

Wearing the Rules:

**From Material Control
to Digital Governance**

Kitty Zhang

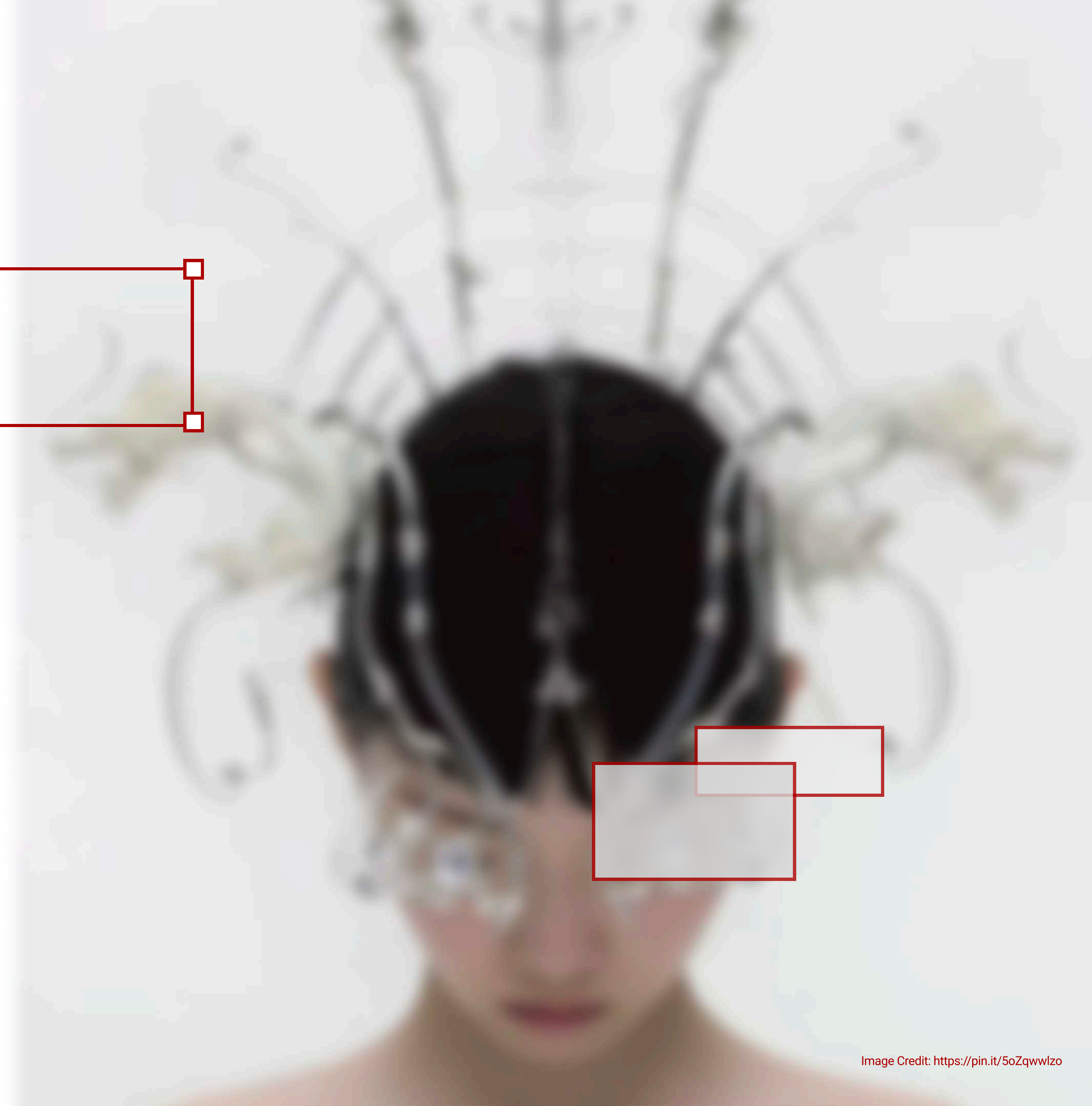
**Master Project
2025-2026**

Idea

“Is my outfit fashionable enough today?”

When this question popped into my head, I realized **something was wrong**—not my clothes, but how I judged myself. This thought didn't stem from my own preferences, but from an **imaginary audience**, from the **fear of judgment**. What should I look like to be accepted?

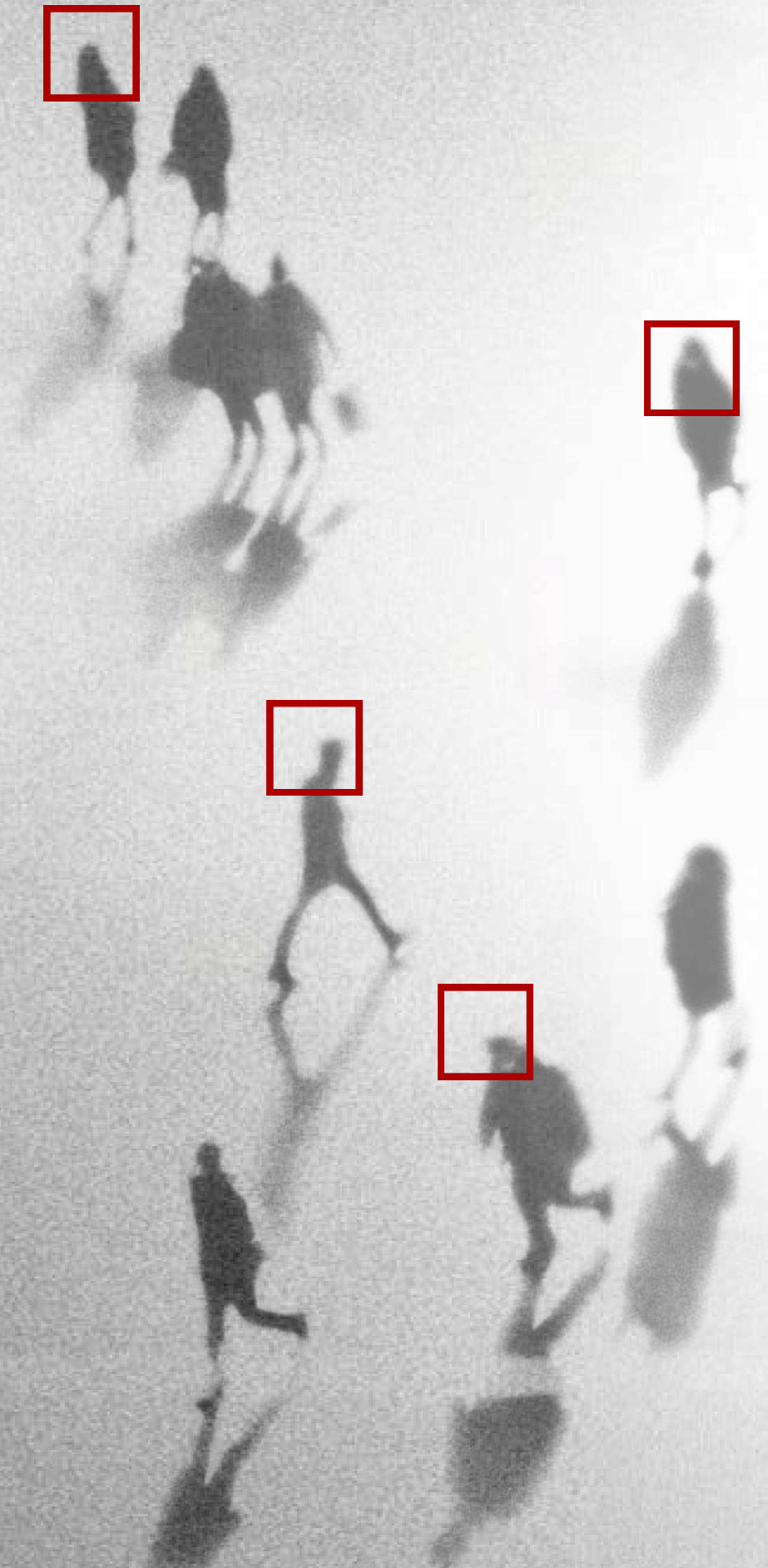
At that moment, I realized my decisions were **no longer free**. They were **controlled by invisible expectations**. Realizing this made me understand that fashion was influencing me in ways I hadn't noticed before.



Context

In a world increasingly dominated by consumption, curated identities, and algorithmic aesthetics, **fashion** plays a **powerful**—yet often **invisible**—role in shaping who we are.

While fashion is widely seen as a personal and creative outlet, this project questions whether this “**freedom**” is in fact **manufactured** by external pressure. Drawing on research into social judgement, consumer culture, and digital algorithms, the work visualizes these hidden controls through **three AR virtual clothing** and **a short film**.



Purpose

Aim

- This project aims to explore how fashion extends from material control to digital governance and to understand how these mechanisms affect people's sense of freedom and identity.

Objectives

□ I

Identify hidden control mechanisms in physical and digital fashion systems.

□ III

Examine how social media and algorithms shape consumer behavior and self-perception.

□ II

Analyze examples of contemporary fashion control through brand case studies and online observation.

□ IV

Translate these findings into three virtual clothing designs and a short film to visualize the different levels of influence.

June

Focus Group

July

Case Study

August

Digital Ethnography

Experimentation

Visual Research

September

Digital Clothing Designing

Dissertation

October

Digital Fashion Modeling

AR Effect

November

Film Shooting

Editing and Effect Production

Dissertation

Proof Read

Hand In

Timeline

03

Augmented Reality

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01

Research

02

Costume Design



Final Film

04

Focus Group

To understand how **fashion** influences **daily behavior** and **emotional response**, I conducted a focus group with **eight participants**. The discussion explored personal dressing **habits**, hidden **rules** around fashion, and the impact of **social media** and **algorithms** on self-expression.

Profile:

Fashion students, young professionals, active social media users

Key questions:

1. How do social media and algorithms shape your choices?
2. How does fashion influence your sense of identity?

Participants: 8

Age : 21-34

Duration: 1 hour

□ Key Findings

1. Fear of Judgement

Participants felt pressure to appear “fashionable”, often imagining how others might evaluate them.

2. Self-Surveillance in Dressing

Many monitored their own appearance more strictly than any external observer.

3. Algorithmic Influence on Buying

Consumption was often driven by social media aesthetics rather than personal need.

4. Emotional Impact

Anxiety, guilt, and pressure were commonly expressed.

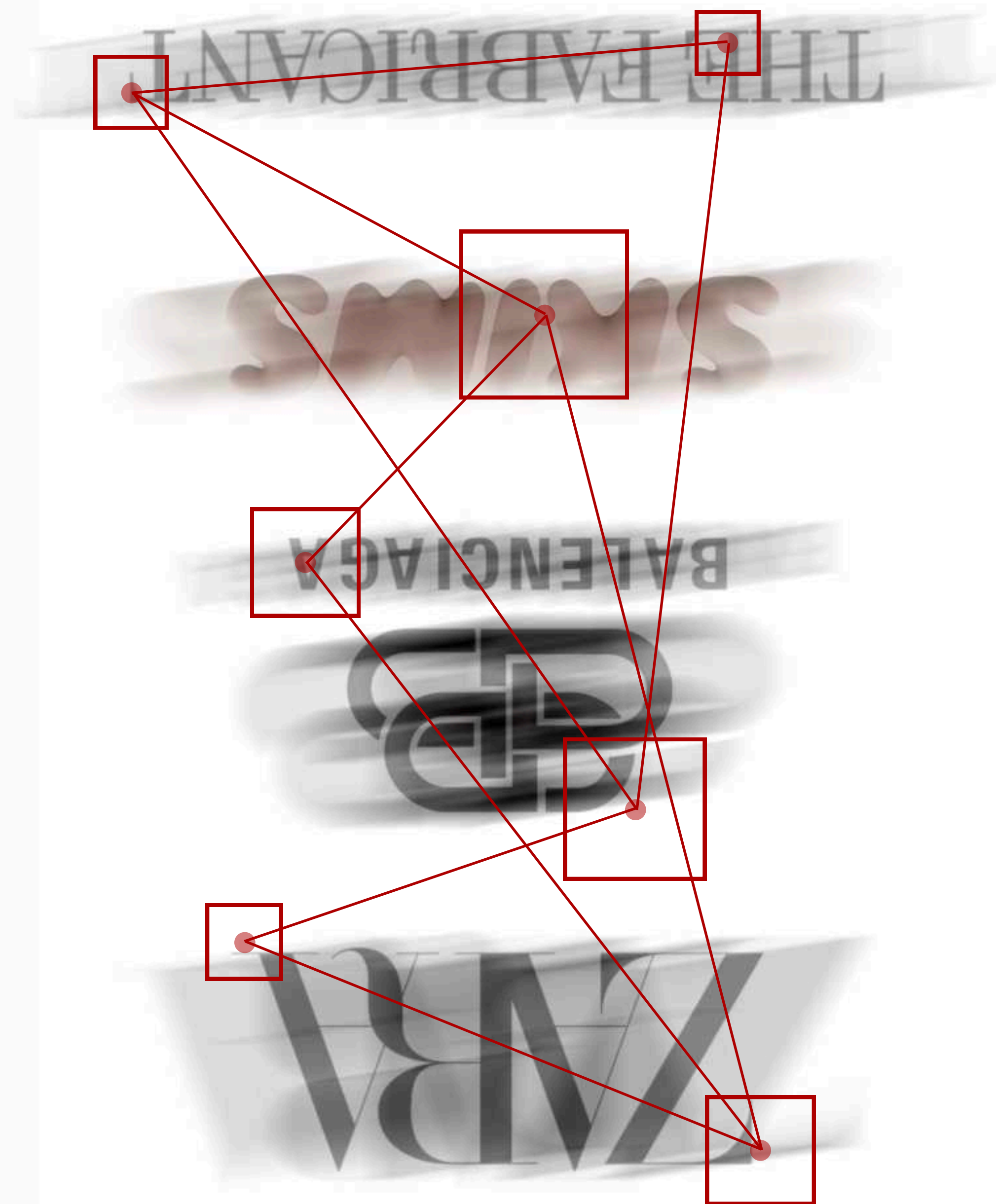
The **focus group** delved into how people internalize the **unspoken rules** of fashion. These findings confirm the process by which the control over fashion shifts from **external** pressure and algorithms to **internal** constraints. The focus group revealed many hidden rules to me, providing further **inspiration** for the development of the **augmented reality clothing** concept and the **nine unspoken** rules presented in the final film.



Case Study

The Illusion of Fashion and Choice: How Brands Use Consumerism to Shape Behavior

Fashion is often seen as a realm of creativity and self-expression. However, beneath its glamorous exterior lies a system intertwined with consumerism and subtle control. Fashion brands subtly guide individual clothing choices through the manipulation of trends, marketing narratives, and identity politics. This study examines four brands—Zara, Balenciaga, SKIMS, and The Fabricant—to explore how fashion constructs the illusion of choice in contemporary culture.



Zara:

Fast Fashion and the Logic of Constant Replacement

Zara, one of the world's most influential fast-fashion brands, is known for its rapid release model of "weekly updates." Zara launches up to 52 micro-collections a year (Brui, 2024). This pace creates a cycle of planned obsolescence. Clothing appears "outdated" long before it physically wears out. Even the store layout is designed to support this behavior—merchandise is frequently rearranged to create a sense of urgency and scarcity. Zara's marketing reinforces the idea that "constant change equals staying relevant," encouraging consumers to redefine themselves through continuous purchases (Sun, 2024).

Photo by Burak Başgöze via Pexels



Key Control Strategies

- Artificially created trend cycles and the resulting fear of missing out (FOMO)
- Social media marketing promotes "following trends" rather than long-term styles
- Standardized aesthetic archetypes in styling reinforce narrow identity ideals

Balenciaga:

Shock Value and the Commodification of Subversion



Courtesy of © BALENCIAGA

Under creative director Demna Gvasalia, Balenciaga has distilled an aesthetic built on irony, alienation, and deliberate anti-fashion. It transforms historically rebellious elements into lucrative spectacles. Iconic examples, such as the €1,790 garbage bag tote bag, demonstrate how counterculture symbols can be repackaged as luxury (DeNinno, 2022).

Meanwhile, the brand frequently incorporates political events and crisis themes into its designs (Nast, 2024). This strategy reinforces a hierarchy of understanding: only those well-versed in ironic semiotics and fashion theory can truly “fit in.” Behind this performance lies a carefully controlled narrative of identity, transforming subversion into an exclusive aesthetic language.

Courtesy of © BALENCIAGA



- Using irony as a luxury language, excluding those unfamiliar with its meaning
- Turning rebellion into an elite commodity
- Using political symbols to gain attention

Key Control Strategies



SKIMS:

Body Politics and Algorithmic Intimacy



Courtesy of © Skims

SKIMS bills itself as a shape-wear brand advocating for body positivity and inclusivity (Khanpara, 2023), but its success relies on subtle body standardization and behavioral influence mechanisms. Through targeted social media marketing, collaborations with Victoria's Secret models, and data-driven product promotion, SKIMS subtly reinforces the definition of the "perfect natural body"—smooth, shapely, and with an even skin tone (Pauly, 2022).

This aesthetic is then amplified through algorithmic dissemination. The more user interaction, the more the platform reinforces this norm (Elias, Gill, and Scharff, 2017). In this context, SKIMS acts as a soft control system, using alluring and powerful language to encourage women to focus on and change themselves.

SOLUTIONS FOR EVERY BODY



Courtesy of © Skims

Key Control Strategies

- Commodifying Self-Esteem: "Gaining Confidence by Changing Body Shape"
- Reinforcing a Narrow but "Inclusive" Aesthetic Through Well-Cultivated Advertising



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The Fabricant:

Algorithmic Aesthetics and the Digital Body

Courtesy of © The Fabricant



Courtesy of © The Fabricant



The Fabricant presents digital fashion as a free and sustainable space, yet its clothing operates within a platform environment. To gain attention, its designs often follow the visual logic favored by these systems—fluid textures, clean silhouettes, and a highly idealized post-human form (The Fabricant, 2021). While the brand advocates for collaborative creation, participation depends on technological literacy and internet access, thus creating a new digital hierarchy. This echoes Hayles' (1999) view of the post-human form, which is not limited by material factors but rather governed by data-driven system and platform logic.

Key Control Strategies

- The Aesthetics of Algorithmic Selection
- Digital Literacy Limits Participation
- "Creative Freedom" Constrained by Platform Rules

Tracing Fashion Through the Feed

I studied Instagram through its most active fashion spaces:

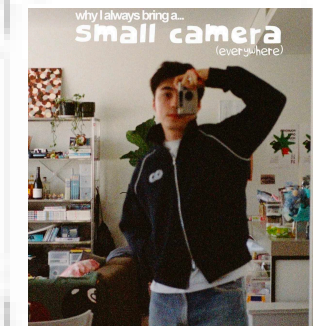
#GRWM, #OOTD, #lookgoodfeelgood, #SheinHaul, #AestheticCore.

Thousands of short videos, mirror selfies, outfit reels, and haul clips—all performing “personal style,” yet following similar rhythms, colors, poses, and aesthetics.

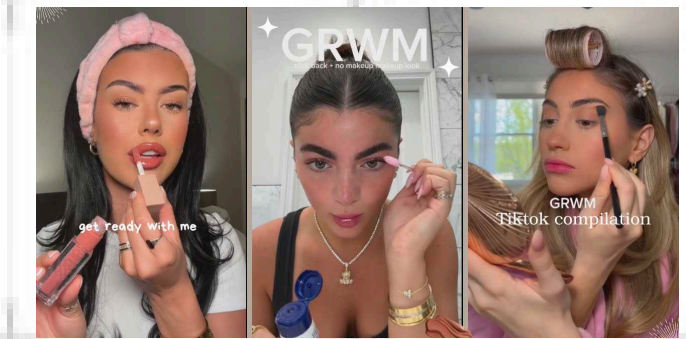
Digital Ethnography

Outfits are chosen not only for daily life, but for the camera.

