Fashion meets tech, new era under way

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Imagine the ability to convert a belly dancing outfit into a burqa and vice versa, equipped with two servo motors and switch.

That's what MIT graduate student Ayah Bedeir imagined when she spent nearly four days making this project "Arabiia" to illustrate the media stereotypes typically associated with Arab women.

"I hope this project will empower Arab woman and the full range of woman in between," said Bedeir, who moved from Lebanon almost two years ago. "I would like people to take away questions about these stereotypes and whether they believe in them or not."

Bedeir joins a slew of designers partaking in the fashion show "Seamless: Computational Couture" (seamless.sigtronica.org), fusing technology and fashion to create conceptually innovating clothes whether making a statement or demonstrating the next wave in the fashion industry.

Seamless (to be presented Feb. 1) was put together by fellow MIT graduate students in media arts and sciences, Christine Liu and Nicholas Knouf, in collaboration with Lisa Monrose, director of Brainy Acts at the Museum of Science in Boston.

"There aren't many technological fashion and computation couture shows and there aren't a lot of venues for them," Knouf said. "We created this event to showcase designers working at the cross section of technology and fashion. These designers are augmenting people's senses

and placing computation power on the body."

The event showcases a collection of original works made by some of today's most innovative students from MIT, Rhode Island School of Design, Parsons School of Design and New York University as well as independent designers.

This year marks the second annual event for the show, considered a success last year as a public showing when over 200 people showed up.

In fact, Knouf says there have been inquires for the fashion show in other locations as well as on garments. And already a May 2007 date has been scheduled for next year.

"At first glance, it seems to be the format of a traditional run-way show, a real glamorous show," co-coordinator Lui said. "But outfits and projects that are being presented are influenced, enhanced, or transformed by technology. It begs you to think how we are reinventing the idea of clothing and rethinking its function in lifestyle and culture."

Lui is one of many designers combining today's infatuation of portable electronics with clothing. Her design "Urbanhermes" involves a messenger bag with an image that changes to complement a wearer's entire appearance via ephemeral fashion signals.

Meanwhile, designer David Lu spent three weekends creating the "iPod Status," a wearable information display that allows onlookers to read the artist and title information of the song playing on a small screen attached to a messenger bag shoulder strap.

"(Technology and fashion) will become more closely bound together," Lu said. "Fashion is our oldest form of social signaling. In the future, fashion will become a platform for exposing dynamic information about

ourselves and the things that surround us. I think we will see some very interesting services emerge that promote social awareness as well as social connectedness."

His idea dawned on Lu, while commuting to Frog Design's New York studio from Brooklyn and watching the "clad of white earbuds" on his train.

"This interested me," he said. "Riders of the L, typically Williamsburg hipsters, made for interesting people watching -- and seeing these white buds made me wonder what they were listening to. Wouldn't it be great if this information were exposed? Would people actually speak to one another as a result?"

Former Project Runway competitor Diana Eng also created a couple of pieces such as the Heartbeat Hoodie, which has a camera strategically placed above the eyes on the hood taking photographs as the wearer's heart rate increases, as means of a form of involuntary blogging.

But one of the challenges, Eng says, in merging technology and fashion together is making it practical for people.

"There are good designs and prototypes, but they aren't machine washable," she said. "I think eventually, they'll need to be commercially oriented."

Fellow designer John Rotenberg agrees saying that many in the show have impractical designs for the real use factoring in power supply and stiff exterior unlike clothes coupled with the need to protect it from water and other unfriendly tech elements.

These factors led Rotenberg to create darkWatch, a mobile communication device that uses an LED display embedded in silicon

rubber resembling a watch that modulates according to an interval of time set by the user.

He adds, however accessories like the darkWatch are perhaps the most current practical approach that could be made marketable by crossing technology and fashion.

Other creative projects include an elephant-inspired costume that picks up infrasonic and seismic vibrations and allows people to experience a sensation of endangered animals, a set of garments woven from part recycled magnetic tape and part cotton and audibly played by the wearer using a modified Walkman, "epiSkin jewelry" a product of biotechnology, and "Muk.luk.flux" a pair of boots which change shape based on the speed of motion of the wearer.

Designer Jen Paulousky who created "Hidden Agenda" -- a contemporary jacket with useful pockets that when revealed shows a hidden gas mask, noise-canceling headphones, and safety gloves, notes while her project may be practical in times of conflict, the garment would be ideal if it used flame-retardant fabric to prevent burns and other injuries.

"That's the problem with these designs," Paulousky said. "They are conceptually and visually interesting -- but not in any means useful. It's more art than an actual market."

But she says that the fusion of fashion and technology is no different from the fusion of technology and portability and see that more of these types of fashion shows ill be the wave in the future.

"It's fun to be in, and its fun to think of the designs," said Paulousky who suggests that in the future, the top three marketable designs should be chosen and produced to the public.

Whether or not, outfits are practicable and marketable, one thing is apparent; these designers are pushing the envelope beyond the mundane reinventions of color and cuts of past spring-summer-fall-winter styles.

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