work on marketing to the non-traditional fashion consumer identified industry's need to use images that reflect the aspirational version of this customer to trigger sales (2013). Kozar and Damhorst's research into older women's responses to current fashion models (2008), also found that older women were more attracted to, and likely to purchase, fashion shown on older models.

Rexbye & Povlsen's paper *Visual Signs of Age; What are we looking at?* (2007), found that biological signifiers of age were not all that others relied on when judging age. Signifiers of energy, and connectivity to the outside world, suggested a more youthful attitude, sometimes leading to younger perceived age judgements than the subjects' true biological age.

Images produced in this research communicate poise, energy and a connection with the outside world; see right.

Right: Collage using art gallery as context to connect muse with outside world. Gaze and hand gestures imply conversation with another person situated outside the frame.

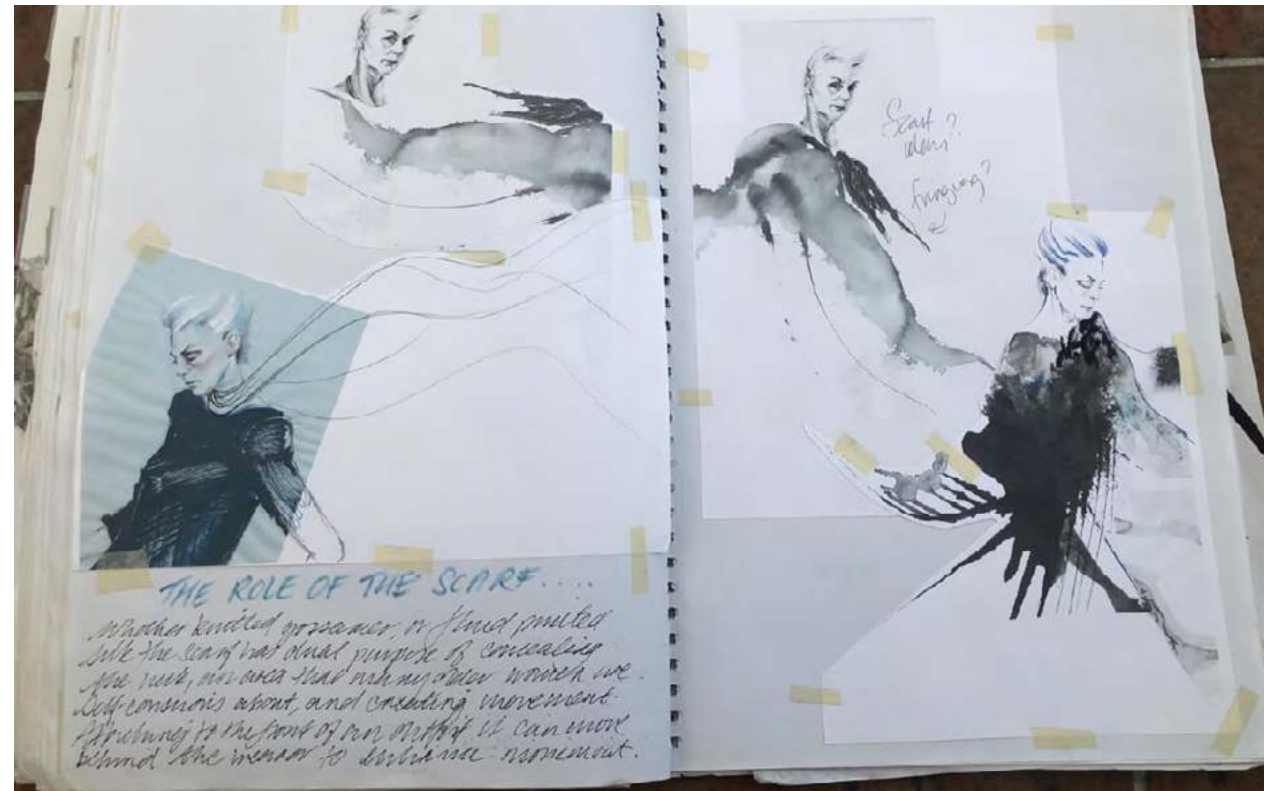


Other fashion illustrators engaged in this space include [David Downton](#) who is known for his fashion portraits of older celebrities and an artistic style reminiscent of the early 20th century's age of couture. The models' signifiers of age are underplayed through his economy of line so, although the message in the drawings is positive, they represent older women in a highly glamorous way untypical of the majority of older women. Ari Seth Cohen's 'Advanced Style' blog and photographs are often credited for raising the profile of older style icons, such as [Iris Apfel](#), and their playful, elegant and eccentric fashion styling.