Clothing becomes content.

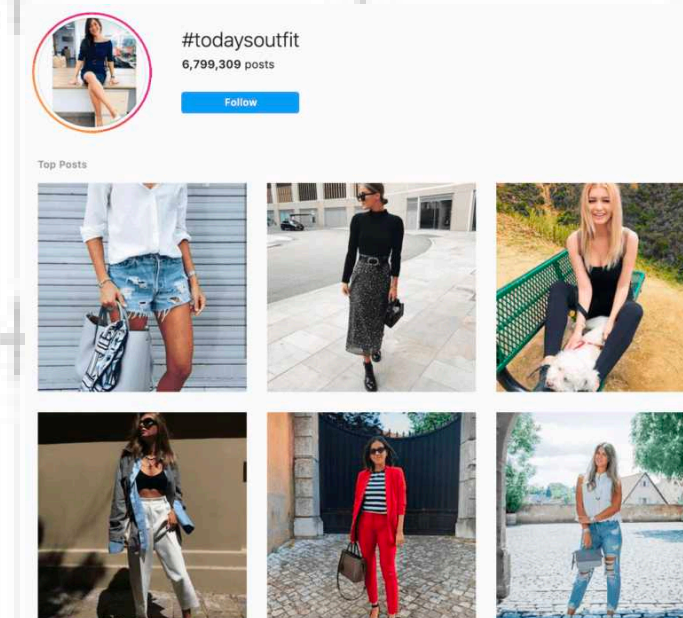


The feed promotes specific looks: neutral palettes, glossy textures, clean silhouettes, “effortless but polished.”

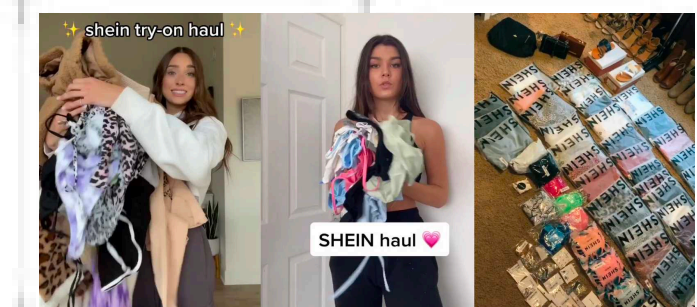


The algorithm decides what looks good before the user does.

Across hundreds of profiles, the same silent behavior appeared: the same outfit almost never shows up on a user’s grid twice.



Hauls, links, and “micro-influencer” videos blur the line between authentic style and sponsored promotion.



A garment is “used up” once it is posted— not physically, but socially.

The Rules

Through focus group interviews, browsing social media, and researching the fashion system, patterns began to emerge.

Subtle behaviors, repetitive gestures, unspoken expectations.

These patterns are not explicitly stated, yet everyone seems to follow them.

I summarized the observed phenomena and tried to rephrase them in a demanding tone. Nine invisible rules were born:

Rule #1 Do not wear the same clothes as you did the day before.

Rule #2 Prove your professionalism through makeup.

Rule #3 Do not wear wrinkles.

Rule #4 Women must carry back packs because clothing pockets are small.

Rule #5 Show the logo to prove you exist.

Rule #6 Wear neutral colors and suppress emotion.

Rule #7 Do not post the same outfit online.

Rule #8 Remove your stockings during an emergency because stockings are flammable.

Rule #9 Do not fit the body; reshape it thinner.

These subtle instructions shape how we dress, what we present, and what kind of person we believe we should be.

They constitute the hidden choreography behind everyday fashion.

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01

Research

03

Augmented
Reality



**Costume
Design**

02

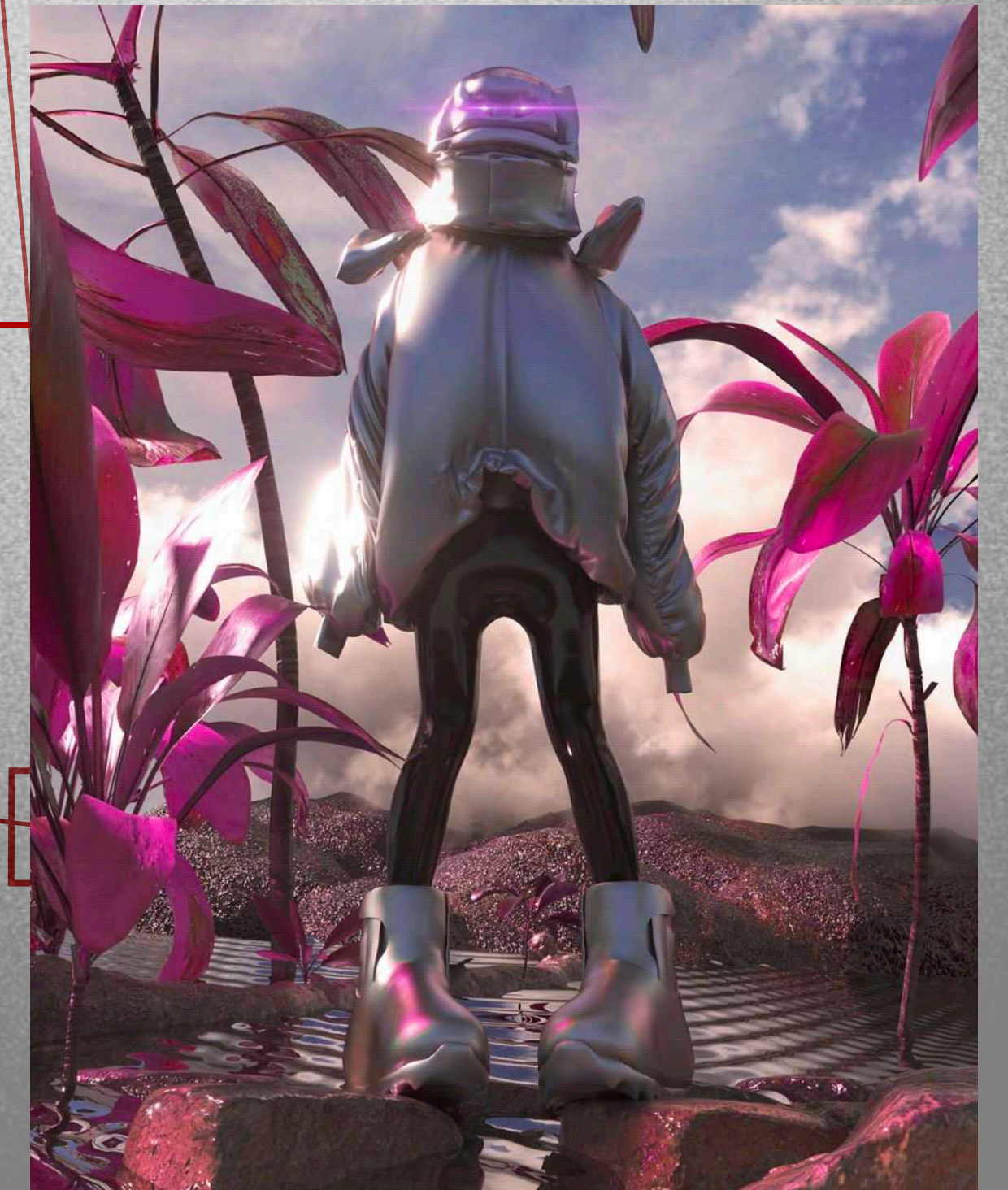


Final
Film

04

Inspiration

Iris van Herpen



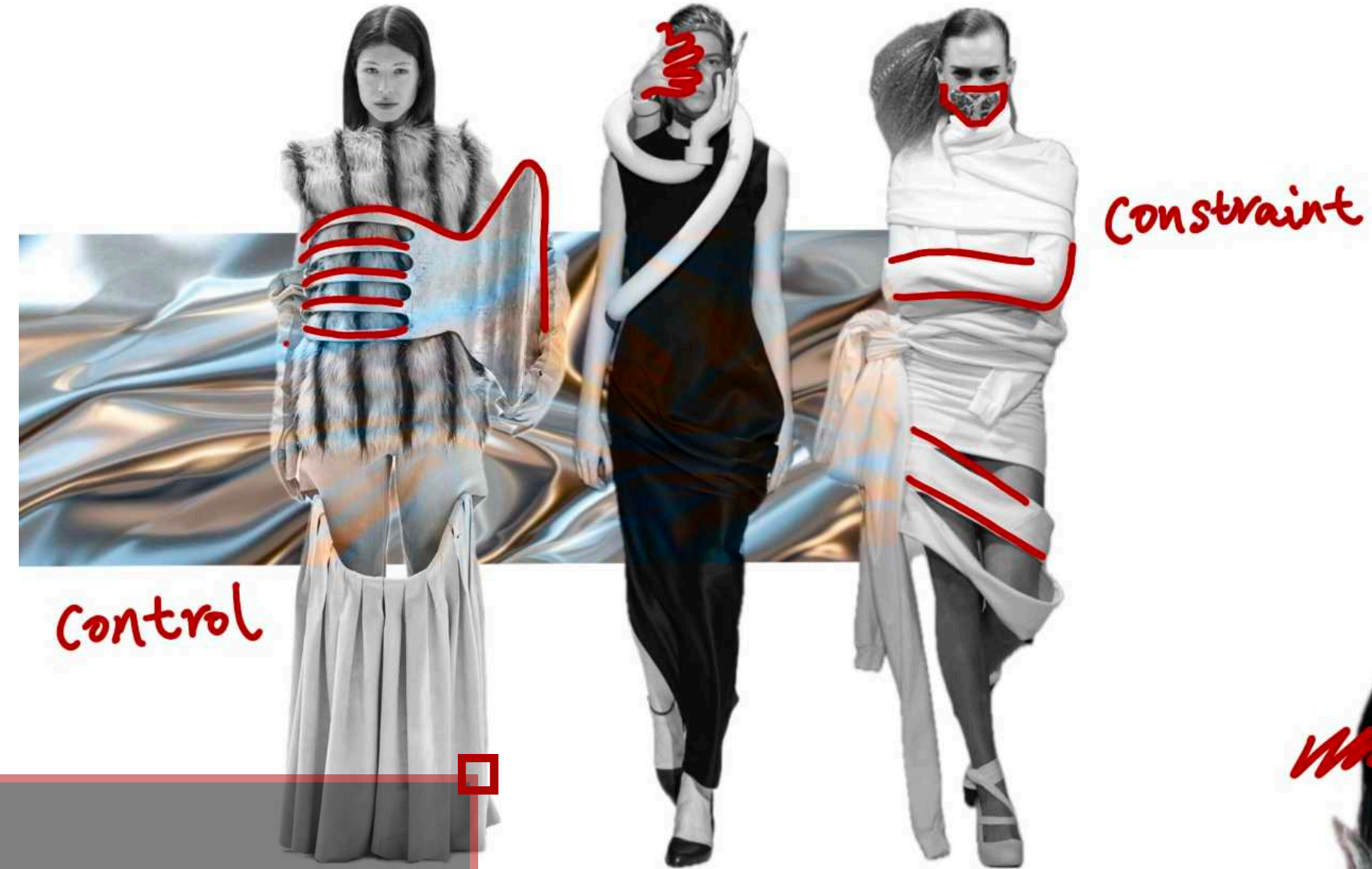
Iris van Herpen's work profoundly influenced my designs; she was able to transform materials into fluid, almost living structures. Her clothing often oscillated between organic and digital. This philosophy led me to no longer view clothing as a fixed form, but rather as a system of movement and emotion.

Antoni Tudisco's surreal digital world inspired me to transcend the limitations of physical fashion. His visual work, blending exaggeration, gloss, and impossible textures, showcases how digital design can create its own unique logic and aesthetic. This perspective inspired me to apply augmented reality (AR) to a space that transcends reality and amplifies symbolism. In this concept, the virtual human body becomes a metaphorical canvas rather than a pursuit of precise representation.

Antoni Tudisco

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Mood Board



control

blind

constraint

After some basic visual research, I decided to design exaggerated silhouettes to make the clothes appear to control the wearer. Meanwhile, I leaned towards using semi-transparent materials to metaphorically represent invisible rules. In addition, I wanted to incorporate elements of receipts into the designs to symbolize the fashion market and overconsumption.

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invisible rules

cumbrance
heavy



Excessive consumption

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I collected a thick stack of shopping receipts and conducted an experiment. I randomly folded or rolled up the receipts based on intuition, trying to find some interesting combinations to inspire clothing designs.



Experiment 2

Another key point I wanted to express through clothing was the sense of constraint and layering. Therefore, I took seven similar garments from my own wardrobe and layered them randomly on a mannequin. This experiment broadened my thinking. As someone without a fashion design background, I gained more daring design directions.



Initial Sketches



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Headphones => fashionable accessory



Listen to the sounds from outside through headphone

Being trapped on the head and neck by external sounds.

The cape hat blocks the view.

Snake Wrapping around the neck

Inappropriate clothes dragging their hands

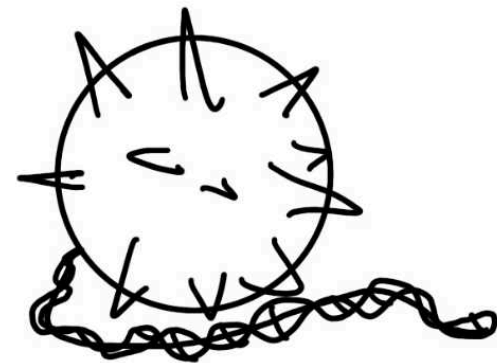
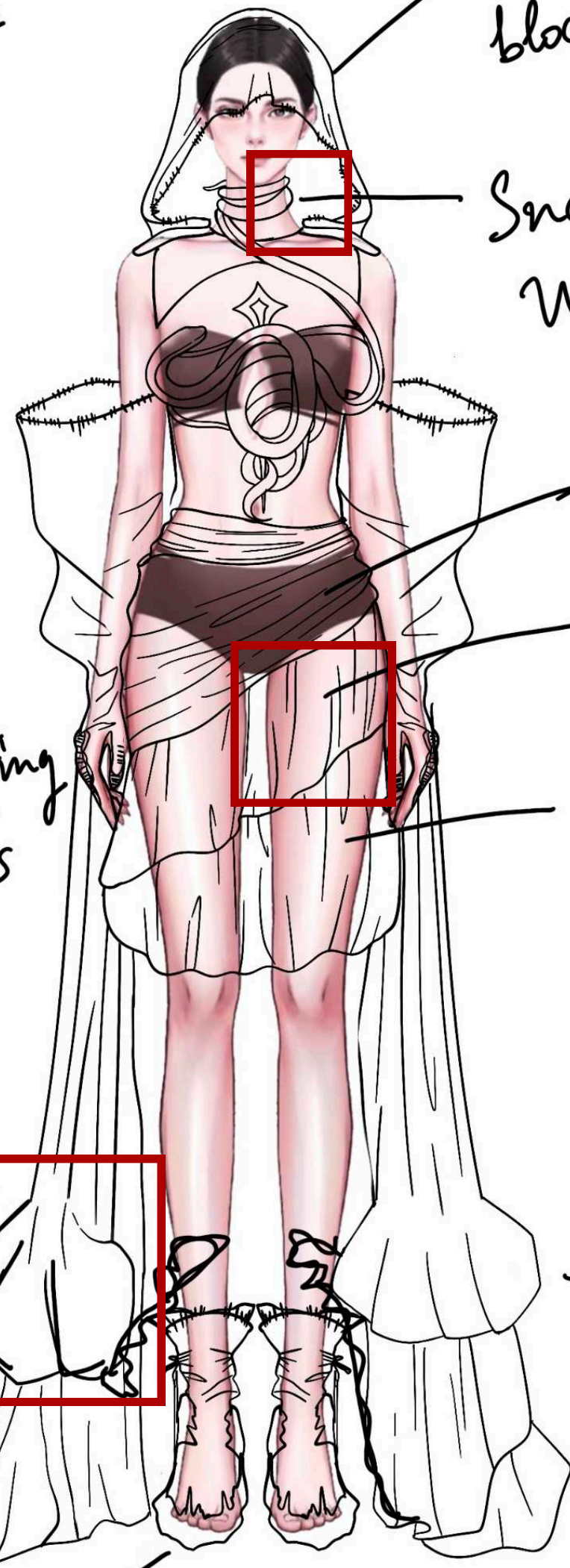
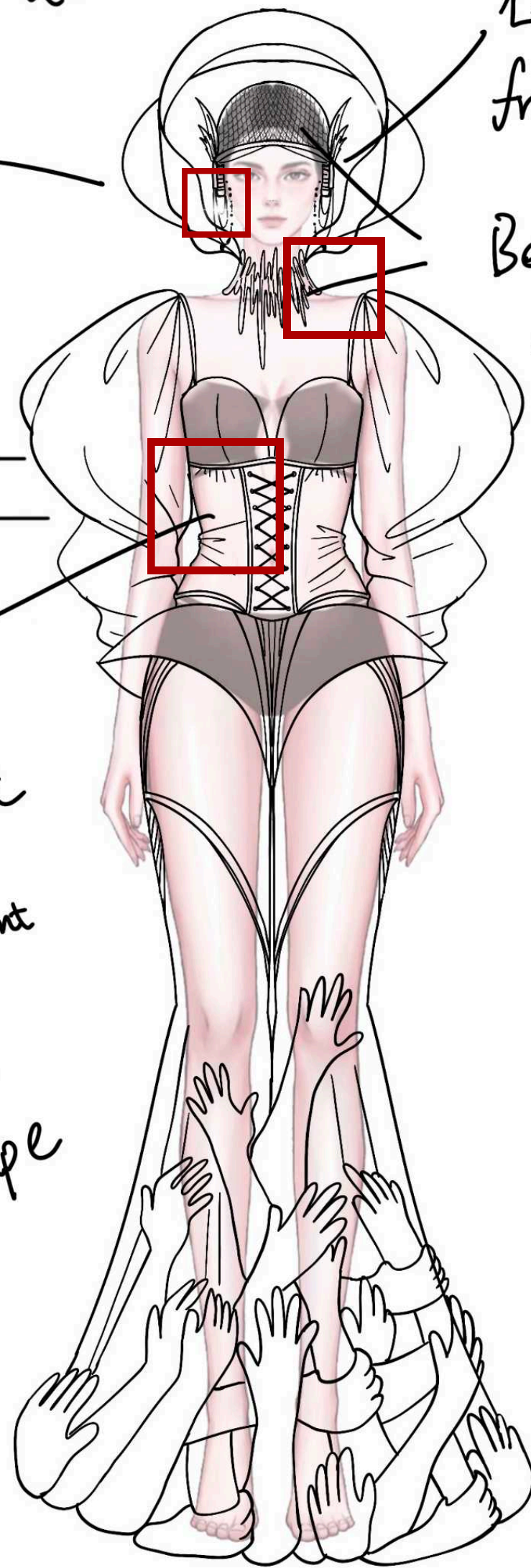
Jeans
Leather
gauze
1. bought too many unnecessary clothes
2. Layered dressing style



