A Celebration of Mortality is a fashion apparel line of women's formal wear with a theme of "Death". I have always been drawn to the darker side of things, and find the macabre uniquely beautiful. I find the human perception of death to be strangely fascinating, an interest that is not necessarily shared by the general public. The objective of this project was to create a line of clothing that showcases death in such a way that everyone would be able to see its beauty. When death and clothing are combined in our society, the outcome is often an image of scary costumes, black fabric, and gothic makeup. The clothing that I have designed and created does not follow that mold. There are no spikes, no chains, and no use of the color black. Instead, I use lace, pearls, pleats, and chiffon. This line is a celebration of life, and the beautiful part that death plays in it. It's a celebration of our mortality.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Trenton Bush for advising me throughout this project, and for understanding and encouraging my sometimes strange creativity.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jinhee Nam for all the extra time she stayed in the lab, allowing me to work round the clock on this project.

Finally, I want to thank all of my family, friends, team, and classmates for keeping me sane and confident in my abilities.
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INTRODUCTION

I watched nervously as my last model stepped up to the runway backstage. She would be the last model of the entire show, and by far the most dramatic. Her hair was at least twice its normal size, and her makeup was, in a word, scary. With dark, sunken eyes, and lines over the model’s lips and nose, there was no mistaking the resemblance to a human skull. A cue came through the headset, and my model disappeared, stepping through the curtains to face the crowd. I took a deep breath, wanting so badly to see the crowd’s reaction. What were they thinking? Did they hate it? Love it? Did they understand what I was going for? Death dresses....did they think I was crazy? How would I even explain it to them if I had the chance...?

In my mind, death is a celebration of life. It is an aspect of life that connects every living creature because we all have it in common. Death makes us truly appreciate living because we know that it will not last. It is like that saying “you don’t know what you’ve got til it’s gone”. If we did not feel the loss of others or fear our own loss, what would encourage us to live life fully? It can, of course, be painful, ugly, and scary, just like every other aspect of life, but I am not focusing on the grieving that comes with death. These aspects get the most attention as it is, and are hard to overlook, but often the negative views of death in our society can completely overshadow the beauty that can also be found. Not all cultures view death in the same way that our society does. There are festivals like Dia de los Muertos in Mexico, and The Festival of Lanterns in Japan that focus on remembering ones ancestors that have died, and commemorating their departure from this world. There is something so infinitely fascinating about death, with the countless theories, debates, and ideas surrounding what is, in fact, a
As a designer, the things that fascinate me inevitably creep into my work. The idea of creating a dress with a skeletal cutout back has been running through my mind for years, but I didn’t have the chance to do it justice until my senior studio line.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The motivation behind my Honors Thesis was my senior studio class, or FCSFA 480. This course is required for all Apparel Design majors here at Ball State University. It is a chance for students to take all that they have learned and put it towards designing and creating anything that they want. The course gave me guidelines, and it gave me deadlines, but the rest was up to me. I was to design a line of seven ensembles under a common theme and color scheme. I had to start with a customer profile, go through illustrations and sketches and end with actually creating 3 of the seven ensembles. The customer profile is a detailed investigation into the exact market niche that you want to cover, exploring the psychographics, and demographics of that market. Your customer has a specified name, style, set of hobbies, income, favorite designers, and even specific family information. My niche was haute couture women's special occasion wear for Winter 2012.

The Studio assignment was very open ended. It was my first real chance to design without boundaries in the classroom setting. Anything that I could imagine, I could create. The classroom gave me time limitations, but also gave me access to many tools that I cannot afford for myself, like sergers, industrial irons, and professional dress forms. Realistically, I was only promised 5 hours a week in the lab, because my class was Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00am
until 11:20 am. But I knew that I would need significantly more time than that in the lab, because I would be using the dress forms constantly.

Unlike other departments at Ball State, the Applied Technology sewing labs are not available 24/7 to students, but fortunately for me, the department has recently added open labs 4 days a week. I took full advantage of them. I also know most of the teachers well enough that I often came into the back of their class and worked on my own projects while they taught.