“I don't move  
as well as I used to,  
so I choose fabrics  
that move for me.”

Ann Howard

Right: Sketchbook pages exploring movement through the scarf motif, 'floating' body, dynamic composition, and fluid media and drawing style.



# METHODS AND PROCESSES

An evolving methodology involving cycles of drawing, discussion, reflection and dissemination, but most importantly, working with a muse, offered rich insights into a lived experience, and defined Kirkbride's approach to this project. A portfolio of research, with a [sketchbook](#) as its core, brings together a collection of visual and textual material that has been annotated with critical reflection to inform the research direction.

Three senior 'muses' were initially selected from a personal network for their demographic relevance, interest in fashion, and potential to inspire on a physical and attitudinal level. Their ages were 50s, 60s and 70s, and they had similar life experiences, creativity, values, and education. As the research was inductive, it was imperative to work with people who would be open to change and have an interest in fashion. Ethnographic methods of observation (though drawing) and interviews were used to collect data, and drawing as a way of knowing was used to understand the physical presence and space they occupied (Fletcher & Grose 2012, Cross 200, Quimby 2006).



Above: Drawing as a way of knowing;  
live at *The New A-Gender* exhibition,  
Newcastle.

Kirkbride's 'productive indiscipline' approach is integral to the development of her research practice. Opportunities for open-ended playful visual experimentation were built into the methodology (Gaver & Bowers 2012). E.g. choosing media and techniques that are not easily controlled.

After initial sketches, the decision was made to work with Ann Howard, as expert representative of her generational cohort. It is emphasized that the research was produced in collaboration with Ann. This approach is distinct from the historic role of the passive artist's muse to inspire the designer to express their individual creative vision. Working with Ann offered an opportunity to enter the debate on visibility, belonging and style vs fashion and, during synchronous interviews and conversations, unexpected insights were revealed that shifted the focus of the research problem from the fashion industry's macro viewpoint to that of the individual older fashion consumer.

Further drawings were developed to disrupt existing stereotypical images of older women, enabling Ann to be viewed through a fashion lens. The annotated portfolio documents the evolution of Ann's role in the research from the embodiment of the creative aesthetic to collaborator. Ann gave permission to be identified by name in the research to reflect its aim of raising visibility, and in recognition of her contribution to the project.