Corset tie constraint



Judging body shape



Details

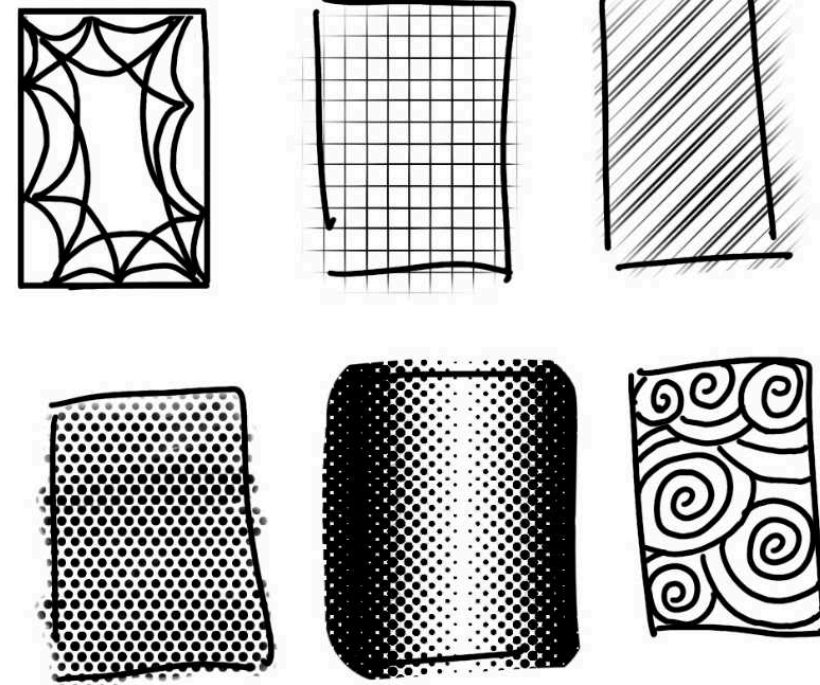
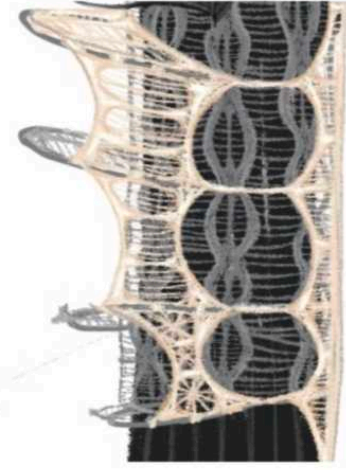
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Bound by a meticulously woven net

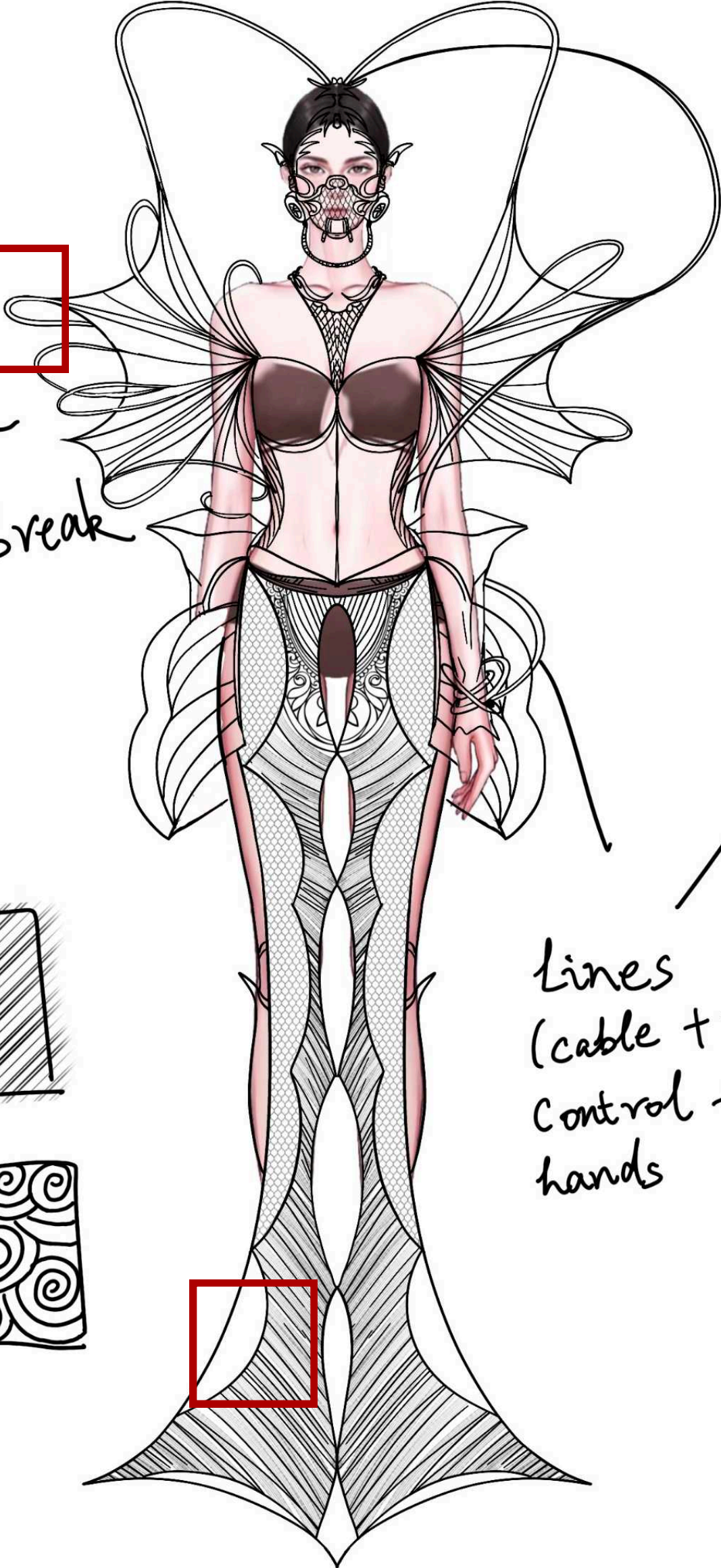


tied up
intertwine

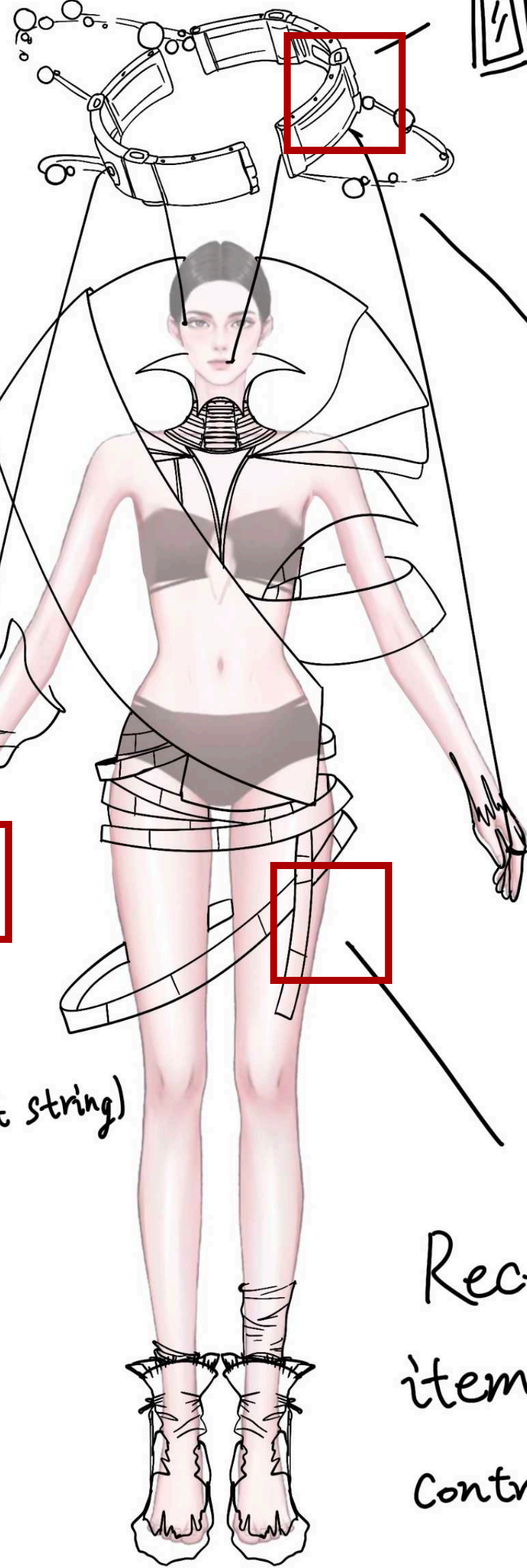
Hard to break



Data cables:
connecting the head
to the net

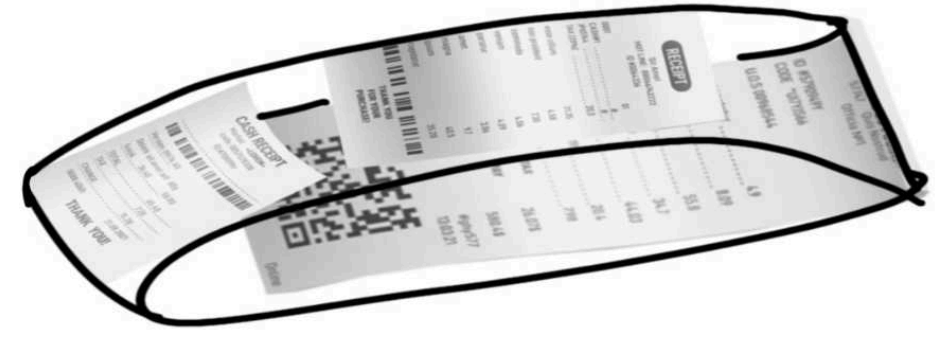


lines
(cable + puppet string)
Control the hands



electronic screen
phone, Internet, social media.

emoji bubbles.
like + comments.
Judgement.

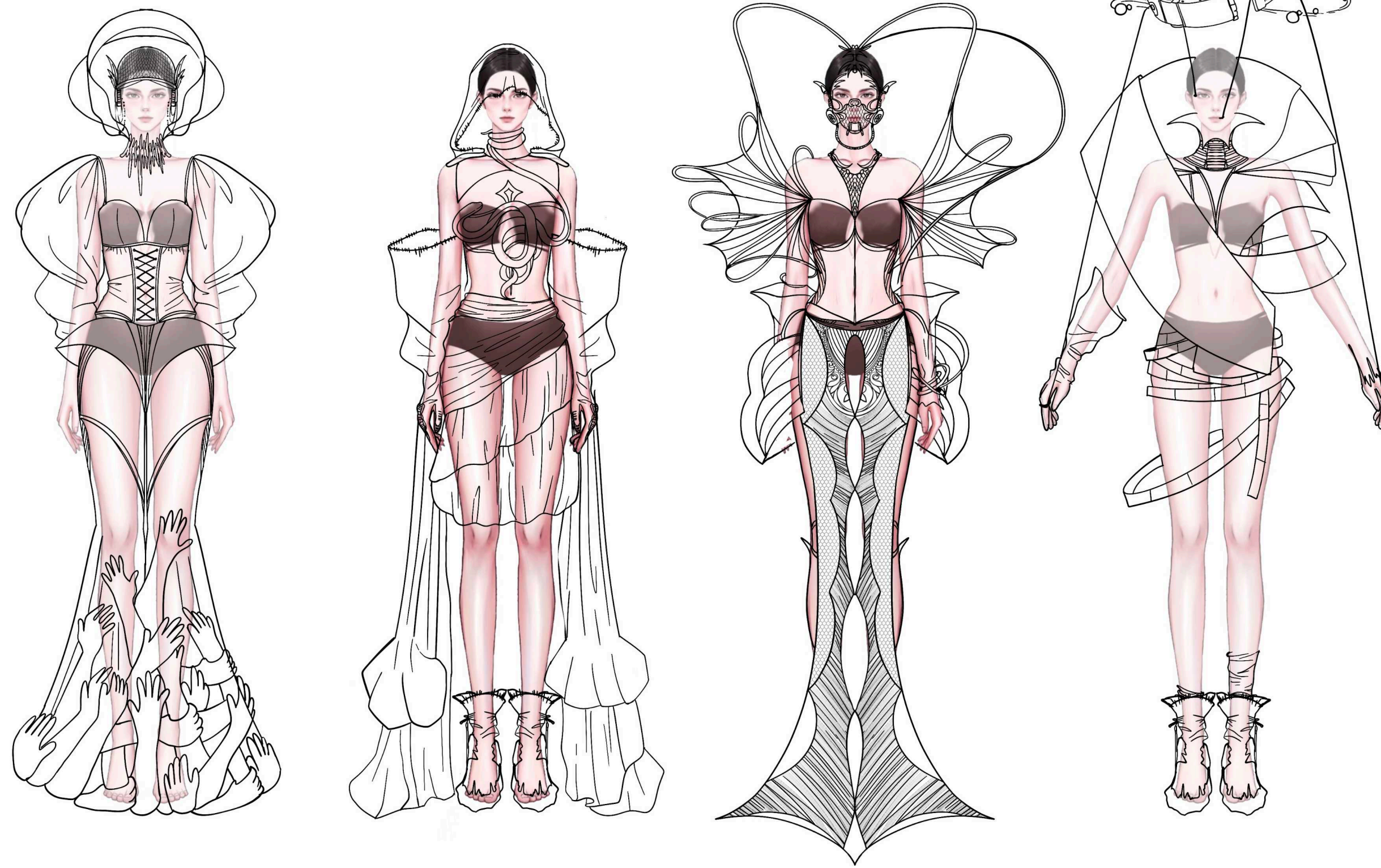


Receipts for the purchased items under the invisible control of marketing tactics.

Details

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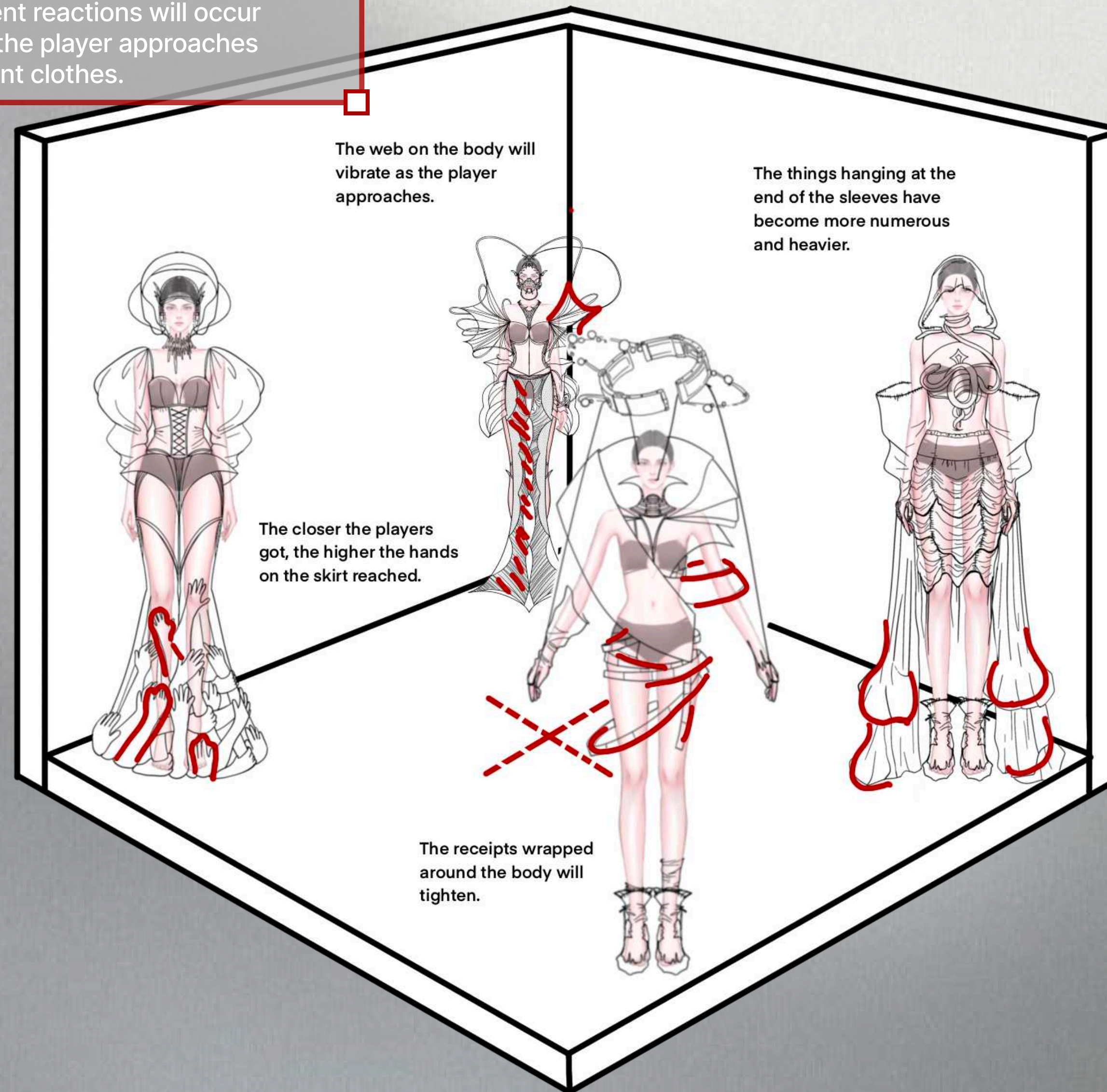
Initial Design



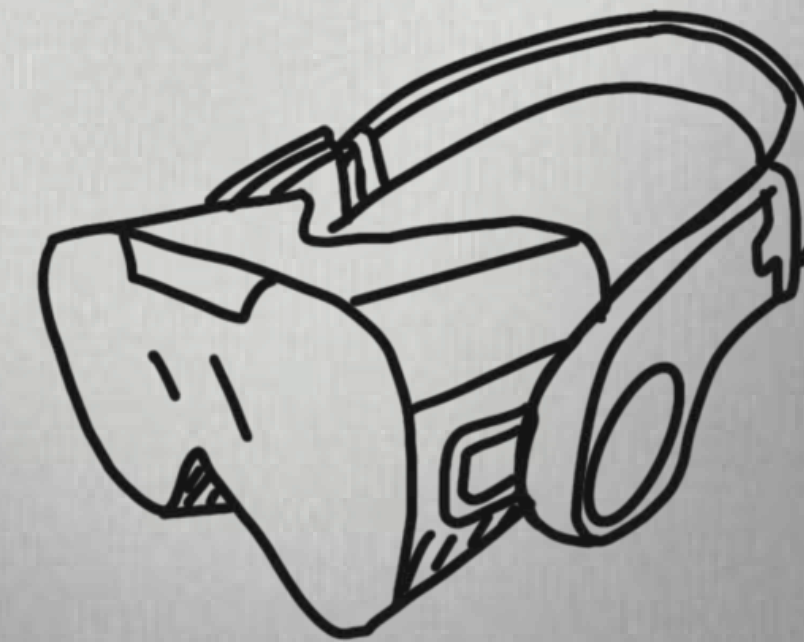
□ After selecting and combining sketches, I arrived at four designs. I then refined these four designs by integrating them with the research theme.

At this point, the specific concepts each theme emphasized weren't very clear. They seemed like a collection of unrelated elements stacked together, lacking cohesiveness. Nevertheless, this was my first real costume design experience. I was looking forward to it.

The player puts on the VR glasses and enters a room. There are models wearing four sets of clothes in the four corners. Different reactions will occur when the player approaches different clothes.



