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VISUAL ESSAY

DAWN SUMMERLIN
Edge Hill University

Perceptive Fragility: Movement and porcelain

ABSTRACT

This visual essay focuses on the perception of fragility through the costume design and making process and subsequent creative interaction with performers, central to the creation of a piece of choreographed contemporary dance. Working with porcelain clay as wearable material, examples of emerging methodologies for researching costume are demonstrated. Through this practice its position as the governing element to the piece is explored as costume becomes the 'text' determining the choreography. Can the costume shape the physical and emotional responses, as its resistant, yet fragile form dictates the movement and senses of the body?

KEYWORDS

porcelain
performance
costume
dance collaboration
movement

The costume design methodology was determined by the idea of creating a choreographed piece using porcelain clay as the chosen material. This led to a series of practical research workshops, filmed recordings, and ultimately was presented as a realized 45-minute piece of contemporary dance (*Perceptive Fragility*, 18 April 2015, Rose Theatre, Edge Hill University) developed with dancer and choreographer Michelle Man and dancer Nathan Clark. Throughout development and rehearsal stages, this non-conventional costuming of the body placed the costume at the forefront of the conversation.

Through this process, I have observed how the body can be part of a material language, investigating what knowledge stems from the body, how it reacts, breathes, responds under the weight, and the physical restriction, temperature and kinaesthetic elements of the costume. Via a collaboration process a dance was created, in which the costume was the guiding 'text', the choreographic instigator and where dancing became the means of navigating a relationship with costume.

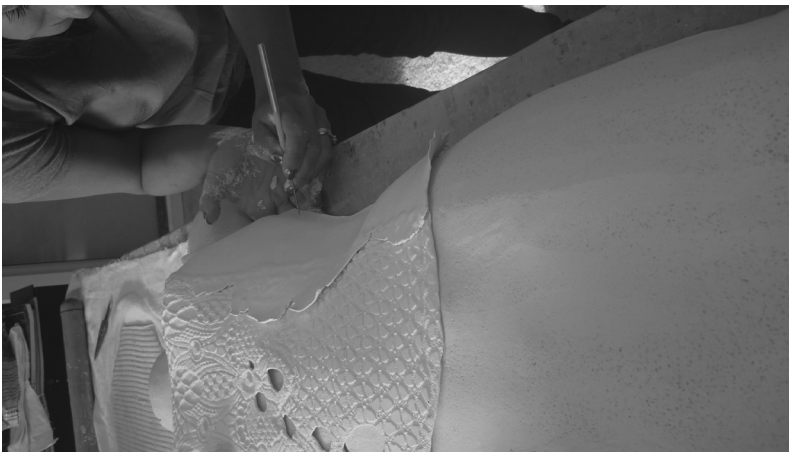
Primarily I was bound by the chosen material and compelled by it narrating of the movement in the dialogue of expression governing the choreography. While it eventually became a live performance, I had initially anticipated it would only be a recorded performance, serving as a point of departure for a later live dance piece, as I expected that the choreography and range of movement determined by the porcelain costume would be limited and too fragile to withstand repetition. Each rehearsal continued to reveal further characteristics of the costume that rely on the dancers' own perception and the intricate delicacy of the material. Consequently, I titled the piece *Perceptive Fragility*.