Before I began my senior line, I knew that it would double as my Honors Thesis. I knew that I would need to write an artist statement and in it, be able to reflect on all that went into this project. In order to help my memory over the semester, I kept a log from day one, recording the number of hours I worked on each garment, the money I spent on supplies, and often the insights I had along the way as well. Some of this information has been included in Appendix A.

THE INSPIRATIONS

From the project’s conception, I knew that I would be spending every free moment working on my line, and that I would need a theme that I could be excited about for an entire semester. The process of choosing a theme started by simply writing down topics that inspire me, which lead to searching and sketching wherever they took me. When it comes to design, my personal process can be time consuming. Coming up with a working concept always takes a large investment of time spent researching and sketching and planning before I am satisfied with it. Even after I choose a design, it changes constantly as I actually create the piece, as I see what works and what doesn't, and how the materials evolve. As soon as I came up with possible
themes I researched them in order to narrow it down to one. In the end, I felt that a theme of “mortality” gave me the most to work with, and was a deep enough concept to keep me interested, even after the first few weeks of construction. Staying excited for a project that takes three months to complete can be difficult, but I did my best to stay motivated. The timing of this project was perfect, due to Halloween taking place partway through the semester. The deathly celebration and macabre imagery helped recharge my enthusiasm.

The initial sketch for my deathly line was one that has resurfaced in my work for years. It’s the idea of a formal dress that is backless, except for what appears to be a ribcage and a spine. From this initial seedling of an idea, my entire line began to take form. The design process began small, but soon took over my entire life. The “research” consisted mostly of pictures that I looked through for inspiration. I searched Google, Pinterest, books, magazines, and my imagination for images that represented death, and bookmarked ones that I found particularly profound. I took color inspirations from some of the photos, and brainstormed lists of words that are associated with death, in order to discover which aspects of mortality interested me most. I made playlists of songs that inspired me, and watched several music videos for costume inspiration. I spent my nights Google searching and my days doodling through classes. I spent runs brainstorming out loud with my teammates, and used all my other schoolwork to focus on my studio line. In my Computer Aided Design class, we had to create collages and color-ways, and mine always came back to my studio theme (see Appendix B). I’m sure that anyone watching my work from the outside or tracking my Google searches would probably have been afraid for my mental health because of the sheer obsession that I showed.

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THEME

My senior line consists of women’s formal wear that reflects the anatomical connections that we associate with our mortality. Five of the seven designs directly reflect a specific part of the human anatomy: the muscles, the circulatory system, the skeleton, the lungs, and the intestines. The final two designs have anatomical influences, but specifically resemble a wedding dress and tailored funeral attire. The color scheme was to be mostly monochromatic, using shades of ivory. The exception would be The Muscles dress and some of the lining and/or accents of the other dresses, which would be burgundy. I wanted to stay 100% away from the color black, because that is obviously the first thing that comes to mind in our culture when we think of death. I designed my garments to be subtle, elegant, detailed, and extremely well made. The three that I actually created are “The Muscles”, “The Circulatory System” and “The Skeleton”

THE MUSCLES

I began construction on what I believed to be the most complicated of my three garments, trusting my initial enthusiasm to get me through the hardest part first. The muscle dress (as shown in Appendix C) is an off the shoulder floor length evening gown. The bodice is tight fitting and completely covered in two-toned burgundy pleating. The direction, size, and shape of the pleating directly reflects how the muscles of the human body would look if you peel back the skin. Even the sleeves resemble human shoulder muscles. The skirt flares out towards the floor and has an extra layer of pleated chiffon as a top layer. The back of the dress has a “U” shape cut out with a bow across it, and a pleated train starting just below the butt.
I had a very clear vision of what I wanted this dress to look like. The problem was that I had no idea how to physically recreate that vision beyond the basic layout. I began by draping the lining of the dress. Draping is a common method of pattern making where the designer pins practice fabric to a dress form and cuts and marks it to get a desired effect. Then the designer transfers the markings on the fabric to paper to create a pattern. I prefer this method of patterning because it is very easy to envision what the finished product will look like, and tweak it as you progress. After the lining, I began work on the bodice. This is where the experimentation began, because I wanted to make sure that the pleating was very secure, but I did not want any stitching to show on the outer layer. After a few failed attempts, I came up with a workable method. The only problem was that it was a painstakingly slow one. I made a base layer of a bodice, and then individually pinned and hand-sewed each fold of fabric. If you take a look at Appendix D you can see my work in progress, and see the sheer number of pins that I used to keep the fabric perfectly in place until I could hand sew it. This garment took me the longest to complete, but I took care not to rush through the work because I did not want to sacrifice any of the quality for a deadline. The dress turned out far better than I ever expected it to, and my somewhat unexpected success only fueled my excitement for the next two pieces in my line.