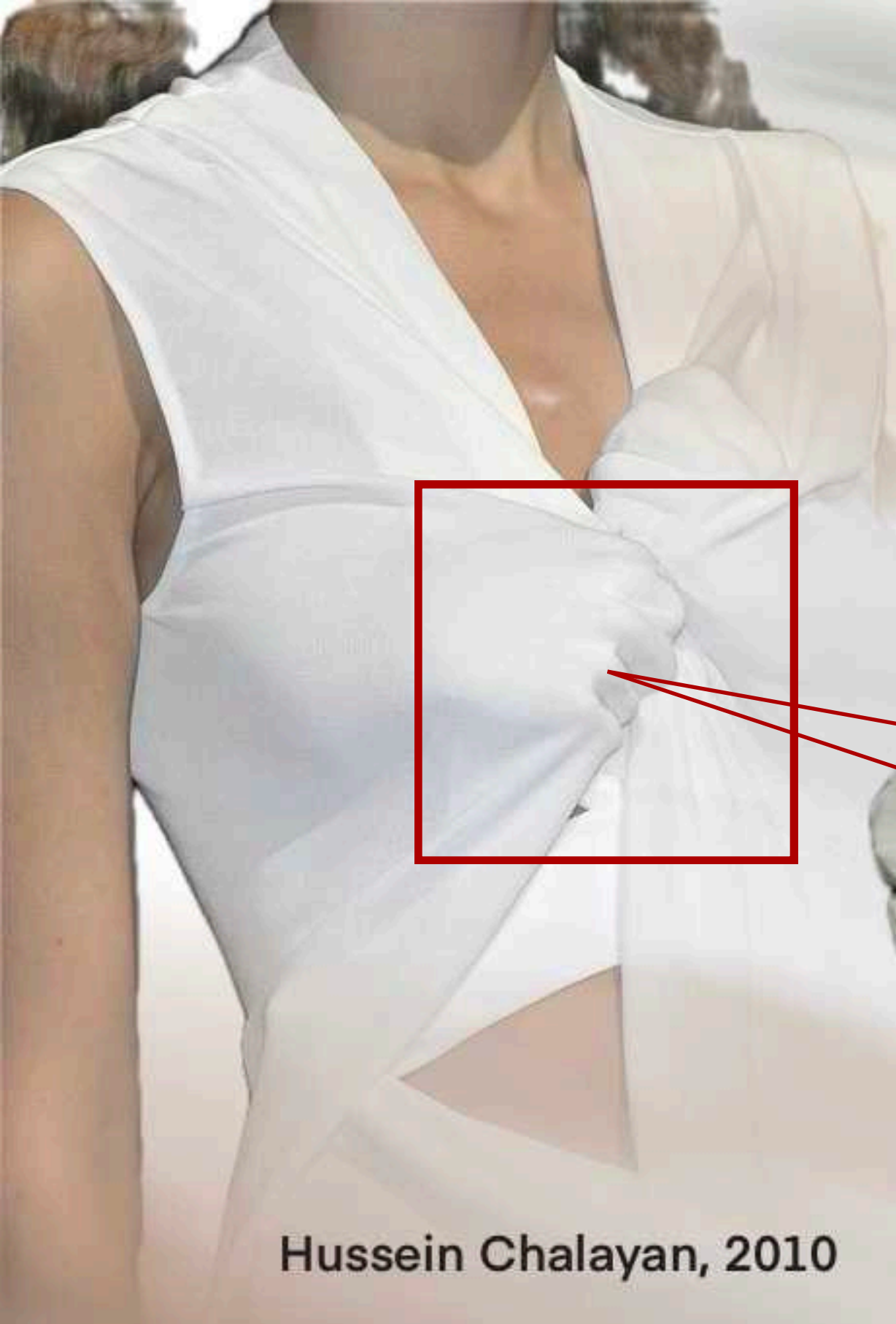
Initial Design



Initially, my goal was to create an immersive experience for the audience, so I planned to use VR technology to create a virtual space to showcase my clothing. The audience could wear VR headsets and immerse themselves in a virtual fashion show. However, after consulting with the instructors at the Digital Learning Lab, they gave me a better suggestion: to present the three outfits using augmented reality. Wearing virtual clothes in a real environment would have a greater impact than in a virtual space. AR also aligns better with my concept of visualizing real-world rules.

Final Design

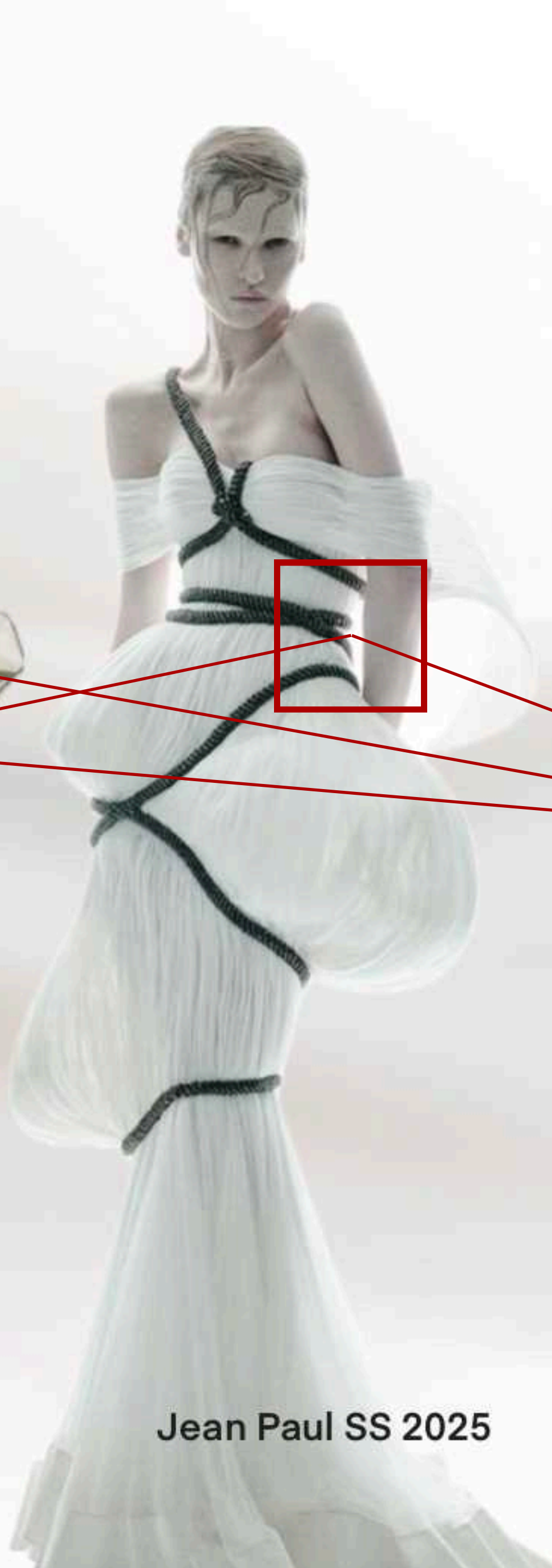
After receiving feedback from professors and peers through the presentation, I decided to continue refining my design. My current design is visually appealing, but some details are too superficial. For example, using a snake to represent the greedy desire to buy clothing. Also, the four outfits are somewhat disjointed, lacking a clear connection between them. Next, I changed the four outfits into three with a narrative sequence. Meanwhile, I conducted three separate visual research to gain a deeper understanding of how the details of the clothing should be designed. I also added simple animations to the three outfits. Although, in the end, it wasn't fully realized due to limitations in AR technology.



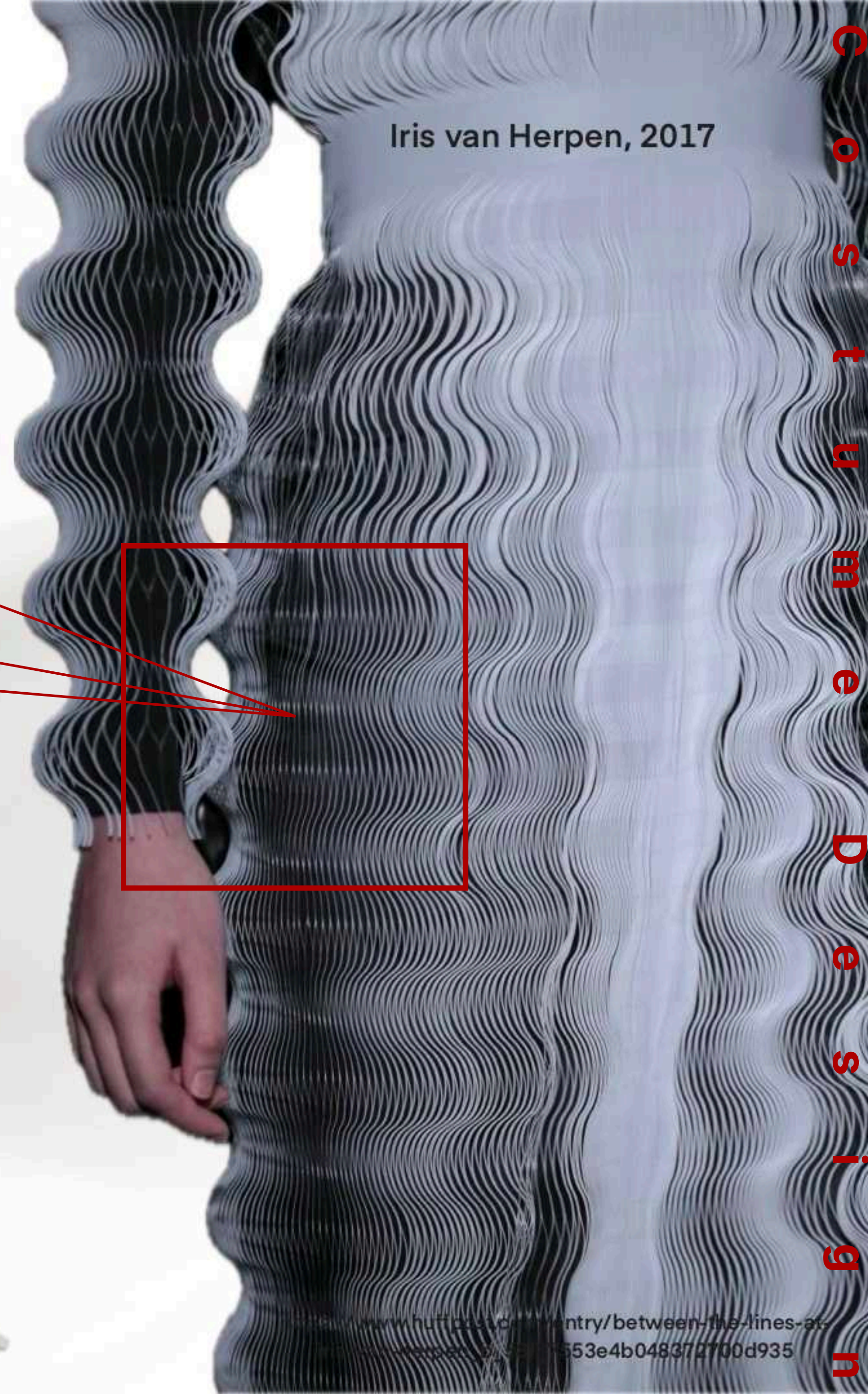
Hussein Chalayan, 2010



Han Kjøbenhavn
Autumn 2022



Jean Paul SS 2025



Iris van Herpen, 2017

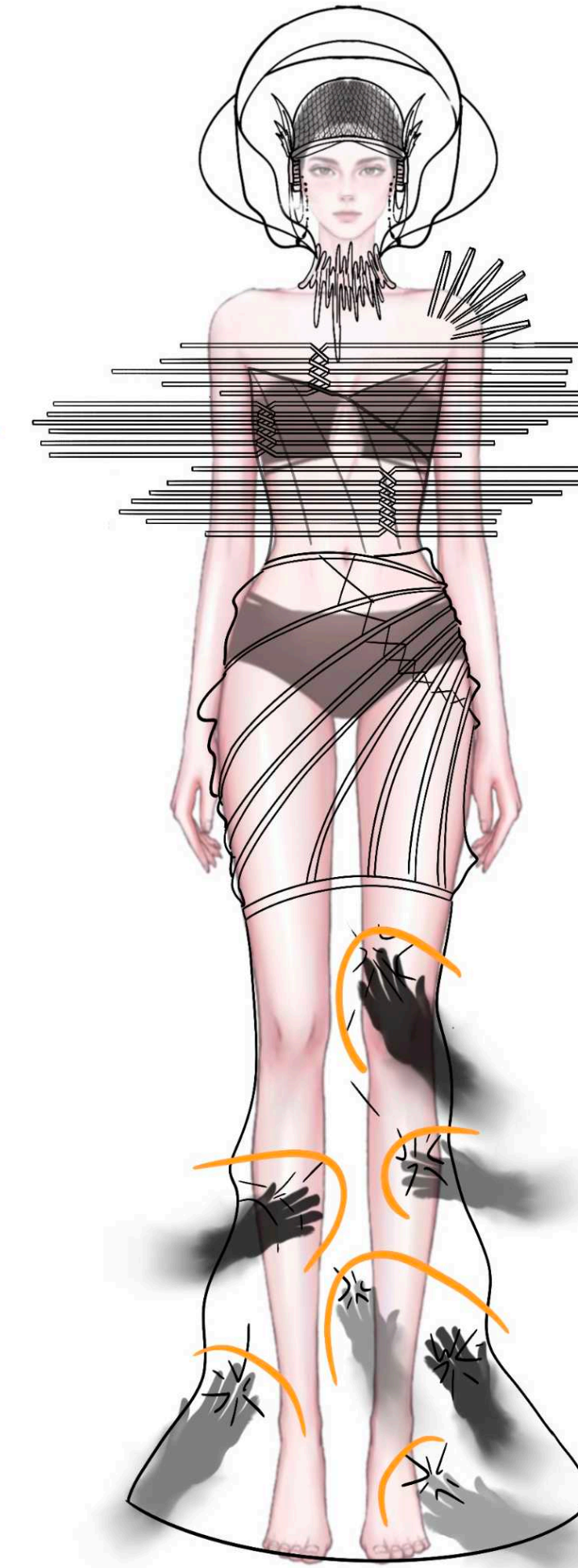
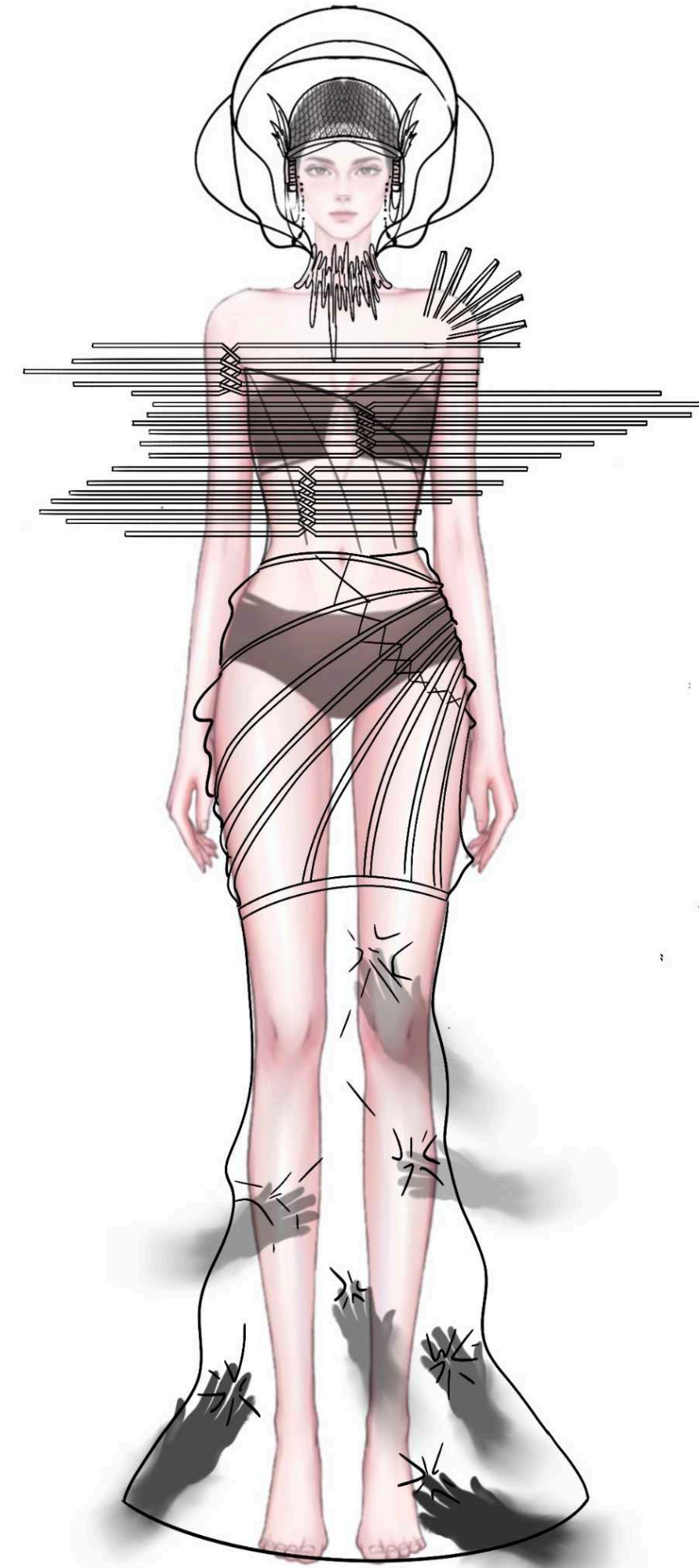
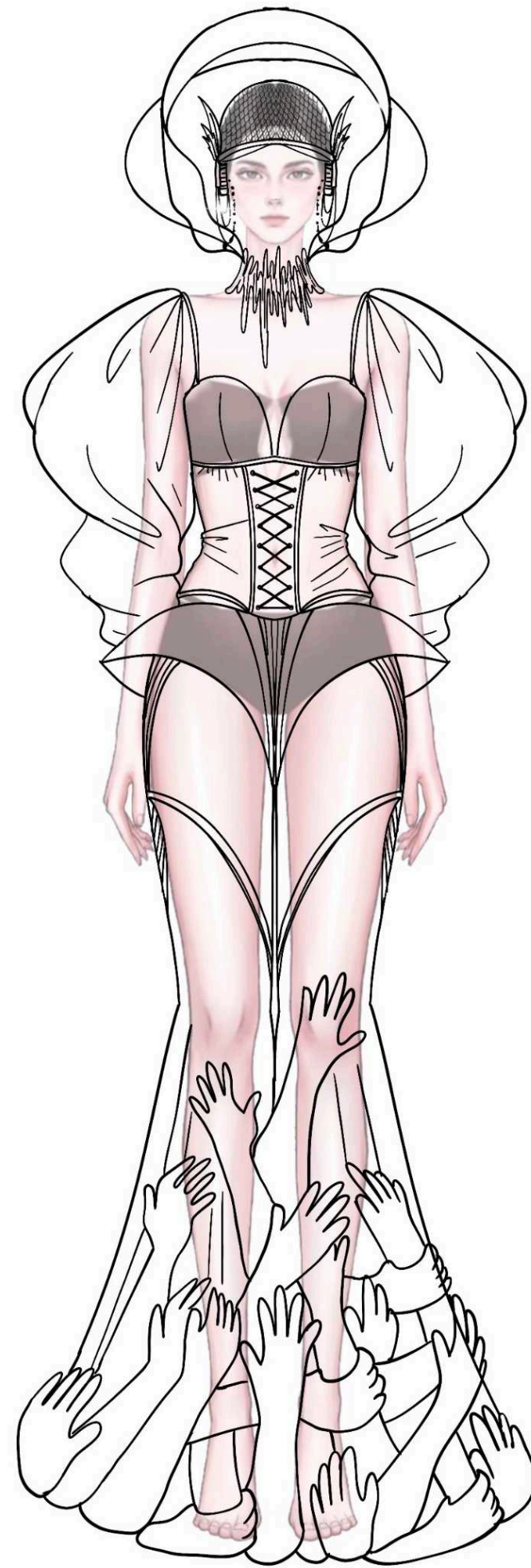
Han and Jean's designs gave me new inspiration for expressing a sense of constraint. They can simply use loops or ropes to create seemingly passive yet beautiful shapes from fabric. Then, I looked at more of Iris's work. Her use of lines is masterful; her designs broadened my thinking. In addition, Hussein skillfully brings a dynamic feel to static works. Her fusion of hand and fabric is ingenious.

