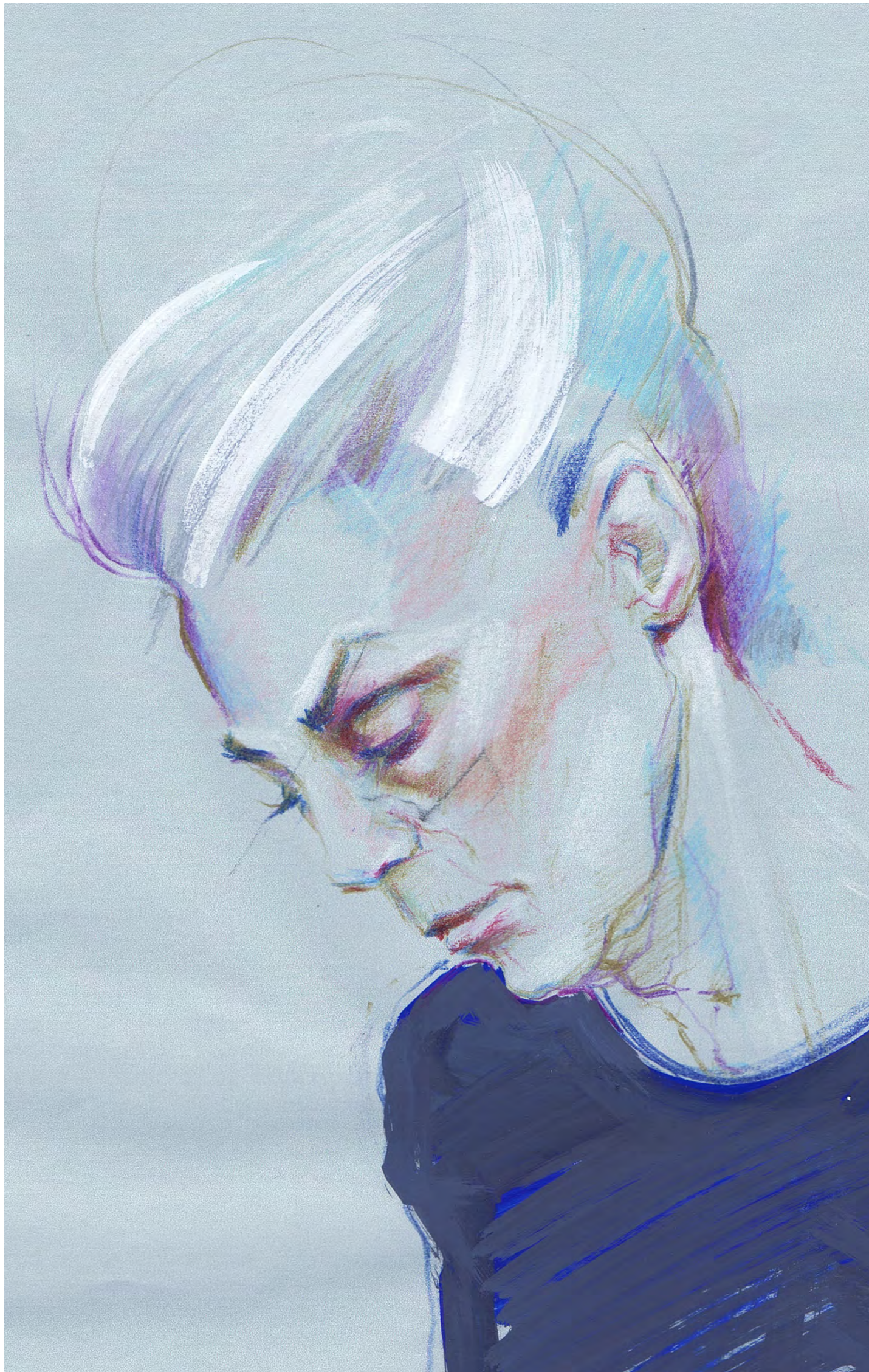# Envisioning Fashion's Invisible Woman;

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 practice-based research in the creation of 2D illustration based fashion design for the over 55 year old female fashion consumer a.k.a. 'The Invisible Woman'.