THE CIRCULATORY

The second garment I made was the Circulatory dress. It was a much needed break from hand sewing because there were no pleats for this design, which significantly cut down on the number of hours I spent on this dress compared to the others (see Appendix A). As you can see from Appendix E, this garment is a sleeveless lace dress, with a collar, one front pocket, a large

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heart shape cut out of the back and buttons up the neck. The lace and lining end right below the butt and are replaced by a sheer chiffon skirt that falls straight to the floor. An important design element of this dress is the seams. I deliberately created an intricate seam design to reflect the veins of the body. None of the seams are straight, not even the one for the zipper, and almost all of the seams originate from either the heart back, or the front chest directly over where the heart lies inside the human body. The delicate lace overlay symbolizes the capillaries that spread throughout the human body. The lining is deep red, and asymmetrical around the top, giving the look of a vessel being filled with liquid, in this case, blood.

This second garment was difficult in an entirely different way from the first. The difficulty last time was in the pleating details of the muscle dress, while this second dress needed special attention to the patterning in order to ensure a symmetrical fit while creating completely asymmetrical pattern pieces. I also was not sure how to create clean, finished seams with the lace and the openings, and experimented with simply leaving the cut lace edge (as shown with the heart back) vs. serging the edges (as shown in the armholes). This piece, more so than any of the others, adapts very well to a model, and is easier to fit into. Overall, I am very pleased with how it turned out both in fit and style, and it is the perfect transitioning piece for my line, because it has colors, fabrics, and style lines that match both of the others, and draws them all together.

THE SKELETON

The final garment for studio was the one that inspired the entire theme. The back of this dress is cut out, featuring strings of beads representing the spine and ribs of the body. If you
look closely at the pleated chest in Appendix F, it too, resembles a ribcage, with the pleats hanging over a bare lace stomach, and a "sternum" of fabric in the middle. Lace makes up the shoulders of the dress, as well as the overlay on the otherwise satin bodice. This dress is actually a romper, with a skirt of pleated and draped chiffon, which features a large bustle in the back, and a slit up the front.

The skeletal dress ended up being the most expensive and the most complicated garment that I've ever constructed. I started by draping the lining for a romper (a one piece garment with shorts) which in itself was something that I'd never done before. I made sure to strategically alter this romper in such a way that it fit both the dress form and myself, so that even during finals week, when we are not allowed in the labs at all, I would have some sort of "dress form" (my own body) to use just in case I needed it. Then I began work on the chest. I draped, pinned, and hand sewed the chest pleats using the same method that I developed for the muscle dress. Next I created the outer layer of the romper, and gave it a lace overlay, draped the sheer skirt, and pieced everything together. The last element of the dress was the beaded ribcage in the back. I spent hours in JoAnn Fabrics trying to pick out the beads. There was a certain look that I wanted, but the beads had to be light enough not to rip the dress, cheap enough for me to afford, and have enough in stock to complete the entire ribcage. I had no idea until this project just how expensive beads are. I bought my beads half off on Black Friday and I still spent $26 on that element alone.