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Look 1

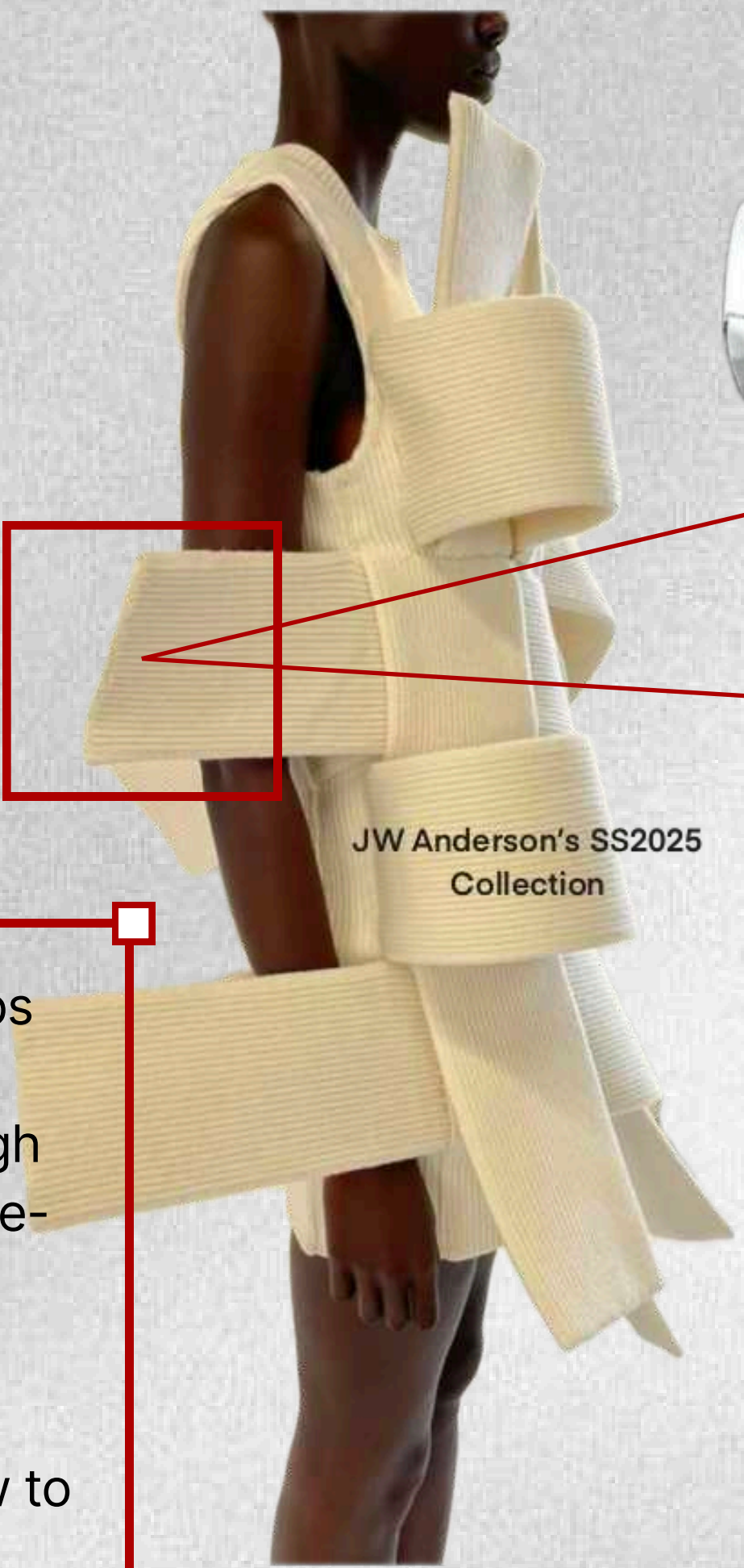
Echo

- This piece explores how external sounds shape identity. I changed the puff sleeves on the upper body into suspended rings surrounding the model. The rings can move horizontally to simulate the effect of sound waves. Additionally, I refined the design of the hands at the hem. The previous hand textures looked stiff and rigid. I added circular pleats to the hem and overlaid the shadows of the hands on them to simulate the feeling of hands grasping the hem. This look reflects how social perception subtly influences self-image.

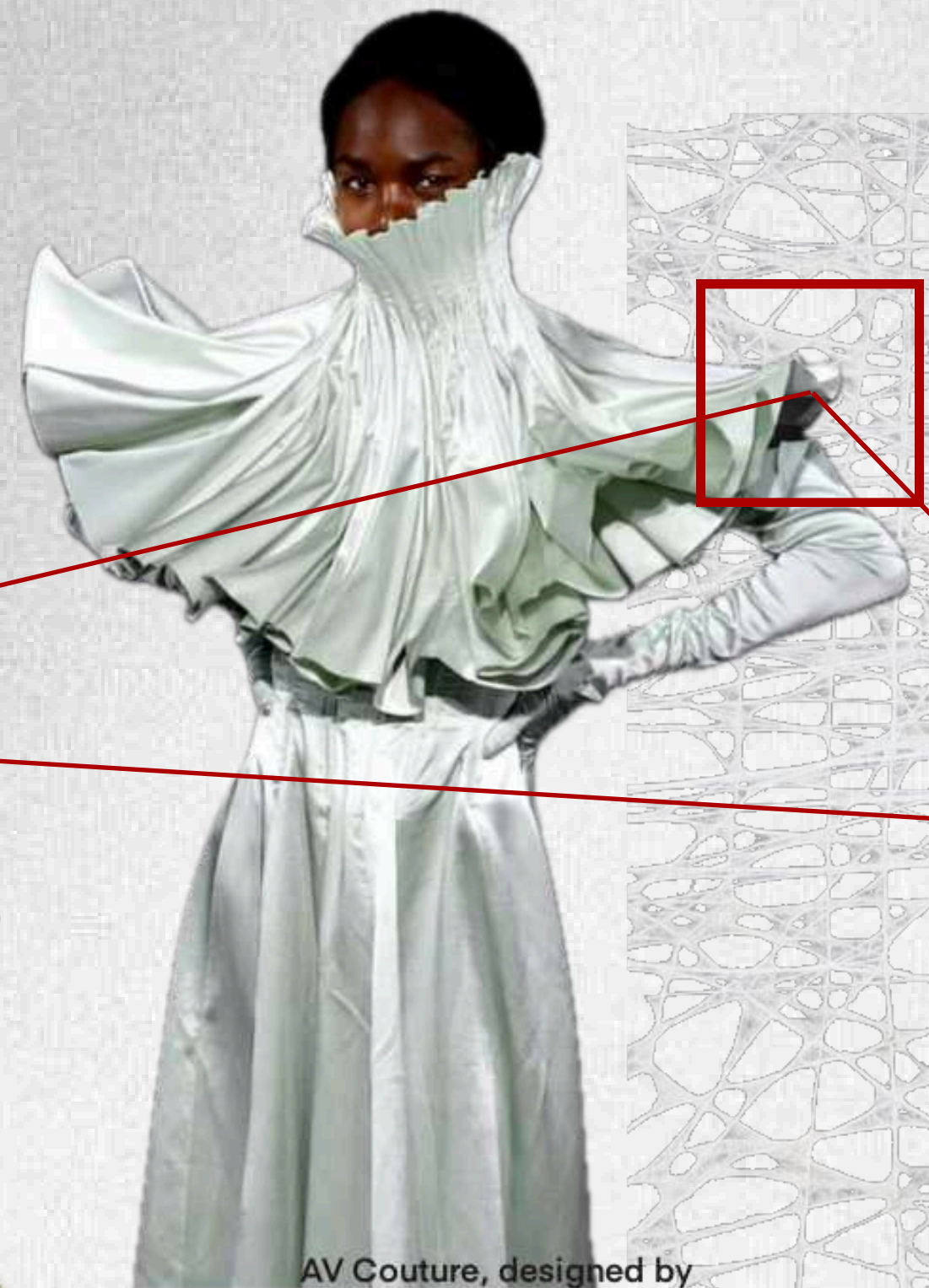


Animation:

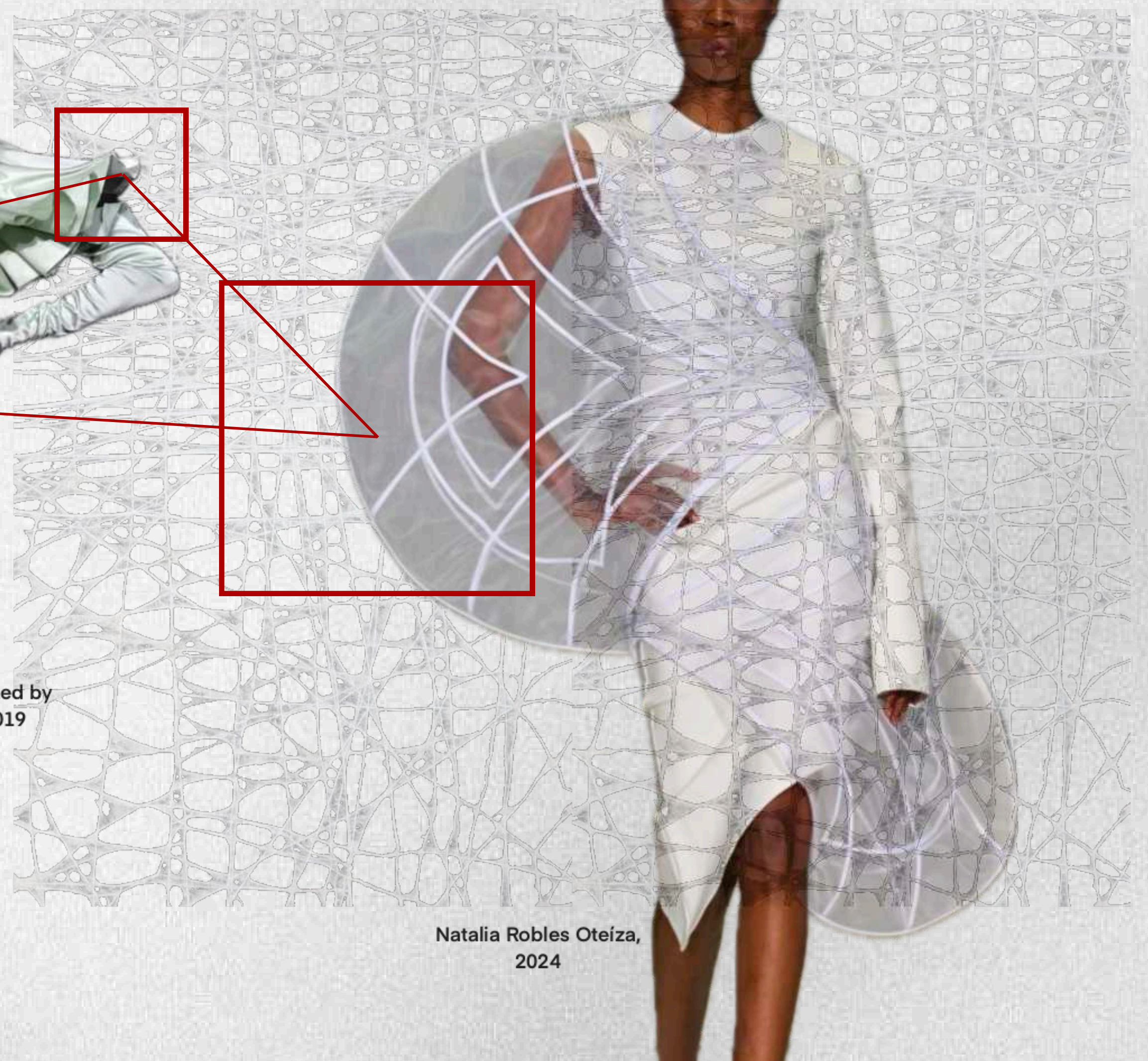
1. The ribbon moves left and right, creating an effect similar to a sound wave pattern.
2. The hands gradually appeared and began to pull at the skirt.



JW Anderson's SS2025 Collection



AV Couture, designed by Vincent Lapp, 2019



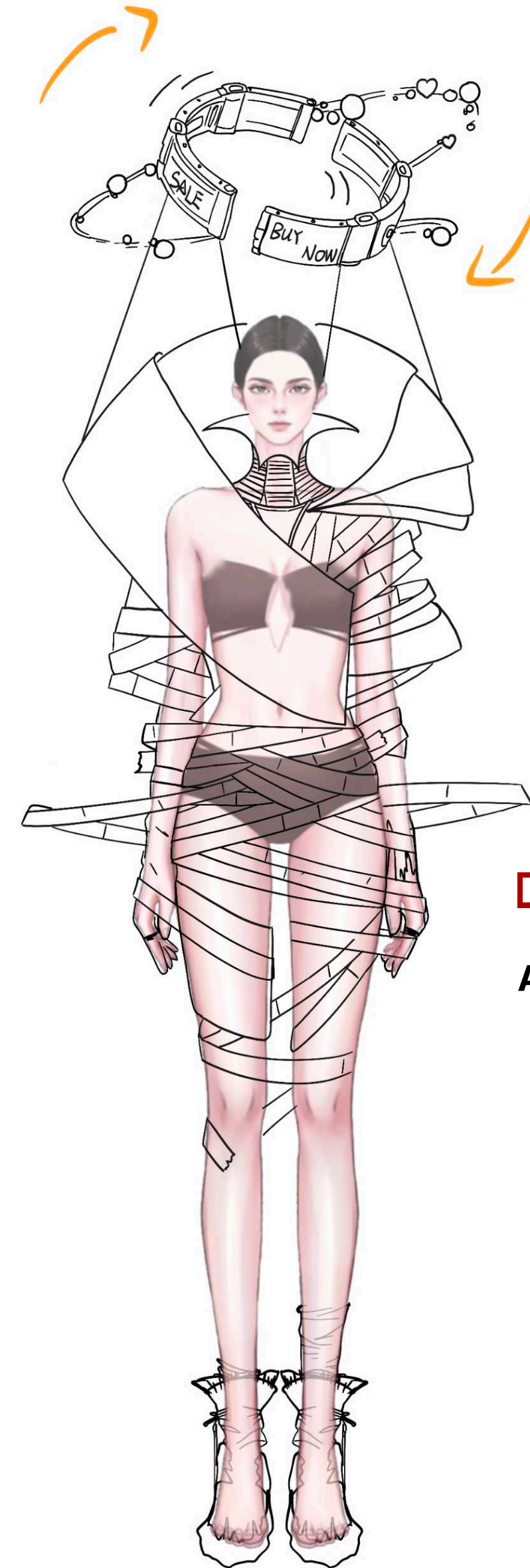
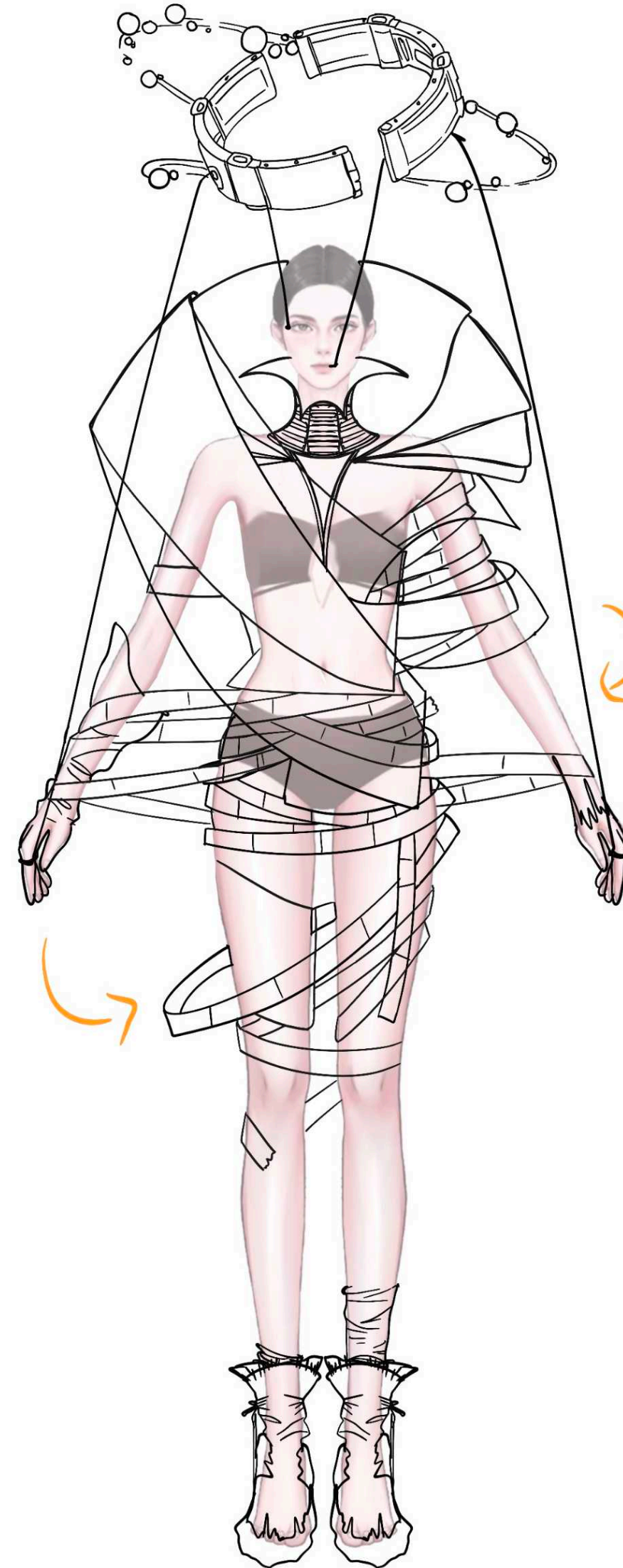
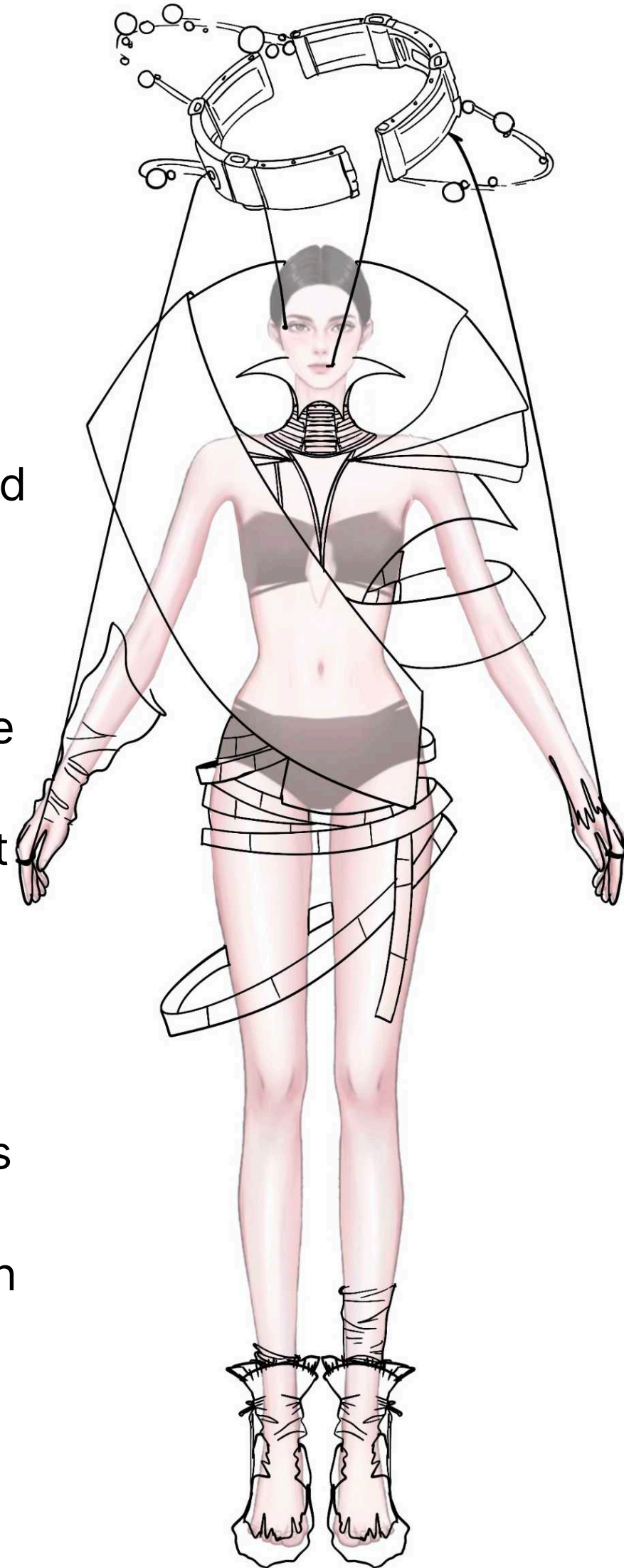
Natalia Robles Oteiza, 2024

Anderson cleverly used strips of fabric in his design. He threaded these strips through one another to create a three-dimensional mesh effect, which then wrapped around the model. This gave me a better understanding of how to connect the strips. Additionally, Vincent and Natalia's designs encouraged me to be bolder in using large geometric designs.