Audiences: Primarily, the audience is the older woman with my septuagenarian Muse as representative of her generational cohort, and also fashion students, in their role as taste makers and the future of the fashion industry.

Benefits: Changing attitudes towards fashion for the older consumer has the potential to benefit all stakeholders leading to improvements in the economy, growth within the fashion industry, increased career opportunities for fashion graduates (Sender, 2012), and improved wellbeing of the older woman (Twigg, 2013).

Research: The project developed from the issues arising from the visual and verbal enquiry of my 'older' Muse, Ann Howard, in particular from discussion on her relationship with fashion, and how this has changed with age.

Questions: Framing the project raised questions on what makes illustration 'fashionable', can the older woman be fashionable (or just stylish), what constitutes 'old' in fashion, and what does it look like, who makes these decisions, and is the research significant?

Process: Exploratory visual work evolved into rough fashion illustrations. These were then tested on the target audiences for their effectiveness as fashion illustrations of an older subject. Divergent thinking processes enabled further secondary and primary research to be incorporated into image making throughout the process.

As an illustrator, drawing is a primary 'way(s) of knowing' (Fletcher & Grose, 2012, p158), and is embedded in personal creative practice. Exploring Ann's physical form through mark making, not only reflected her colourful life on both a physical and symbolic level, but also created understanding of how she holds herself and moves; the space between her clothes and her body, and how she occupies the space within her environment.

In an attempt to find out how Ann sees herself, she was asked to record how she curates her look by taking 'selfies' on her tablet over a period of 6 months. The findings were then used to direct the project until potential illustrative solutions emerged that could be tested on both audiences.

Challenge: The key challenge was how to negotiate the tension between age and fashion, when the visual codes are opposed; age is considered a 'flaw' and fashion illustration's purpose is to represent the (flawless) ideal.

Findings: The developing images revealed that fashion illustration and design codes communicating a fashionable attitude (e.g. dereliction, vulnerability, sexual confidence, nonchalance, humour, eccentricity, etc.) don't always translate successfully across generational boundaries.

Feedback also indicated that illustration techniques traditionally used to make fashion drawings attractive, e.g. larger eyes, an elongated neck and legs, a full pout, etc., could make the older woman look 'regressive, vulnerable and needy'. Furthermore, combining several codes for age in one image diluted the fashion message.

In encoding the images to connect with diverse audience(s), it became evident that greater attention to visual context was needed in support of the figure, to explain the older muse's presence in the image. Rexbye and Povlsen's research into the perception of age (2007), informed the decision to use the 'potential for movement' and 'interest in and connection to the outside world' as a visual tool to better connect the older Muse to a diverse audience.

Feedback: Both target audiences responded well to the concept and draft outputs of the project, and responded emotionally, intellectually and critically to the illustrations. Students appeared fascinated by the rapport and interaction with my Muse throughout the project, and expressed an increasingly open minded attitude to the opportunities that working within the older fashion market could offer:

Furthermore, their comments were influential in forming my future research direction, confirming that this research is worthwhile, not only to the older woman and fashion, but on a broader socio-cultural level :

'...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 (sic) so I buy 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!' (Anonymous student feedback, Survey Monkey, 2015)

Feedback from the 'older woman' was crucial in framing the project's problem space, and also beneficial to Ann who, through participation in the project, can recognise her own style and strengths.

'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, 2017)

Reflection: Listening to the ideas and responses of both generational cohorts changed not only my pre-conceived ideas about their relationships with fashion and their fashion needs, but also the content of my research, the way I work as a creative practitioner and, most importantly the direction of my future work and research.

Moving forward: Throughout the Selfie project, the role of my Muse (Ann), developed from object of inspiration, through expert representative of her generation, to co-creator. Most of the questions about the project related to the human element – personal values, identity, relationships between the artist and muse, and the benefits of being part of the fashion community to the individual's sense of self-worth and personhood.

This poster presentation marks the start of a new phase of research: to gain feedback from socio-cultural gerontology experts on my research, and use this to frame a future PhD that explores how fashion and age can be brought together for mutual benefit.

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