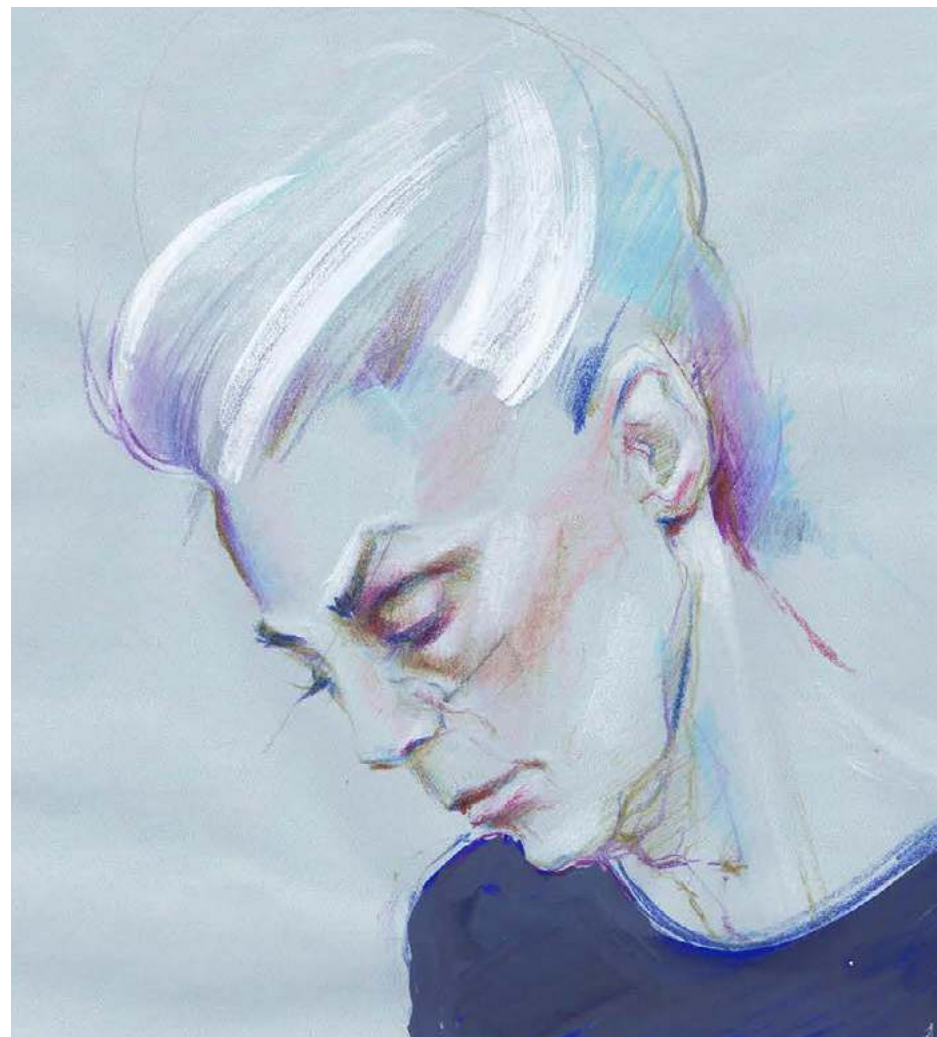
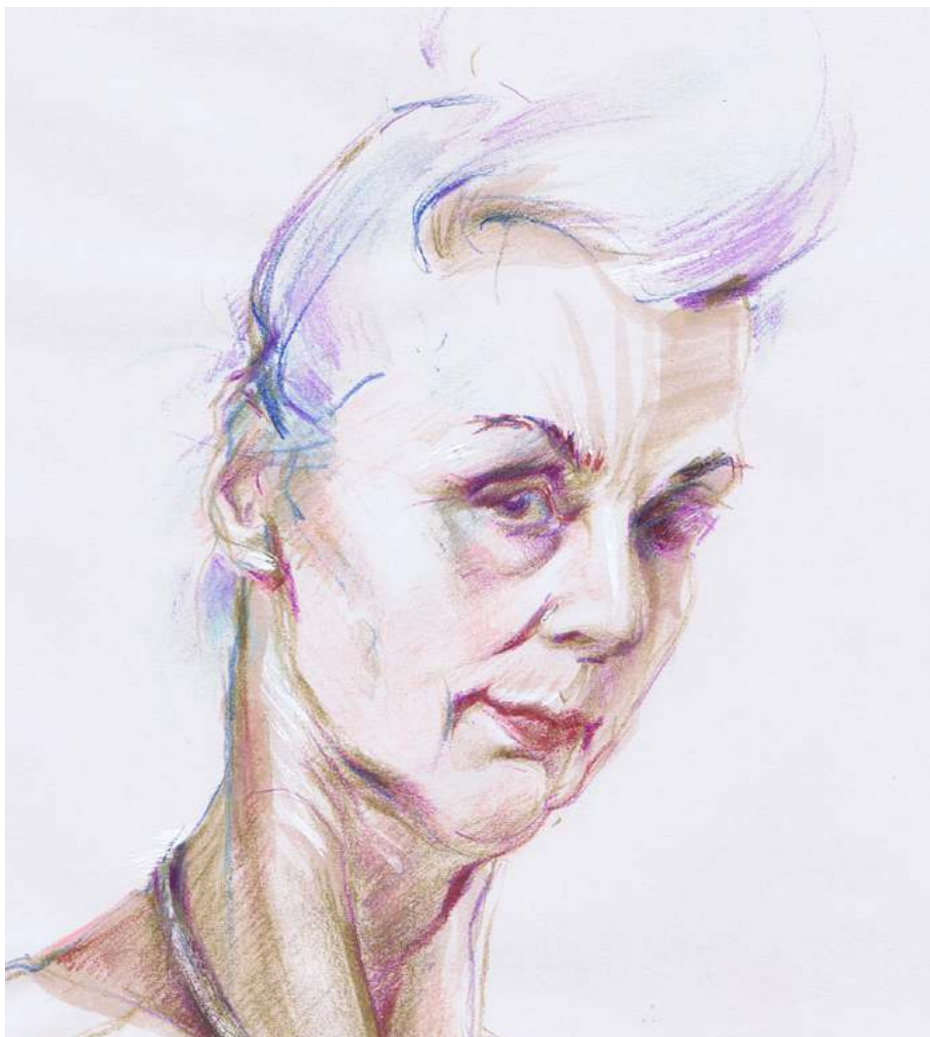
A divergent approach was taken to the processes of visual and verbal inquiry, interpretation and experimentation. Drawings and insights from the interviews were shared in 3 principal stages to inform and develop this ongoing research.