Look 2

Trap

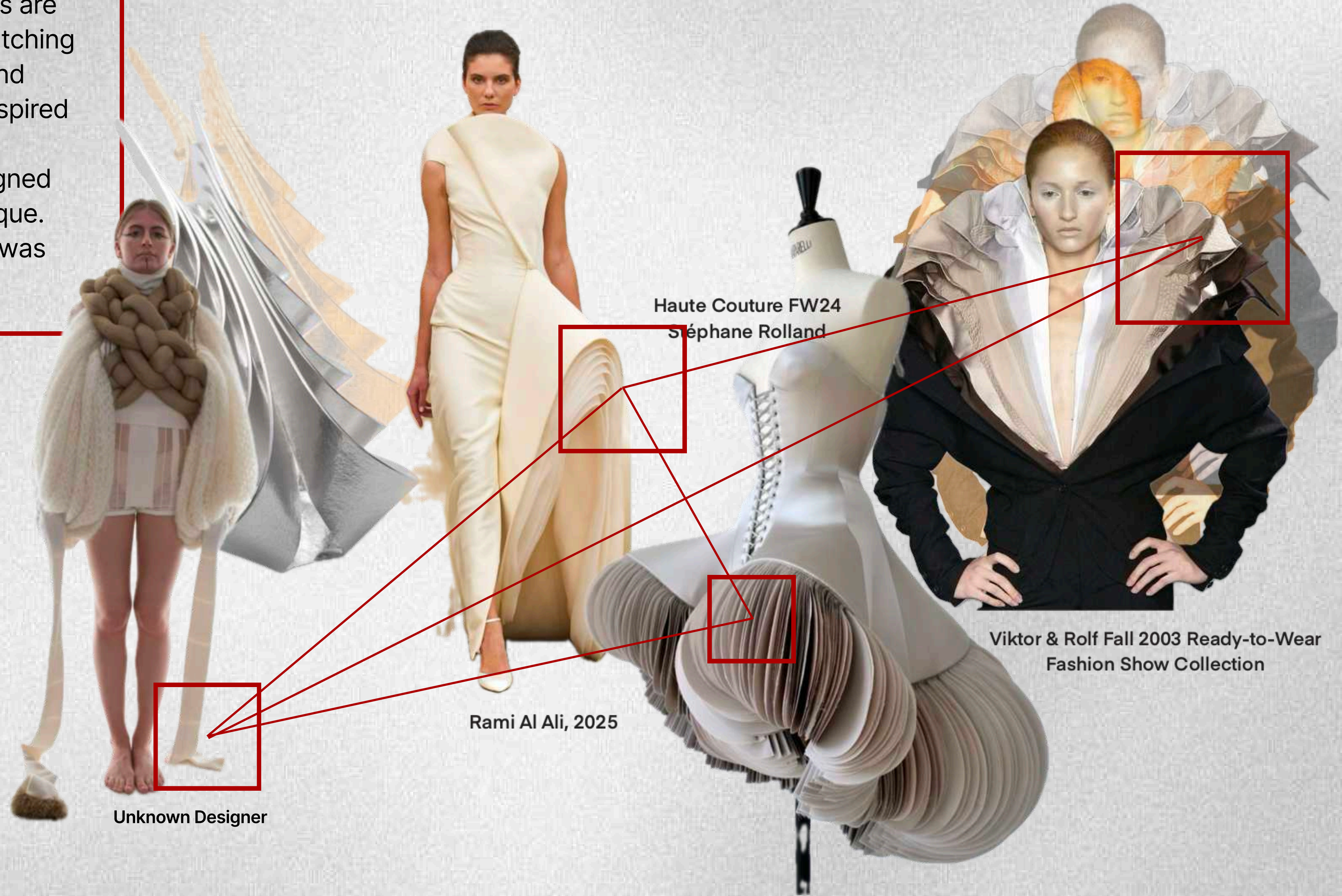
- The design of this garment is inspired by lengthy shopping receipts, illustrating how algorithms influence our choices. The taut straps and floating electronic screens symbolize digital manipulation and precise algorithms. It reflects the feeling that in online consumer systems, we are often guided rather than making our own choices. I made minimal changes to this design. I mainly increased the number of fabric strips connected by the receipts and strengthened the continuity between them.



Animation:

1. The bandage on the body began to tighten.
2. The circular electronic screen on the top is rotating rapidly.

Viktor & Rolf's multi-layered collars are distinctive. This layering is eye-catching yet aesthetically pleasing. Rami and Stephane's multi-layered skirts inspired me on how multi-layered fabrics connect. Finally, the sleeves designed by this unknown designer are unique. They became a reference when I was designing my own sleeves.



Unknown Designer

Rami Al Ali, 2025

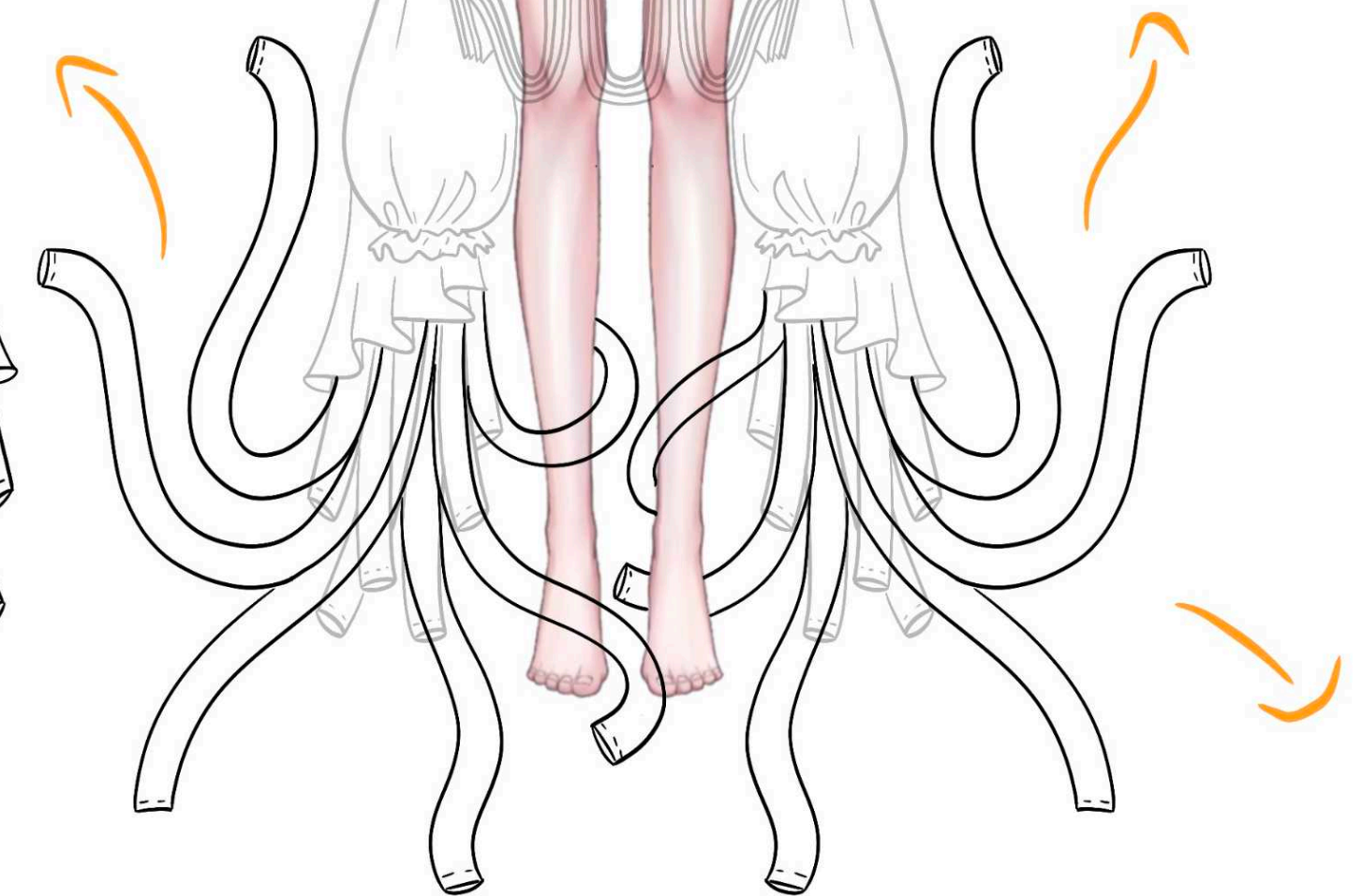
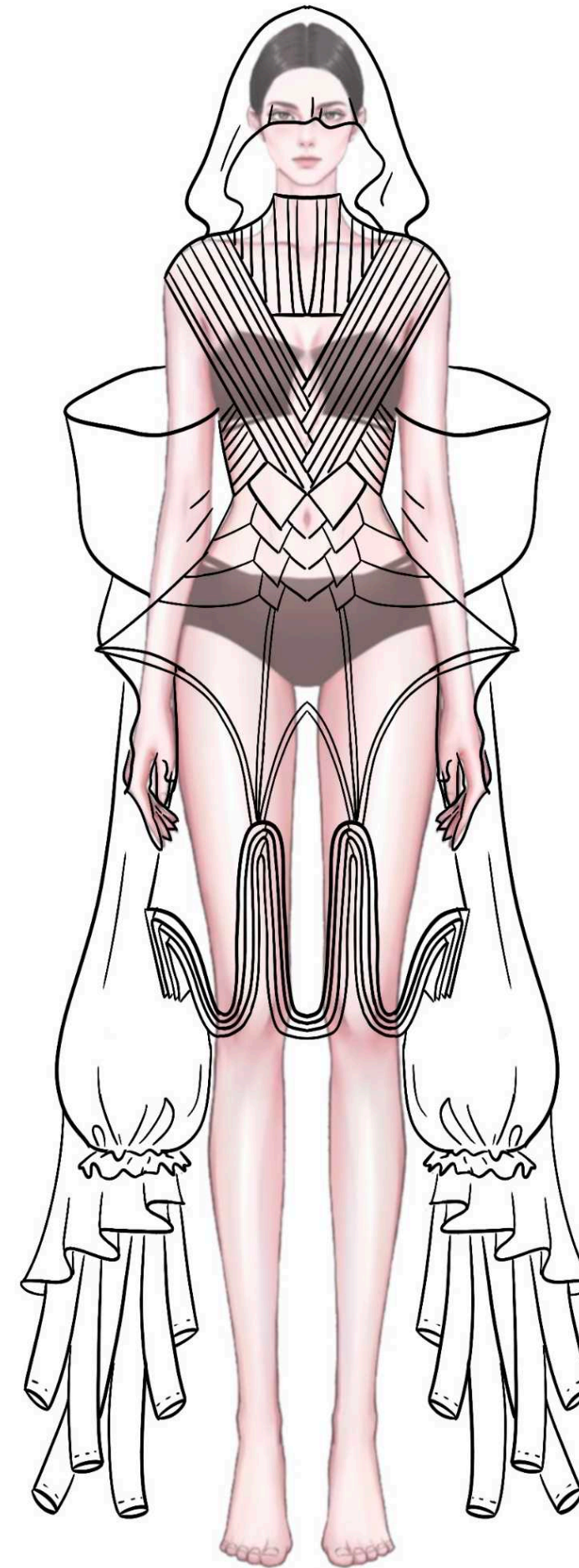
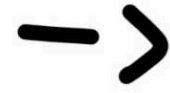
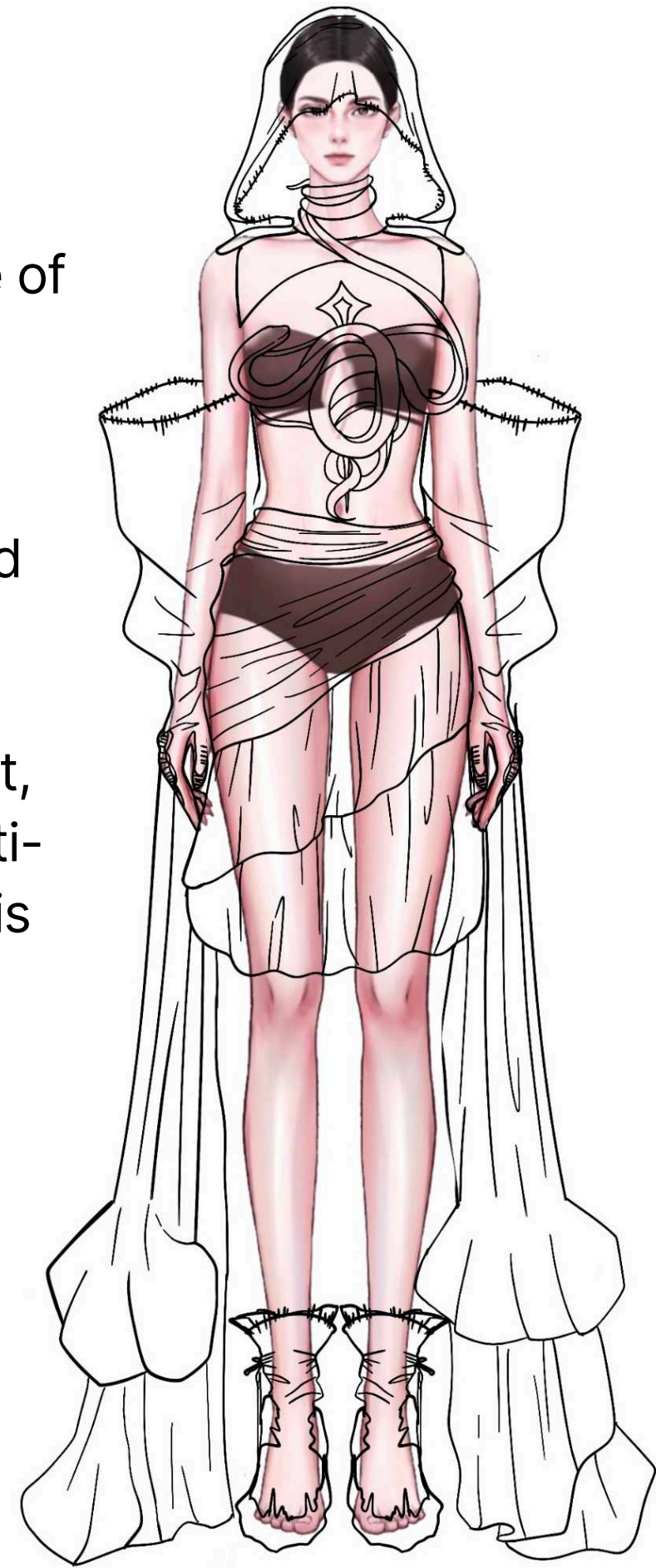
Haute Couture FW24
Stéphane Rolland

