

At show, flights of fashion fancy

MICA student-run event offers the avant-garde, not the off-the-rack



MICA PHOTO

Red yarn is used to represent the web of veins in the human hand in a glove designed by Julie Cheng for the "Panoptic" show this weekend.

By Mary Carole McCauley

MARY.MCCAULEY@BALTSUN.COM

Julie Cheng made a glove from red yarn that mimics the intricate system of veins in the human arm. The blood-colored thread begins at the middle finger and is connected to the thumb by the web of tissue across the palm, and then runs down the biceps to the elbow. It looks as though her model's skin had been turned inside out, an effect that is both disquieting and oddly mesmerizing.

Cheng, who will show four fashions in her "Accupressurist" collection Saturday night as part of the Maryland Institute College of Art's experimental fashion show, is fascinated by the human body's internal systems. The 22-year-old from Queens, N.Y., is intrigued by the notion that the clothes of the future could reflect their wearer's physical state.

"I'm very, very interested in smart fabrics," she says of materials designed to change color, stiffness or shape in response to such stimuli as temperature, humidity or pressure. "My models will wear outfits that light up to demonstrate different systems, such as electrical impulses in the brain or acupuncture points. Certain organs will be illuminated as well."

She is among the 15 undergraduates taking part in "Panoptic," a decidedly unconventional runway show featuring avant-garde fashion, videos and choreography. The students spent eight months working on their collections and planning the show, which will be held in the cavernous former North Avenue Market.

"When people hear the words 'fashion show,' they immediately think of New York City and the runway," says MICA instructor Valeska Maria Populoh.

"Fashion may have its practical implications, such as creating shelter or comfort for the body. But throughout history, it's been used to communicate class distinctions. Fashion and the runway have been a way of bearing witness to what's happening in society, especially at the turning of the millennium."

Populoh's students think of themselves as artists, she says, and not as manufacturers of ready-to-wear garments.

Cheng, for instance, knows it's unlikely
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that her marvelously intricate gloves will ever be sold at Target or Nordstrom. Neither will the outfits in Julia Stone's "Heroes and Villains" collection, which includes beards made from brightly colored buttons for the characters of Civil War opponents Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.

Alex Baldwin's flame-colored thigh-high dress seems based on a straitjacket, as the wearer's arms are completely encased inside the fabric. And Beth Pakradooni's short, stiff cape is made from an olive-green upholstery fabric and was inspired by furniture armrests.

Senior Amy Mann, 22, of Albuquerque says that experimental fashion is important even if no one ever wears the at times intentionally bizarre clothing, because such flights of fancy can generate the big ideas that move the industry forward.

"In avant-garde fashion, there's really no boundaries that you have to stay within," she says. "If we have some wacky idea in our heads, we can make it happen. It allows for a lot of freedom."

Still, there's no question that the students have chosen a career path with more than its share of obstacles. Cutting-edge painters can display their artwork in



galleries and museums. But there's no comparable venue for showcasing radical fashion, since the garments don't come fully alive until they're worn on moving bodies, and since many people might be reluctant to wear, for example, Baldwin's see-through slacks on the street.

"My designs don't make any sense if you just see them hanging on a hanger," says Katie Coble, 22, of Kansas City, Mo. "So it's great to be in a setting like this, where you can get able bodies to activate your clothes."

Because "Panoptic" is an entirely student-run event, the young designers created their own fabrics, recruited and rehearsed models, built the video projection screen, hung the stage lights and handled the advertising — practical know-how that could prove valuable in the future.

Senior Vincent Tiley, 22, of Charleston, W.Va., hopes to one day create costumes for such performance artists as Nick Cave and Matthew Barney, while Mann dreams of designing film costumes. Pakradooni, 22, of Philadelphia, will seek a job fashioning textiles, while Cheng will apply to companies creating smart fabrics.

If you go

"Panoptic: An Experimental Fashion Event" will be held at 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Saturday at the former North Avenue Market, 12 W. North Ave. Tickets cost \$10 at the door or \$5 in advance at the [MICA](#) Bookstore, 1200 W. Mount Royal Ave., or at store.mica.edu.

Who knows? Perhaps some day she will invent a fabric that can actually relieve pain. But for the moment, she is content to simply make her audience aware of the body's various acupuncture and acupressure points.

For "Panoptic," Cheng wants her models to convey a sense of losing and regaining health. During a recent run-through, she instructed them to walk down the runway as though they were in pain. One by



MICA PHOTO

Amy Mann's "The Makers Part Deux." "In avant-garde fashion," she says, "there's really no boundaries that you have to stay within."

one, the four hobble down the taped-up path encased in bandages and wearing the red-veined gloves.

They resemble decaying, diseased, bloodied corpses. It seems they barely share a single, germ-ridden breath between the four of them.

Cheng squeals, jumps up and down, and thrusts both of her thumbs straight up.

"That's just how I hoped they would look," she says.