**Stage 1:** Initial research findings and images were shared with Ann for developmental purposes.

**Stage 2:** Research findings and images were shared with the fashion academic community (at the (a)*Dressing the Ageing Demographic* symposium, and *Futurescan4* conference). In addition, 40 Level 5 Fashion Communication students were engaged with as style barometers, and as the future decision makers of the industry. They gave verbal and written qualitative feedback on the wider research and the sketchbook. In addition, Fashion and Fashion Design & Marketing students participated in an anonymous questionnaire designed to collect students' attitude to the wider subject of age and fashion.

**Stage 3:** Research findings and images were shared with the Gerontology academic community (via the 47th BGS conference: *Ageing in an Unequal World*).





Above: Details from the annotated sketchbook - exploring gaze as a tool to connect and to convey mood to an audience. Illustrations are constructed from secondary sources to relieve pressure on live muse in posing for drawings during experimental phase.



## Methods and Processes: Drawing as a way of knowing.

The research developed through the process of drawing and in response to the synchronous conversations and interviews. Ann's relationship with fashion, how this has changed with age, the barriers and incentives of engaging with fashion as an older woman, and the debate around visibility and invisibility, style, fashion and fashionability were discussed.

Conversations during the drawing process revealed personal insights that impacted the creative direction of the drawings, and led to a shift from the macro focus on the fashion industry to the individual's own experience.

Throughout Stage 1, Ann's role in the research developed from object of inspiration to co-creator, and her rich contribution gave the research and drawings added pathos, fostering connections with audiences of academics, fashion professionals, and fashion students as the future of the industry.



Above and left: Drawing as a way of knowing; 'mapping' the body and face.

### Methods and Processes: The 'Selfie' method.

During the drawing and interview process, Ann's personal style was analysed. The act of drawing revealed her signature look to the researcher in terms of the fashion formal elements of colour, silhouette, detail, texture and pattern, but Ann seemed unaware that she had a look, or a curation process.

She photographed her dressing rituals over a few weeks – as 'her (own) way of knowing'. On reflection Ann was able to explore her sense of self through styling, layering garments as she would paint: according to colour and shape, laying claim to the recurring themes as part of her visual language. Unusually for a woman of her age, her look is typically constructed around her collar bone and neckline.

Ann's planning for 'being on display' is a joyful ritual. Preparations for her weekly Saturday evening dinner event begins on a Wednesday when she pulls together potential outfits on hangers before 'playing dress-up' for the afternoon. Shopping for missing elements to complete the look takes place and older items are revamped: a slither of fabric is removed from a hem to get the proportion right for her, brooches adjust a silhouette to fit, the feet are chopped off bold coloured hosiery to create footless tights. Nakedness is hinted at through the layering of sheer fabrics, subtly negotiating the older woman's challenge in using sexual display in her dress (Barnard 2002, Twigg 2013), and fabrics that move are used to conceal the diminishing mobility of her own body.