The design and making process

As a trained ceramic artist, I revisit in this practice the beautiful, fine and complex qualities of porcelain clay. I was attracted by its ultimate white beauty, its purity and transparency, and as the potter and writer Edward de Waal describes the material as 'white gold' in a 'category of materials that turn objects into something else, it is alchemy' (2015: 14). To achieve such qualities he describes the porcelain must be worked into a very fine paper-like state. However, de Waal also defines this material as 'hubris' that likes to buckle and bulge, and that it is not tolerant of any 'structural weaknesses' (2015: 50). While I am lured by its qualities and incomparable beauty, I am ever anticipating its potential fragility. Understanding both the material and the distinctly different appearances at every stage of its development are important parts of the process. As an artist re-engaging with this material I began, needing it as a wet, sticky and milky white cheese block. After manipulation and time, it proceeded to the leathery hard malleable state, probably the most akin to fabric. During this stage, I cut the costume patterns, inlaid the detail, and considered all construction requirements for assembly, each piece needing to rest across a pre-made stoneware clay formation of the same size. At this point, there is only so much moisture in the leathery surface and time allowed to work with it before it starts to crack or crumble. After drying out, it is ready for the first bisque firing process, where it is baked in the kiln up to 2000 degrees Celsius. Once cooled down, it adopts a chalky hard yet porous appearance. The porous nature is then ready to soak up any optional glazes, before the final firing taking it gradually up to 2650 degrees Celsius.

Porcelain, due to its density has the highest shrinkage rate, approximately 17 per cent, but also carries the added tension of a high 50 per cent failure rate. So, for each dancer's measurements I had to factor in a shrinkage calculation. Being prone to cracking and deformity, porcelain also relies on a supportive under structure within the kiln, without such it will retreat to a deformed sheet. This outcome after hours in the kiln, can not only be potentially troubling, but also prove very costly due to the high failure statistics.

Despite the potential disappointments likely to be countered by using this material for my costumes, I continue to be excited by its challenges from a design perspective. Aside from its use within the arts, familiar items associated



Figures 1 and 2: Ceramic workshop, designing and making porcelain costume by Dawn Summerlin. Photograph by Michelle Man.

with porcelain are table wear, decorative china and dental veneers. So, to imagine it as costume, something to be embodied, furthermore danced in, was for me a revelation unfolding from its very core. The fundamental point here, as I discovered, was that the costume would unknowingly control me, the designer and author of what became a guiding 'text' for the movement of the performer. Through its intrinsic language, it would reveal a level of control over my design that it would also extend over the dancer's bodies. I also later realized that much care and attention to the internal surface was needed as it would scratch and chafe against the dancer's flesh.

I proceeded to push the porcelain to its thinnest, not only to resemble as near as possible fine fabric, but also to achieve optimal translucency, whilst hoping it was not going to break on first contact with the moving body. My first pieces were unglazed, delicately fine and completely pure. This costume element was the first of many, the first to reveal an insight that undoubtedly informed the initial movement experimentation by Michelle Man and myself. She was particularly eager to interpret a mix of gestural languages against her naked flesh, in the dance studio, in early October 2014, at Edge Hill University.



Figure 3: Workshop with the first porcelain prototype, costume worn by Michelle Man. Photograph by Dawn Summerlin.

With apprehension she pushed the material through a range of movements to reveal its potential limitations. The abrasions that she experienced, when the ceramic material marked the surface of her skin, proposed a further performative exploration which may be addressed in a future research collaboration.

I endeavoured to record how the dancer's trained body would move and breathe under the confined creative insignia of my porcelain costumes. The piece was to be performed by two dancers, a male and a female, with one being the choreographer. I selected Nathan Clark to embody the male figure porcelain costume. Aesthetically his white alabaster skin, combined with fair afro hair and slim bodily frame, harmonized with the costume. Reminiscent of porcelain, he held the slightly unusual appearance of fragility matched with a deceptive agility and tremendous core strength. He joined Michelle Man, who had already experienced her first dialogue with a porcelain prototype in earlier movement experiments with me. As she had been, from the start, drawn to its creative potential, she became not only the female figure, but also the choreographer of the dance piece. Man's appearance offered a contrast to Clark's. Her olive skin, dark hair and slender limbs, were complementary, not only to Nathan but also to the costumes, given her striking Eurasian features, having a white Caucasian mother and an Asian father.