Viktor & Rolf Fall 2003 Ready-to-Wear
Fashion Show Collection

Look 3

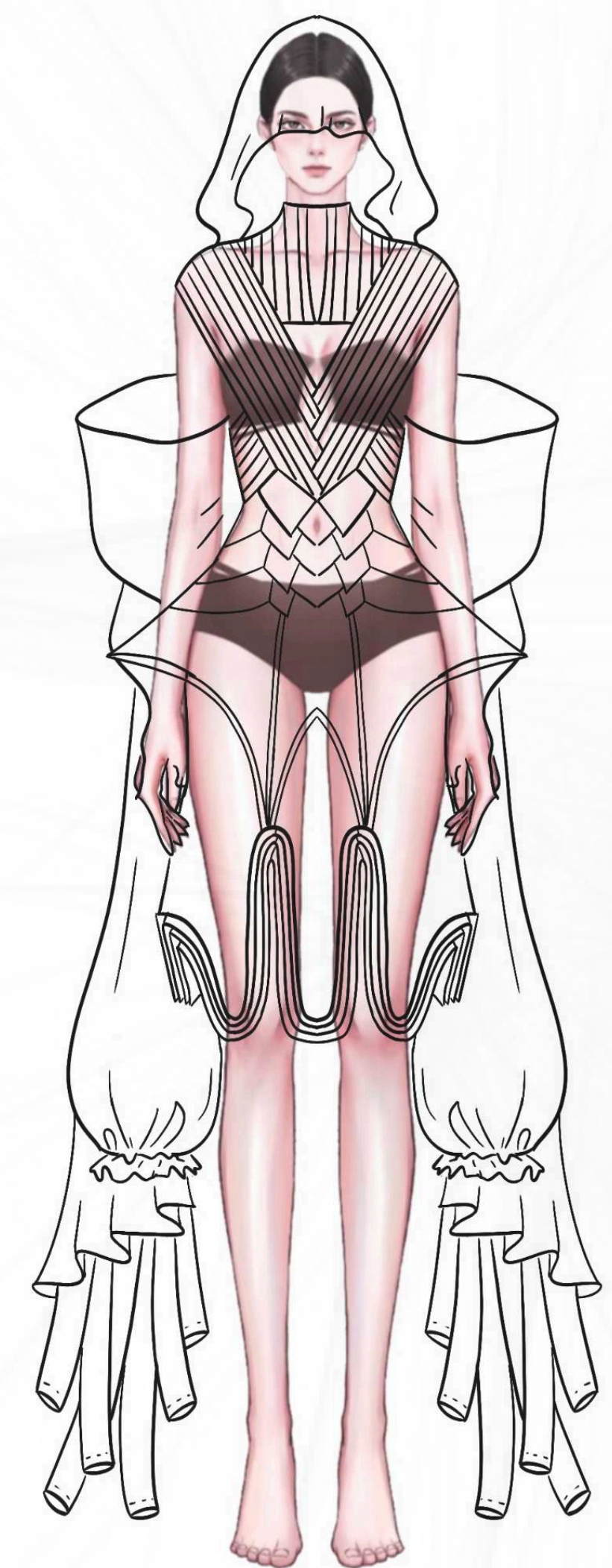
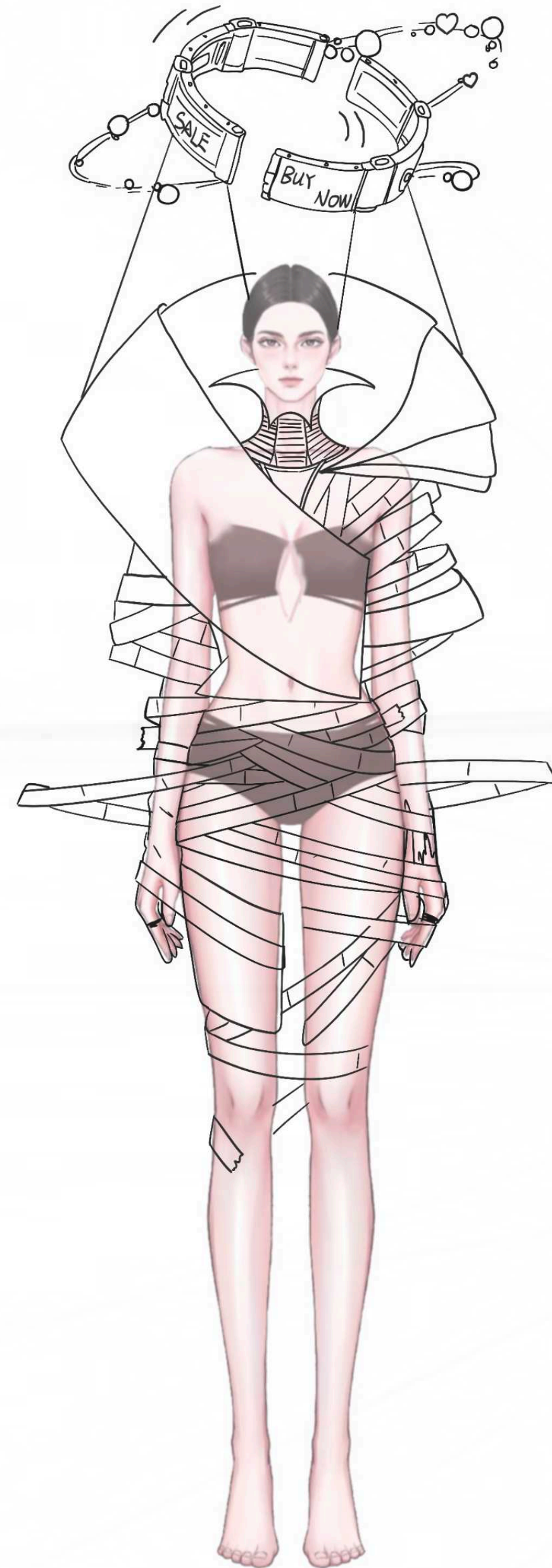
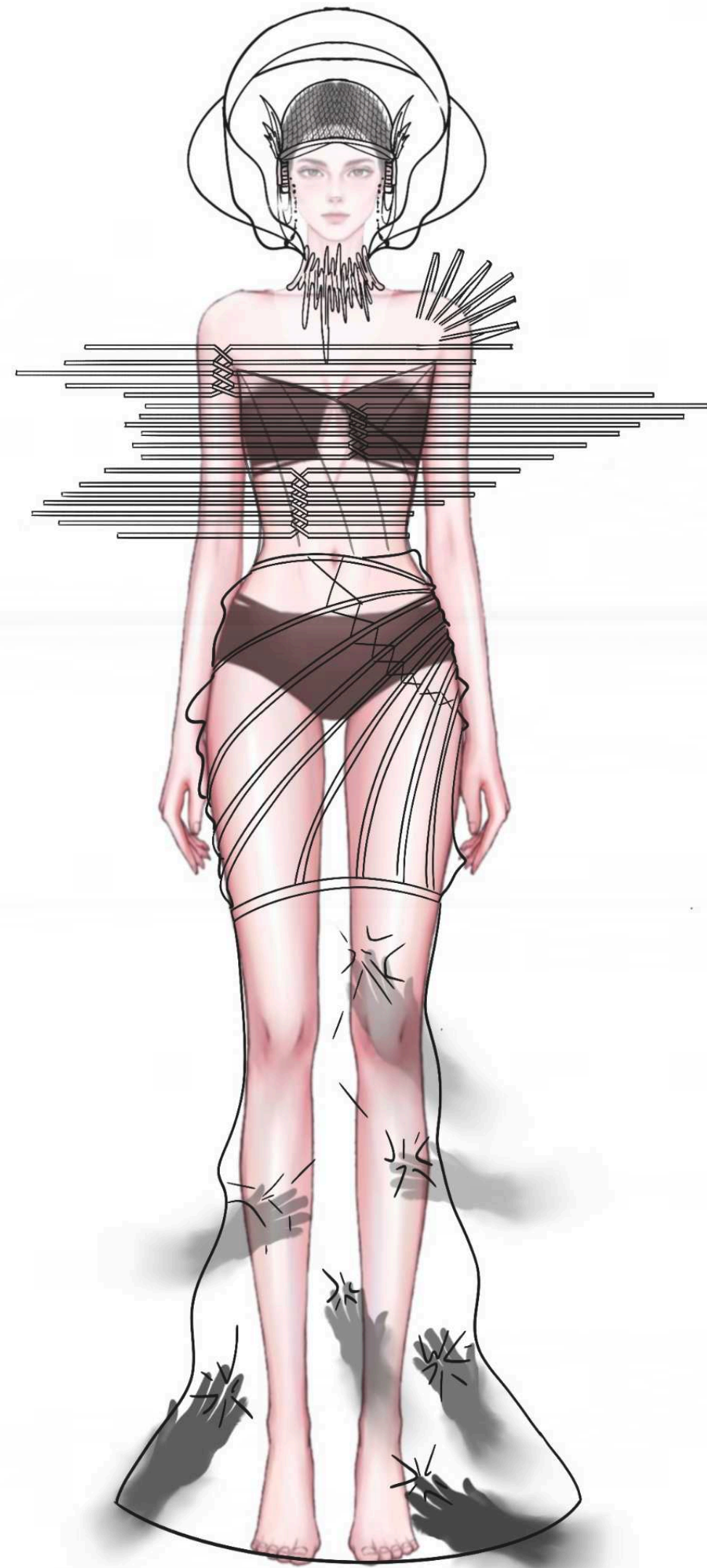
Overflow

- This look represents the final stage of control: consumption ultimately evolves into waste. I changed the sleeves to two heavy sections extending to the ground, composed of multiple overlapping sleeves of different designs. I removed the figurative snake design at the chest, replacing it with a top made of multi-layered pleats. The silhouette of this top is also inspired by the previous Experiment 2. The waist design consists of multiple layers of shirt collars. Finally, the skirt is also repeatedly layered. As the sleeves extend and unfold, they symbolize unused clothing and emotional burdens.



Animation:

The heavy sleeves wildly stretched out.

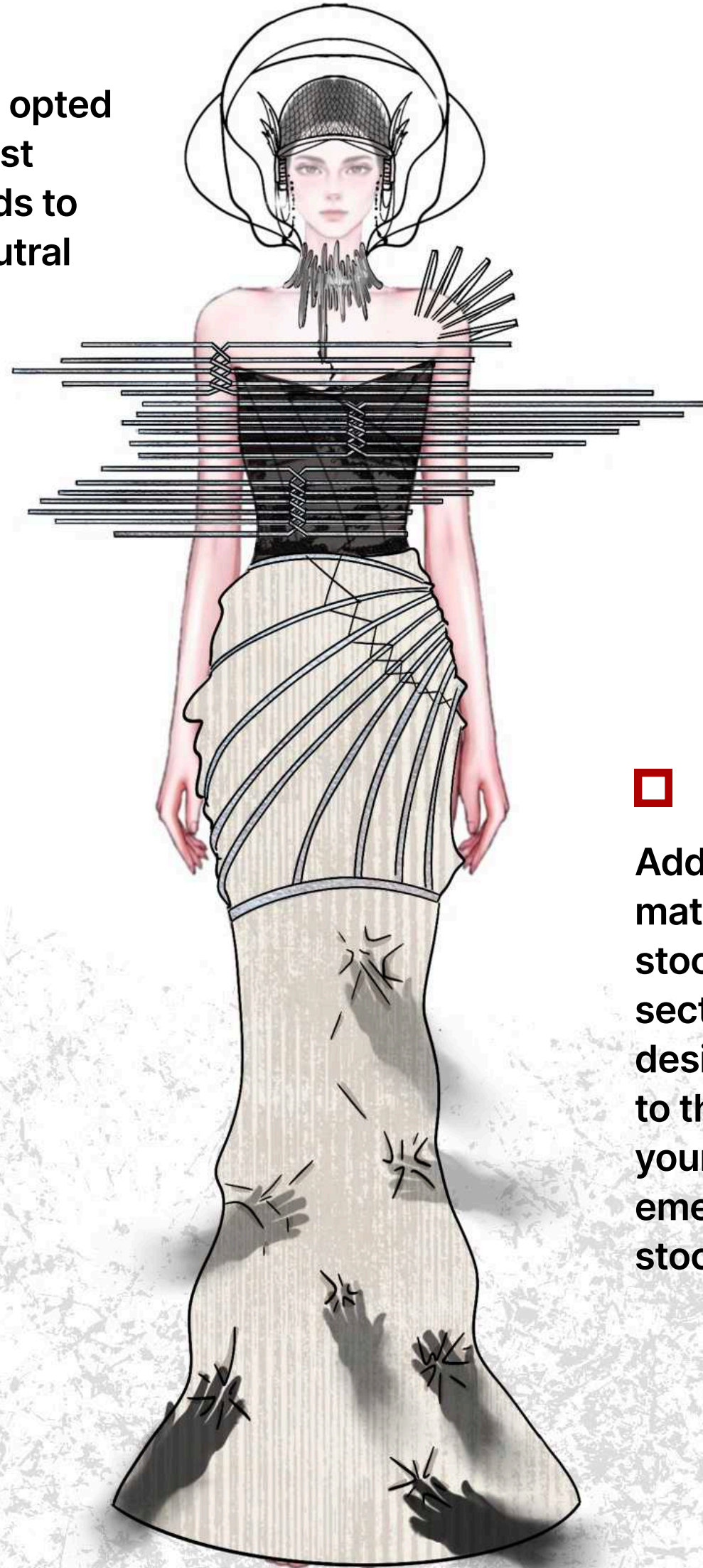


These three augmented reality garments together constitute a gradual process of control: first, the body reacts to external sounds and social cognition; then, the body is bound by digital influence and algorithmic consumption; finally, the body is overwhelmed by the material consequences of overconsumption.

Each garment represents a stage in this invisible cycle: how judgment transforms into desire, how desire transforms into purchase, and how purchase transforms into overconsumption.

Color and Texture

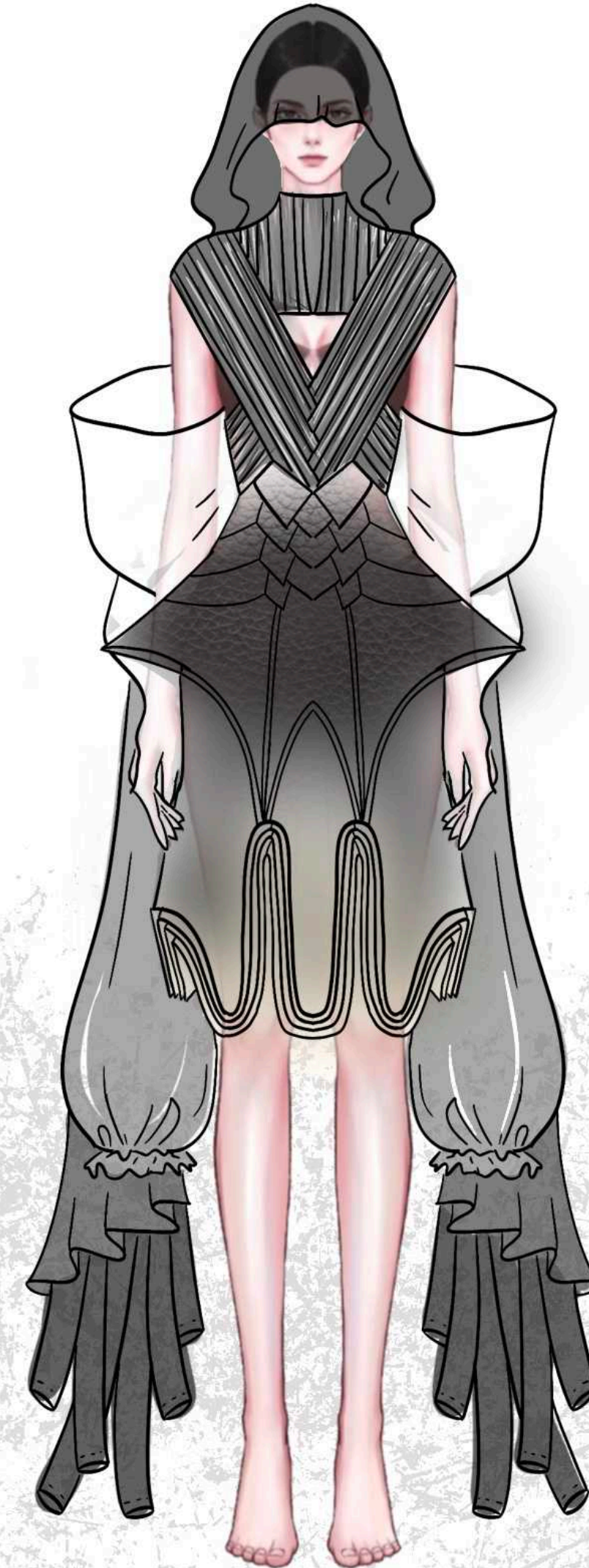
For this design series, I opted for muted and minimalist colors. This corresponds to the sixth rule: Wear neutral colors and suppress emotion.



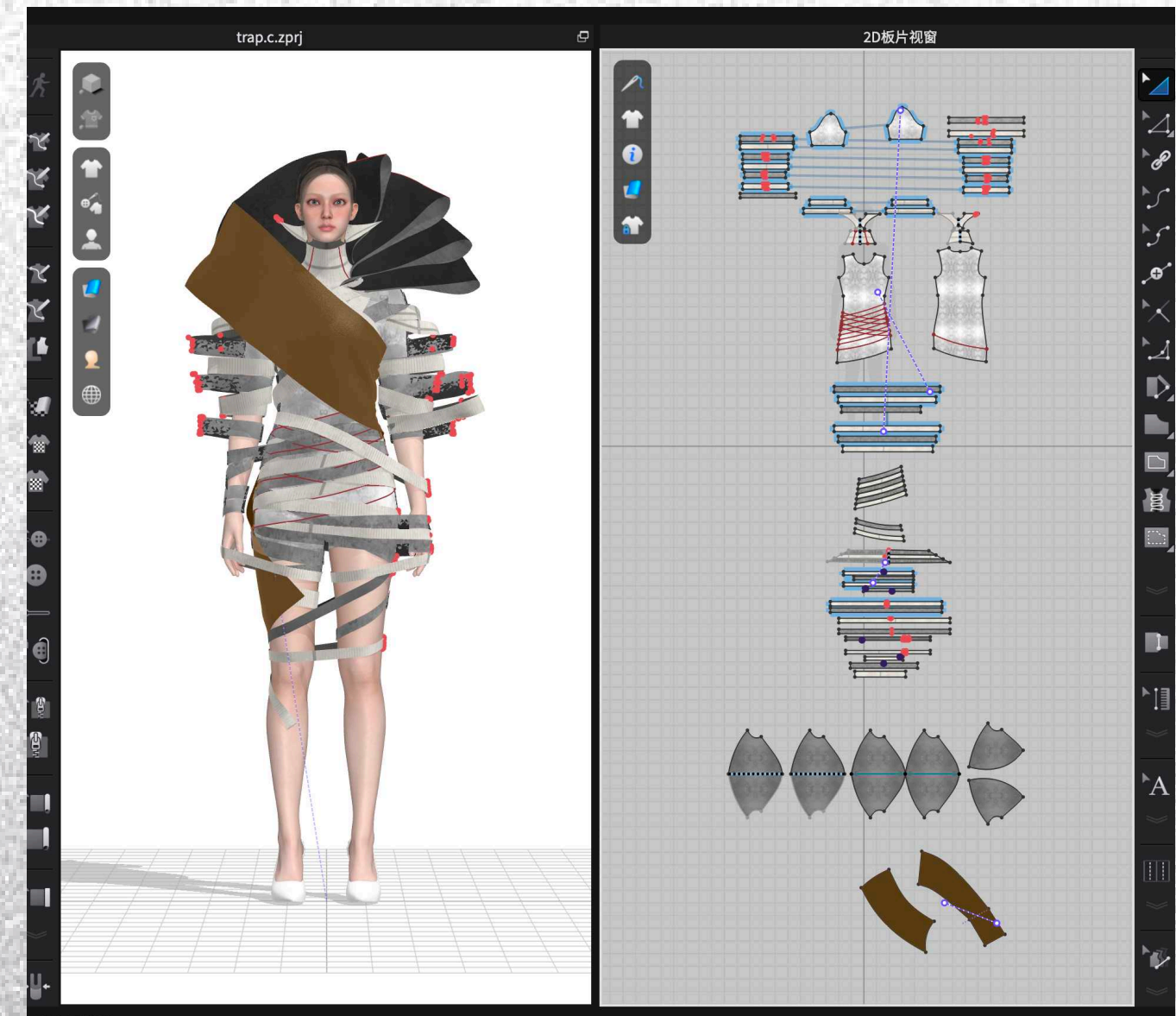
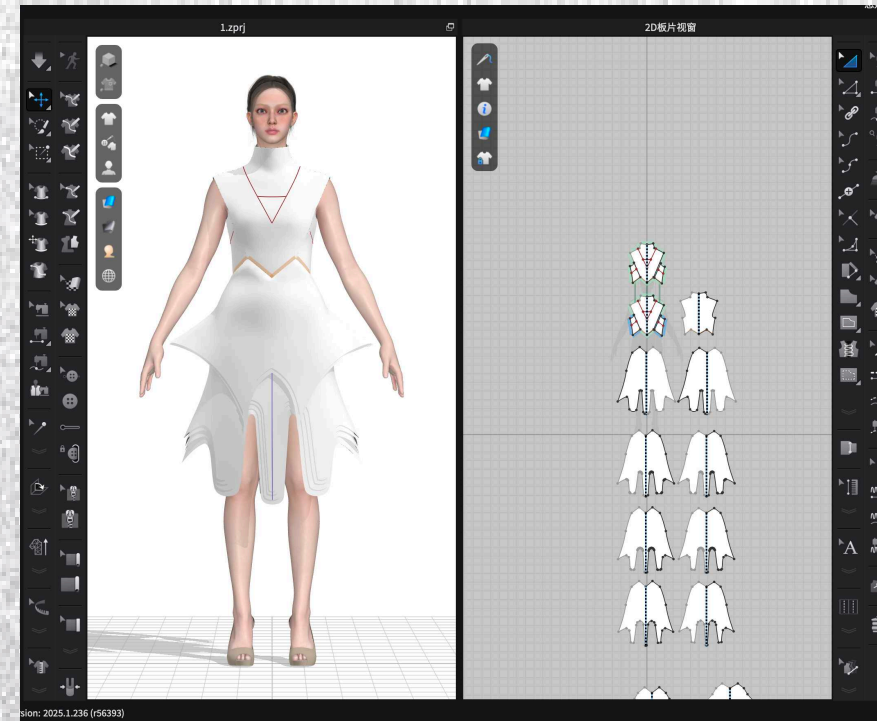
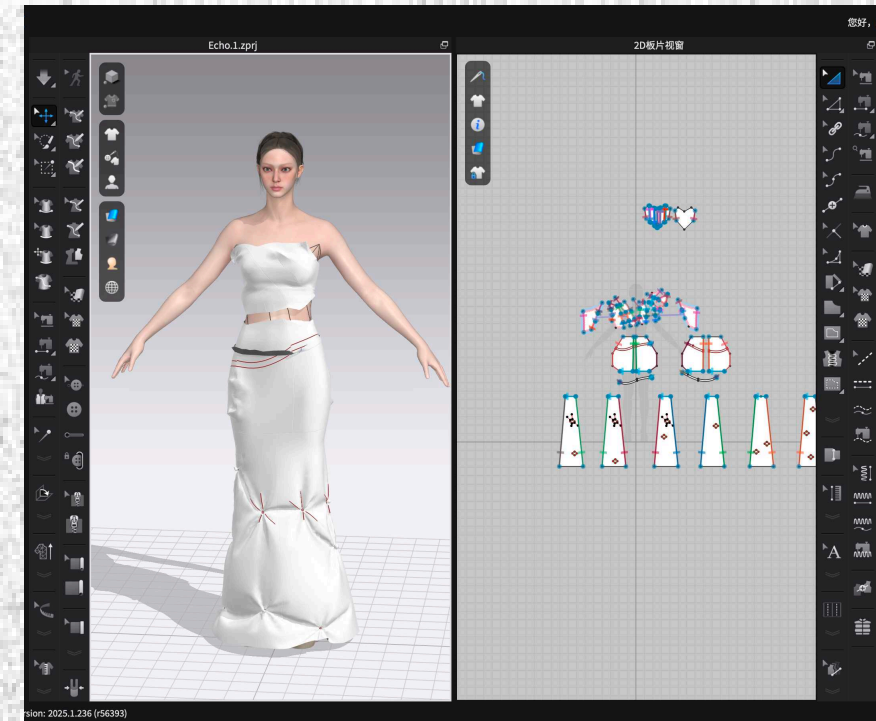
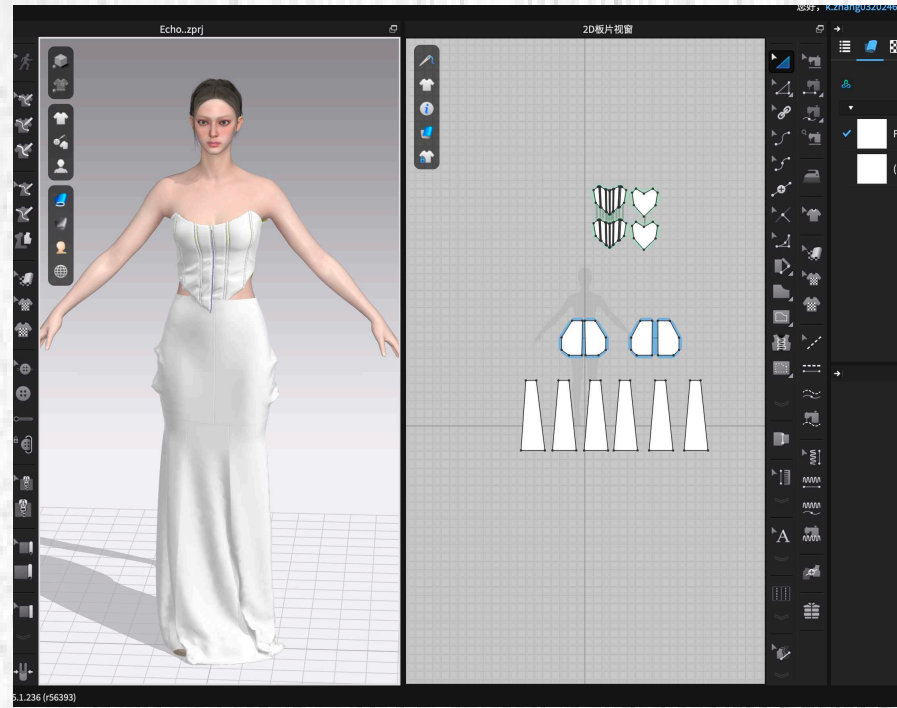
Additionally, I used a material similar to black stockings in the black sections of the middle design. This corresponds to the eighth rule: Remove your stockings during an emergency because stockings are flammable.