The most difficult part of this garment was trying to design a way to get in and out of the dress, while not destroying the integrity of the design. I installed multiple closures, starting with an invisible zipper down the right side of the romper. There are also three different spots
on the back that fasten with hook & eyes and snaps. If you take a look at Appendix F once
again, and look at the back of the dress, you will see the general layout. There are fasteners
where the sleeve meets the neck on the right side of the body, and also where the sleeves meet
the back of the dress on both sides. Both the fasteners on the right side of the body are
necessary to get in and out of the dress and the one on the left makes sure that I have the
flexibility to change the length on both the sleeves in order to accommodate different body
types. Because the beads are so heavy, and so near to the fasteners, I used a total of 5 hooks &
eyes, and two snaps to make sure that the closures would be stable. It is not the easiest of
dresses to put on, but at least this way it won’t be falling off easily either.

I am extremely happy with the outcome of my final piece, especially because my time
frame was so tight. It is so hard to be patient and detailed on a project when you know that
passing the class depends on you rushing enough to finish.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

During the press release for Ball State Fashion Weekend, one of the professors from
another department was asking me questions about my designs. She asked me “If you had to
do it over again, would you do anything differently?” The answer is always going to be YES. To
put it in perspective, these dresses were like giant puzzles that I had to put together after
making up the separate pieces myself and simply hoping that they would fit. It was a learning
process every step of the way, and after seeing the results of what I did, I know that I could do
even better if I tried again. One big change I would make would be to use an actual human for a
form instead of a dress form. Dress forms are good averages of the human body to work from,
but for precise work, it would be much more beneficial to work from life. This change would
actually make the process more difficult, but if I did it this way, I would know for sure that
somebody could wear my dress and fully appreciate it, without worrying about the fit.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

You are probably wondering what in the world one does with three very unique evening
gowns. I wondered the exact same thing. I created my senior line this past fall, but the next step
was tweaking them for my Fashion Promotions class (FCSFA 481) this semester. Each
promotions class creates a fashion show during the spring semester, showcasing all of the
garments made by the Apparel Design seniors. My studio line just closed out the first ever Ball
State Fashion Weekend on Sunday, April 1st, 2012. In order to prepare for this honor, I had to
adjust my garments temporarily or permanently to fit my models for the runway. But now that
that’s done, it is a blank slate as to what I do with my finished creations. After the show, I
received an offer to buy one of the dresses but I don’t think I’m ready for that quite yet. I would
like try entering them in a few competitions this year, to see if I can gain some recognition for
my work and maybe even get an in for a job. In a year or two, I may end up selling my pieces
but I know that it would be difficult to part with something I invested so much of myself into.
IN THE END

Upon completing the project, I am incredibly proud of what I have accomplished in the past year. This class was only 3 credit hours, two days a week, for 2.5 hours each day. In a 16 week semester, if we had class consistently, that would still only add up to 80 class hours for the entire semester. Which means that I put in an extra 290 hours of my own time, averaging out to be 18 extra hours a week. I focused all of my free time on this project, and a good chunk of time that I could have been sleeping as well, but it was worth every second to see exactly how far I’ve come in the last four years of my studies, and to get a glimpse of how far I can go in the future.
APPENDIX A

For the duration of my thesis, I have kept track of the number of hours I worked on each dress, and the total amount I’ve spent on materials. The breakdown is as follows (dividing up the rounded cost of each dress from the accurate total):

Total hours - 370.25 hours
Total price - $191.82

Dress 1 – September 8, 2011-October 25, 2011
Almost 7 weeks
156.75 hours
~$70

Dress 2 – October 27, 2011-November 21, 2011
Almost 4 weeks
87.25 hours
~$30

Dress 3 – November 22, 2011-December 16, 2011
Almost 4 weeks
126.25 hours
~$90

Using the Indiana minimum wage for the hours of work that I put in, combined with reimbursing myself for the supplies, I have estimated a minimum asking price for each dress if I were to sell them.

Dress 1- $1,206.44
Dress 2 - $662.56
Dress 3 - $1,005.31
Total - $2,874.81
The Circulatory
APPENDIX F

The Skeleton