During November 2014 in the dance studios at Edge Hill University, they demonstrated the required choreographic dialogue and demands, as opposed to individual improvisation. They had to communicate and respond to each other's physical cues. The element of trust inscribed within the practice of partner dance, was informed and enhanced by the challenging moves in relation to porcelain. They required the partner to catch the other or hold each other in position while also considering the fragility of the material. I needed to carefully consider how the lived body would respond to the costume from within this kinaesthetic sense, from both dancers' perspectives.

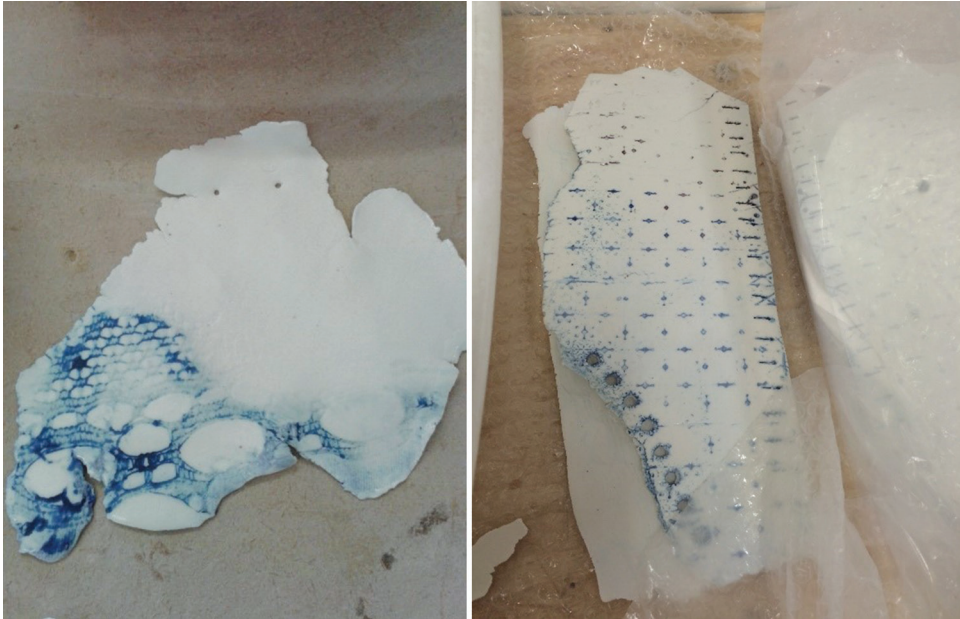


Figure 4: Colouring ceramic. Photographs by Dawn Summerlin.

An aesthetic notion I considered was to use cobalt blue oxide, an aluminium oxide, as a partial glaze on the costumes. Cobalt is prestigious and expensive, a pigment dating back to early fourteenth century (de Waal 2015: 59). The Ming Dynasty was known for applying it lavishly to porcelain in recognizable dragons, flying birds, ribbons, animals and children amongst much else. While wishing to utilize the colour, I sought different starting points for its application. de Waal describes Cobalt as it 'allows the world to be turned into stories' a means through which its decorative inscriptions on any white porcelain vessel could be transformed into a descriptive character or scene (2015: 60). Moreover, in a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh described the colour as 'a divine colour, and there is nothing so beautiful for putting atmosphere around things' (Cavallaro 2013: 173). Therefore, I incorporated it subtly to areas of indicative pattern, as a faded representation of what once existed, a distant remnant.

Along this journey I experienced the costly loss of many of my costume segments. The unforeseen and intriguing bulging in the porcelain, its distortions, blistering and cracks disrupted what were otherwise enlightening and costume defying rehearsals, during a stage of the process that I refer to as 'the re-makes'. Throughout these re-workings important insights were formed and knowledge gained at each stage.

Embodiment through porcelain

Clay is often described as amorphous, so part of my process has been taking this amorphous material and breathing bodily life into it. As the performance maintained a specific ephemeral quality through the nature of the costumes, never being performed in the same way twice, my documentation became critical. I discovered that while the costumes did withstand numerous rehearsals and potential performances, they were weakened and generated break-ages, however they proved surprisingly resilient to movement.