*"If I lost interest in socialising and fashion I would die! It makes me feel alive". Ann Howard*



Above: Series of photographs for the 'Selfie' work, courtesy of Ann Howard.

### Methods and Processes: Encoding fashionability.

In negotiating the tension between age and fashionability codes for fashionability in illustration were explored and applied to the drawings. Catwalk images were analysed and interpreted; the audience's eye level and the muse's downward gaze combined to produce a sense of elevation, and composition and illustrative techniques were used to create the hauteur associated with catwalk images (see right).

As she has aged, Ann's focus has shifted from the sexual display associated with fashionable youth to expressions of rank, knowledge, and self. She uses her clothes to replace what ageing has taken from her by creating the illusion of movement, softness of skin and youthful posture through choice of fabrics and cut. To reflect this in the drawings, abstract silhouettes were manipulated to frame the face, create a focal point and the illusion of movement through the floating composition.

Some codes for fashionability, such as subversion, dereliction and some elements of sexual display did not translate well in illustrating an older woman, as the allusion to lack of self-care carried messages of deterioration rather than rebellion. Subversion was limited to the layering of disruptive media and hinting at the body beneath the clothes to create mystery and allure.

“It was interesting to see myself evolving throughout (Ann) Marie's illustrative makeover, her vision bringing me further into the realms of visibility”. Ann Howard

*The leather tunic has details inspired by the mourning cape laser cut into it: Alternatively, a large scale lace pattern - or 'granny square' pattern could be etched onto the leather lightweight neoprene could be used instead of the leather.*

*I like the straight expression on Ann's face as this looks less 'portrait' and more 'fashion' than previous work.*



Image: Envisioning the silhouette: exploring fashionability through fashion illustration codes to elevate the subject and create a challenging presence on the page.



“It’s made me  
reconsider how  
I view older  
women and  
their style”

Student feedback from qualitative  
questionnaire.

Image: Envisioning the silhouette:  
exploring fashionability through  
fashion illustration codes to elevate the subject  
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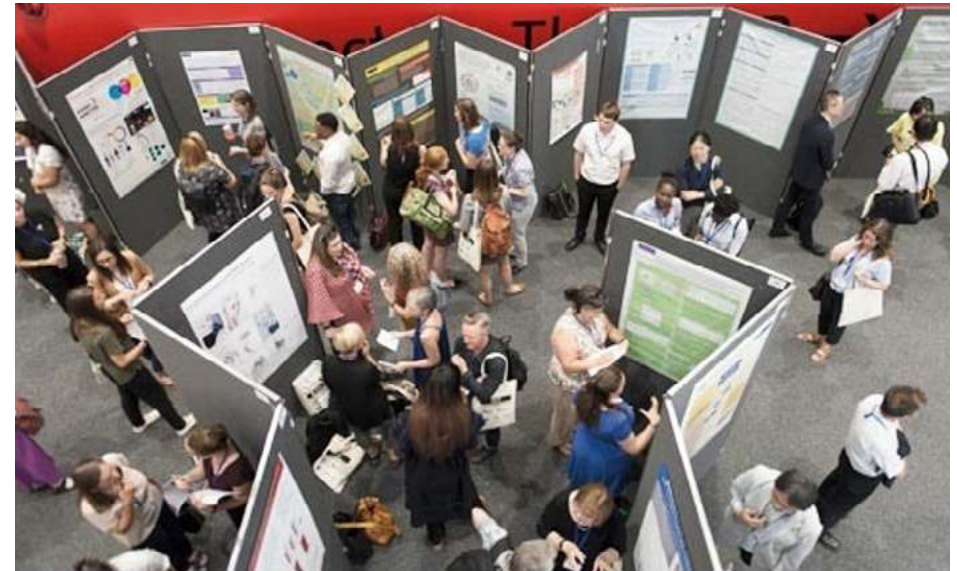
# DISSEMINATION

'Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman' research was presented at the FTC [Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice](#) Conference, Bolton University (2019).

'Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman' poster was presented at the [British Society of Gerontology's](#) 47th Annual conference, Manchester (2018).

Drawings and posters were exhibited in the 'Call for Makers no. 1: Honesty and Purpose' exhibition at Northumbria University (2017).

Drawings of mourning dress from the sketchbook were exhibited in the 'Re-Fashion' exhibition, Discovery Museum TWAM (2016).



Above: Aerial view of discussion around the poster presentations (poster stand positioned centre left). British Society of Gerontology 47th Annual conference; Ageing in an Unequal World.

*Image courtesy of Manchester University.*

You can view the poster here:

<https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.13643123.v1>

Left: Mourning Dress *Re-Fashion* exhibit showing research drawing next to source, Discovery Museum (2016).

## Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman;

a work in progress exploring the relationship between age and fashion through the medium of fashion illustration.

Ann Marie Kirkbride



*'I don't move as well as I used to, so choose cuts, shapes and fabrics that move for me'*

Ann Howard



*'It's made me reconsider how I view older women and their style'*

Anonymous Student Feedback



*'I am here' is the traditional response to the Zulu greeting 'I see you', in a society where being visible to others is a validation of personhood and the foundation of self-worth.*  
(Nepo, 2000)

**Project:** With the aim of raising older women's visibility in fashion, this project was informed by market, academic and creative research in the creation of 2D fashion fashion design for the over 55 years old fashion fashion consumer (e.g. The Invisible Woman).

**Background:** Fashion, like culture in the wider world, with the understanding that as representation of the generation cohort, and also fashion industry, is how we see others and the face of the fashion industry.

**Research:** The project developed from the research project from the visible and invisible aspects of my 2012 'The Invisible Woman' project, and the research into fashion, and how the fashion industry age.

**Questions:** Framing the project raised questions on what makes fashion 'fashionable', can the older woman be fashionable (or not), and what does it mean to be 'fashionable' in the fashion industry?

**Project:** Exploring the relationship between fashion and fashion, these were then linked to the target audience for their effectiveness as fashion illustrations of an older woman. Design thinking processes enabled fashion designers and primary research to be incorporated into design making throughout the process.

**As an illustration designer, a primary aim of this project was to create a visual representation of the older woman in fashion, not only to represent her as a person, but also to represent her as a fashion consumer. The project was then linked to the target audience for their effectiveness as fashion illustrations of an older woman. Design thinking processes enabled fashion designers and primary research to be incorporated into design making throughout the process.**

**Feedback:** The project was well received by the target audience, and the feedback was used to inform the design making process.

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BSG 2018

47th Annual Conference

The University of Manchester

4 – 6 July 2018

The University of Manchester

# Ageing in an Unequal World

## Shaping Environments for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Conference Programme



Poster 47 Submission 121 - Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman; a work in progress exploring the relationship between age and fashion through the medium of fashion illustration.

Ann Marie Kirkbride Old

Northumbria University, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, United Kingdom

Abstract

In the U.K.'s homogenised and saturated fashion market opportunities to engage new customers are increasingly rare. However, despite projections that the over 55's clothing market is set 'to grow by 15% to almost £6.7 billion in 2017' (Mintel, 2012a) the older fashion consumer remains ignored. This raises questions as to the reasons for this: are older fashion customers less inclined to consume fashion, or are their needs simply not being met? Or could it be that the fashion industry has rendered the older woman invisible, preferring to promote its products and services on younger models regardless of the target audience? Mintel's Senior Clothing and Fashion Analyst suggests that the latter may be true as 'one in six females aged over-55 don't feel that advertising is aimed at them.' (Sender, 2012b).

This practice-based research project aims to understand more about the relationship between the older woman and fashion by drawing a septagenarian muse. Using fashion illustration codes to challenge how the older female fashion consumer is portrayed and perceived by herself and others, the project also aims to promote attitudinal change in the fashion industry and broader society, with the longer-term goal of establishing her presence in the fashion community as a muse, a consumer and co-creator.

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Above, left to right: Poster for the British Society of Gerontology 47th Annual conference; Ageing in an Unequal World, 2018; Conference programme; Conference listing.



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