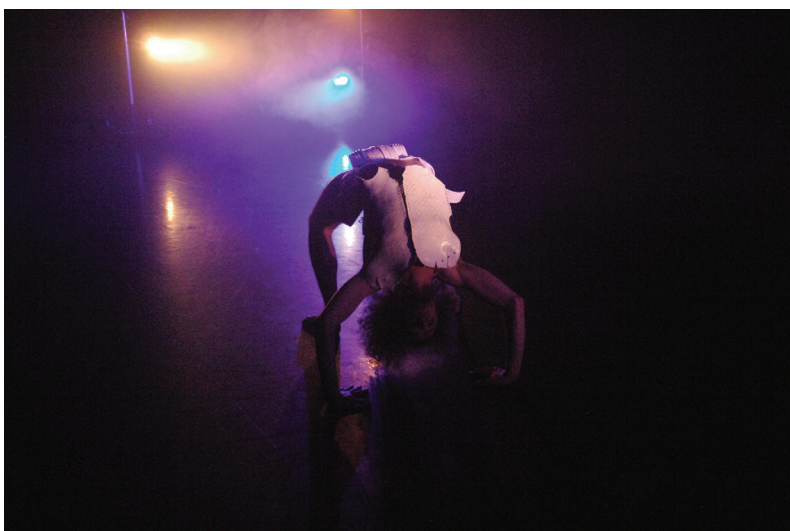


Figure 5: Film stills by Dawn Summerlin, close-up of Michelle Man and Nathan Clark interacting through their costumes.

Governed by the anticipated restriction of their costumes, I had initially visualized the performance taking on a statuesque quality, where only slight movements combined with stillness might be possible. I was inspired by the 16-mm film piece *In the Palace*, created by Daria Martin in 2000 and collected by the Tate Gallery. I was drawn to its simplicity and captivated by what might occur in the interaction between performers and sculpture. A collaborative piece based on *The Palace at 4 A.M.* 1932 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) by Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti (1901–66), which Martin's sculpture scales up into a 25-foot version. Giacometti used fragile structural materials, wood, glass, wire and string. In the film she attempts to explore the parity of 'total artwork' and in doing so populates her sculpture with performers. In the film I am fascinated by the slow sequential segments that we see revealed, as the camera continuously revolves around the performers (Martin 2000).

In my filmed recording and live performance of *Perceptive Fragility*, no other scenic material was used to detract from the porcelain costumes. I intended the audience to have to work to see through the smoke and lighting, thus creating an intensity in their reading of the performance. I wanted to create a sense of nervous apprehension, like spectators at the circus, straining to decipher the unfamiliar eerie sound of the porcelain costume layers and sections, scraping against one another, and for them to wonder what the costumes are made of, and upon recognition, to be anticipating breakage.

Through several weeks of movement improvisation and development, which included dynamic movement, jumps, crawling on the floor on their knees, wearing all or parts of each other's costumes, the performers crafted a vocabulary of moves, none of which I had expected to be possible. Particularly insightful was the ability of Man's choreography to cover a broad range of formations and emotions. As I recorded the dancers' visible embodiment, I was also re-designing elements of the costume in response to this. Despite the unsettling and unfamiliar experience, they were demonstrating defiance to the restrictions that the porcelain imposed. Each rehearsal presented different



Figures 6 and 7: Michelle Man and Nathan Clark in Perceptive Fragility, choreography by Michelle Man, Rose Theatre, Edge Hill University, April 2015. Photograph by Helen Newall.

feedback between materials and bodies, and while these sometimes generated anxious responses, the dancers continued to push the material to its limits.

Perceptive Fragility was playing repeatedly on the minds and senses of the dancers. As noted, by Nathan, 'however much you think you can understand the material, it always plays tricks on your mind, and you never feel you will be comfortable' (Clark 2015). The experience of wearing and performing inside porcelain costumes was described by both dancers as a unique experience in the way that porcelain material drew out their body heat and seemed to retain it, causing them to feel inquisitive and yet claustrophobic. Michelle relates to



Figure 8: A moment in movement in Perceptive Fragility. Photograph by Helen Newall.



Figure 9: Film still by Dawn Summerlin of Michelle Man and Nathan Clark performance.

the costume 'as a foreign skeleton that clasped her flesh from the outside', and denotes 'its intimidation, yet the pleasurable fear of breakage' (Man 2015).

Significantly the noise also controlled the movement, feeling possessed by the porcelain they were never fully comfortable with what each sound represented. These costumes were challenging their ability to learn and retain the choreographed information, by their psychophysical interruptions. A



Figure 10: Perceptive Fragility dance solo by Michelle Man in a photograph by Helen Newall.

significant insight at this point was the continuous conversation they were having with the material. They had to develop the usual discipline of having to listen to their costumes, which demanded additional attention, whilst being aware of what it was trying to do. The costume was taking on a persona that challenged the wearer intensely, whilst demonstrating the ability to co-choreograph the dance.

It was revealing to witness their individual creativity and self-expression being stifled and yet extended. They observed each other in stasis, enjoying the sense of feeling streamlined and sculptured, whilst adopting a new pleasure in the power of the material language.

Reflection

My research investigation has been about finding answers, insights, being challenged and discovering practice-based methodologies. Through these specifically made porcelain garments, some revelations in performative, costume-led performance making have been realized.

In this practice-based research project originality is determined by the chosen unconventional material, porcelain, and with it the intent to produce costumes for a live performance. By using this material, with all its own problematic natural features, I am able to reflect on performance and offer insights on working with material fragility as costume. Through the arduous stages of its developmental process, the costume, as experienced by the two dancers, developed an unfamiliar choreographic language in response to the material behaviour. As all the seams are metaphorically drawn together in its assembly, the costume, a refined porcelain object of complete delicate beauty and purity, requires a supportive under structure, given that, as described by Man it is 'like a foreign skeleton that clasps her flesh from the outside' (Man 2015).



Figure 11: Perceptive Fragility, the remains, immersive exhibition by Dawn Summerlin. Photograph by Helen Newall.

Yet through this insightful journey of growing respect towards the confines of the costume, also comes the dancer's unexpected juxtaposition of playful and defiant characterization, devised through pleasure in the fear the material inflicts. Like bodily armour it radiates a protective resilient quality, allowing to feel reassured, strong, supported and upheld in our posture. Yet in succession, exposes how temporal and fragile these are.

Conclusion

Throughout this performative research, there has been an unfolding of layers, layers like the intricately woven structures of the design process. Layers of insight formed through movement. Layers of experience felt, unexpected emotional responses, all governed by this porcelain costume material.

My methods have presented themselves as stages, a portrayal into the shift of control, between the material, the performer and the costume. These performers' costume will always have a reciprocal relationship with their body, through rips, tears and alterations that are also part of the metaphoric nature. The manifestation of this costume as the guiding 'text' to the choreography, breaks the norms of conventional dance performance making, while narrating its own fragile endurance. Porcelain, not typically a material applied to performance making, has undoubtedly exposed insights, enlightened and enriched me as a designer, practitioner and formulated foundations for future research.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dawn Summerlin has an extensive background working as a freelance artistic director and production designer, Yorkshire and Granada TV. She has worked on several historical and contemporary dramas over a period of fifteen years. Alongside her freelance design work, Dawn is also an associate tutor, covering design for performance subjects. Currently she is working at Edge Hill University, where she supports the performing arts department students with their theatre and visual design concepts, in set design, props, costume and character make-up. Her teaching and research-based practices at the university are in character and SFX make-up, scenographic costume and anatomical studies.

Contact: Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP, UK.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6084-0130>

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