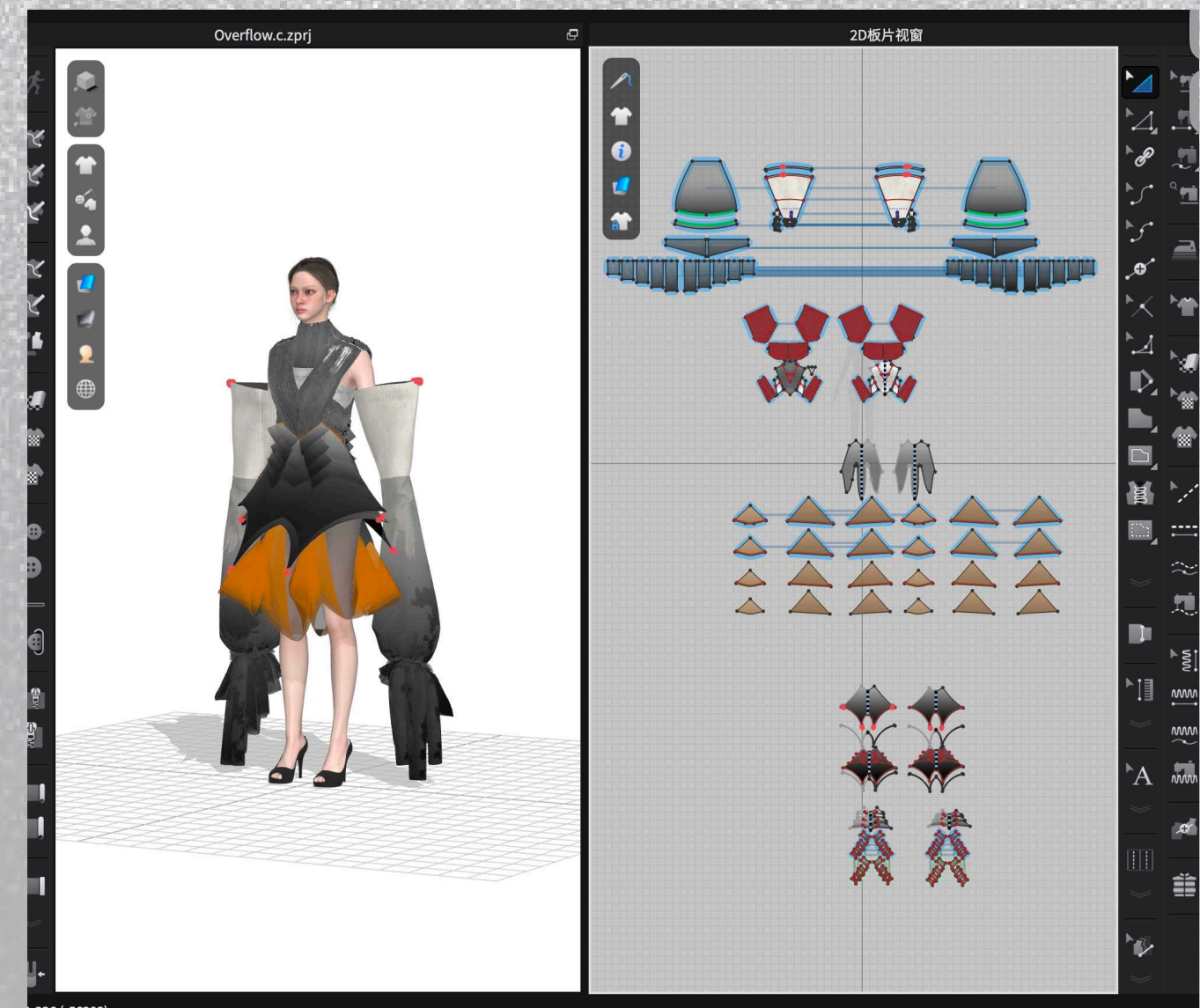
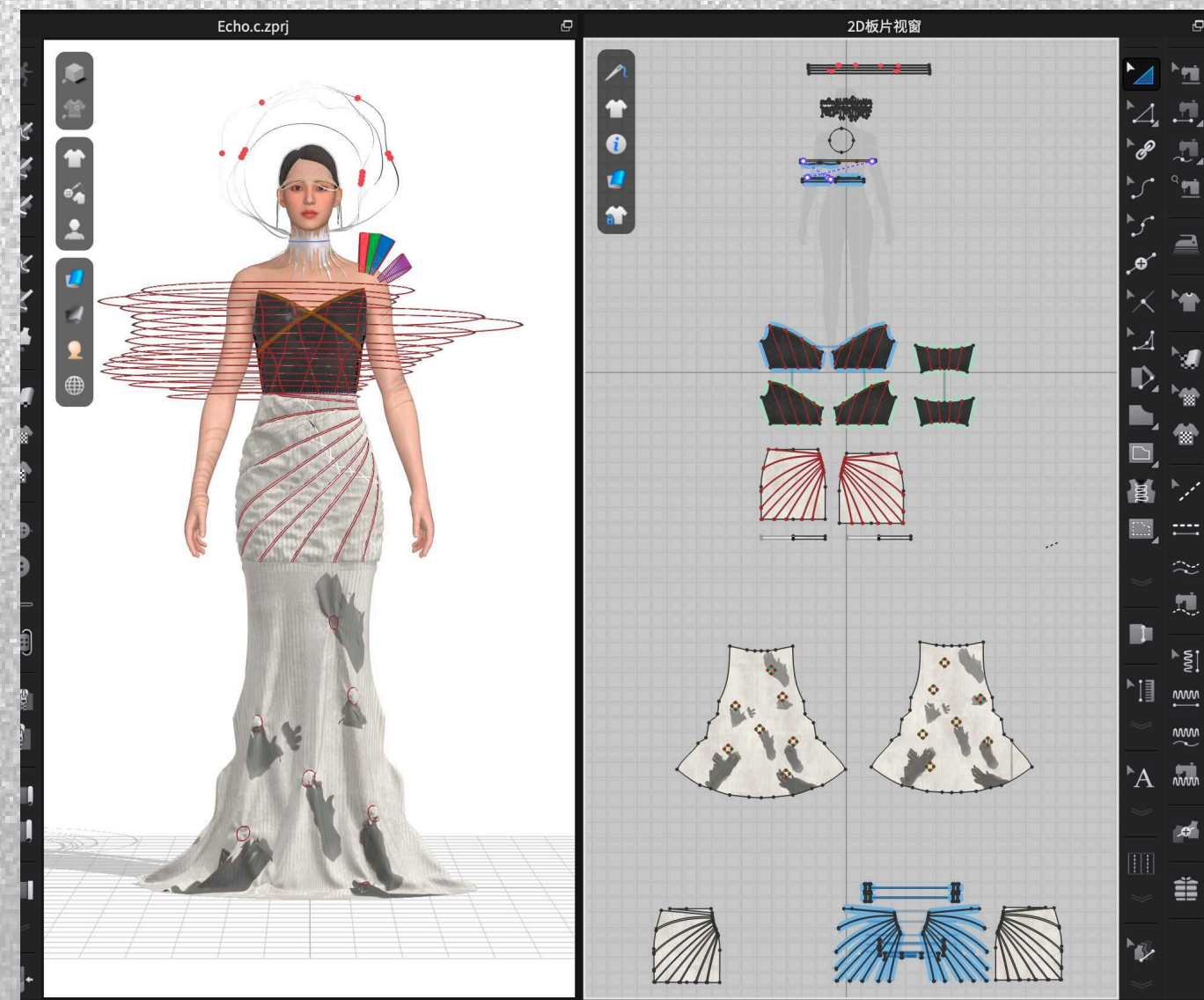
Furthermore, I used silver metallic leather accents to add a hard visual effect to the soft fabrics. This also corresponds to the invisible rule that powerfully influences people's lives.



3D Modeling



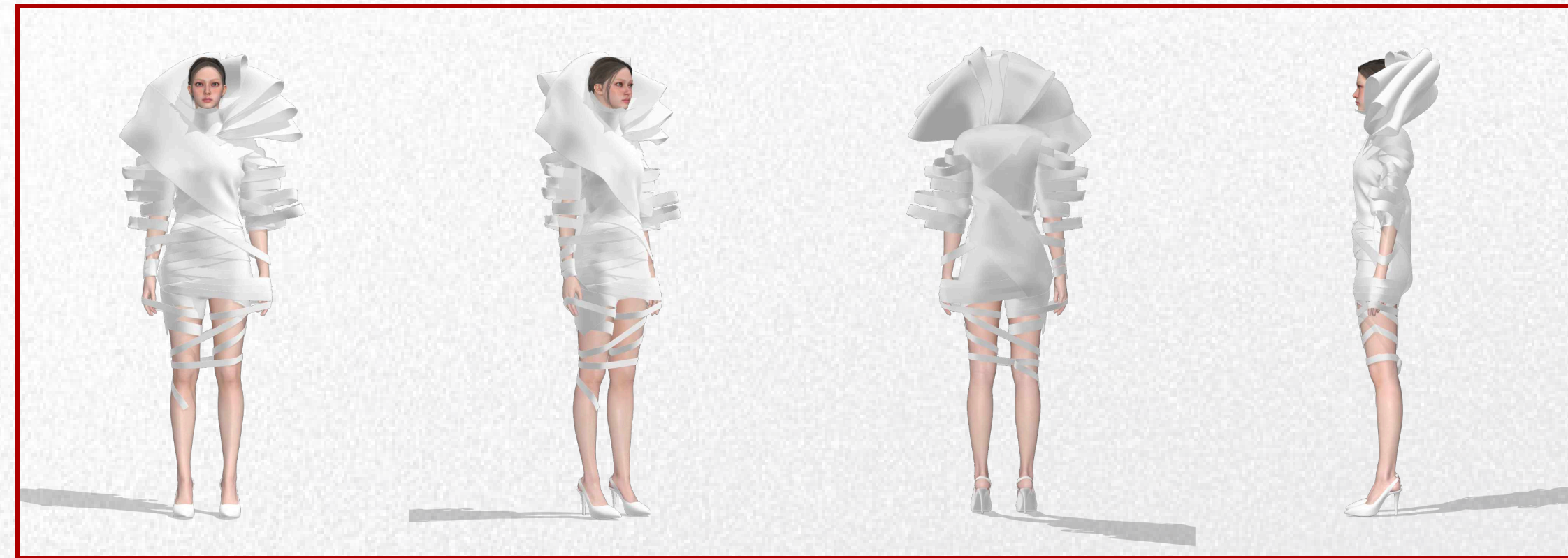
□ For someone with no prior experience in fashion design or using CLO3D, garment modeling was the biggest challenge in this project. It took me over a month to complete the modeling of three outfits, and I want to thank the instructors at the digital learning lab for their help during this time. The final success is very satisfying.



3D Modeling



Echo



Trap



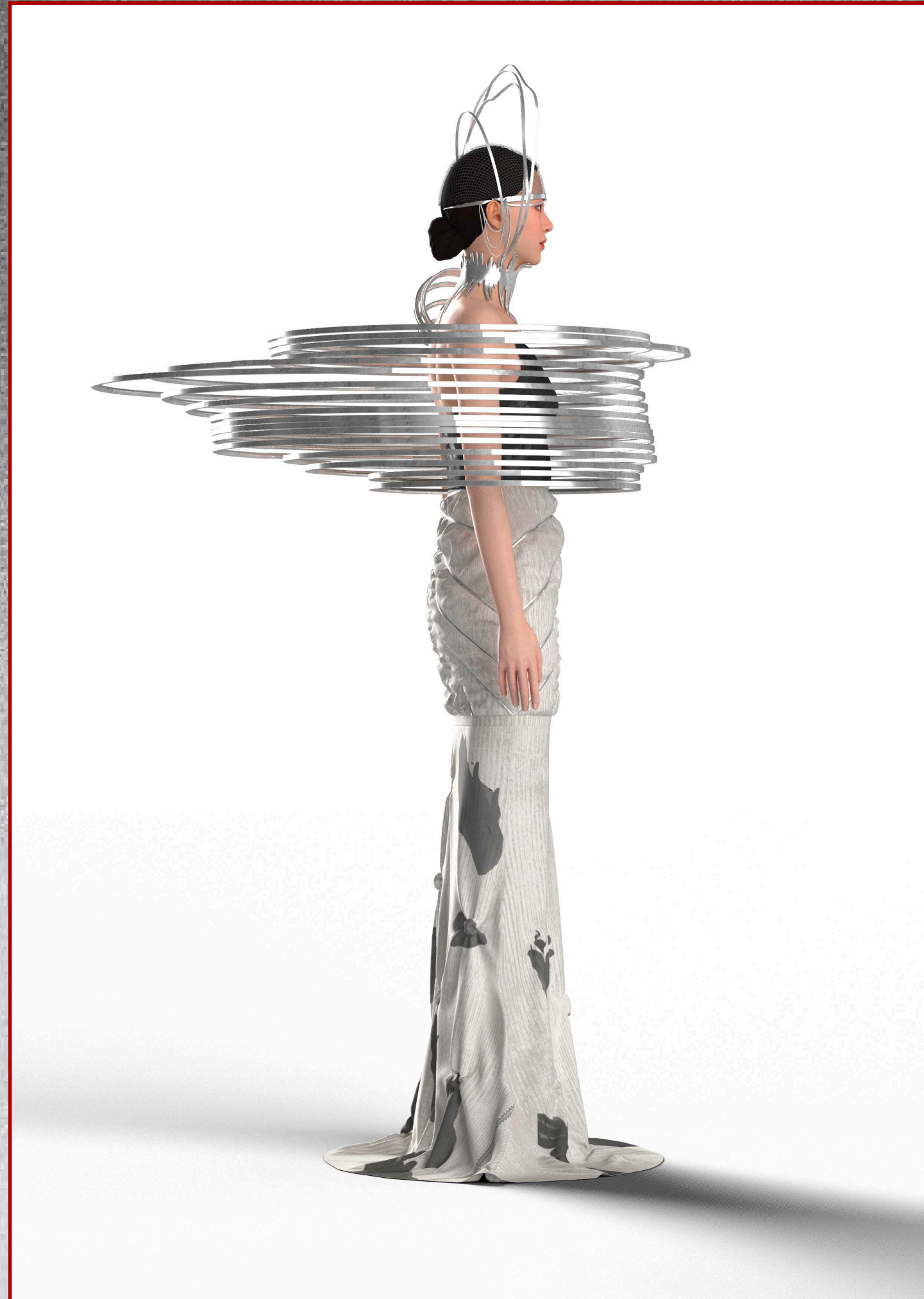
Overflow



All three outfits faithfully reproduced my design sketches. The most complex part was the fabric strips wrapped around of the Trap outfit. It was much more intricate than I had imagined. I'm most satisfied with the sleeves of the Overflow. I believe the greatest advantage of virtual clothing is its ability to defy gravity. This allows the two heavy sleeves to float in the air.

Look 1

Echo



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Look 2

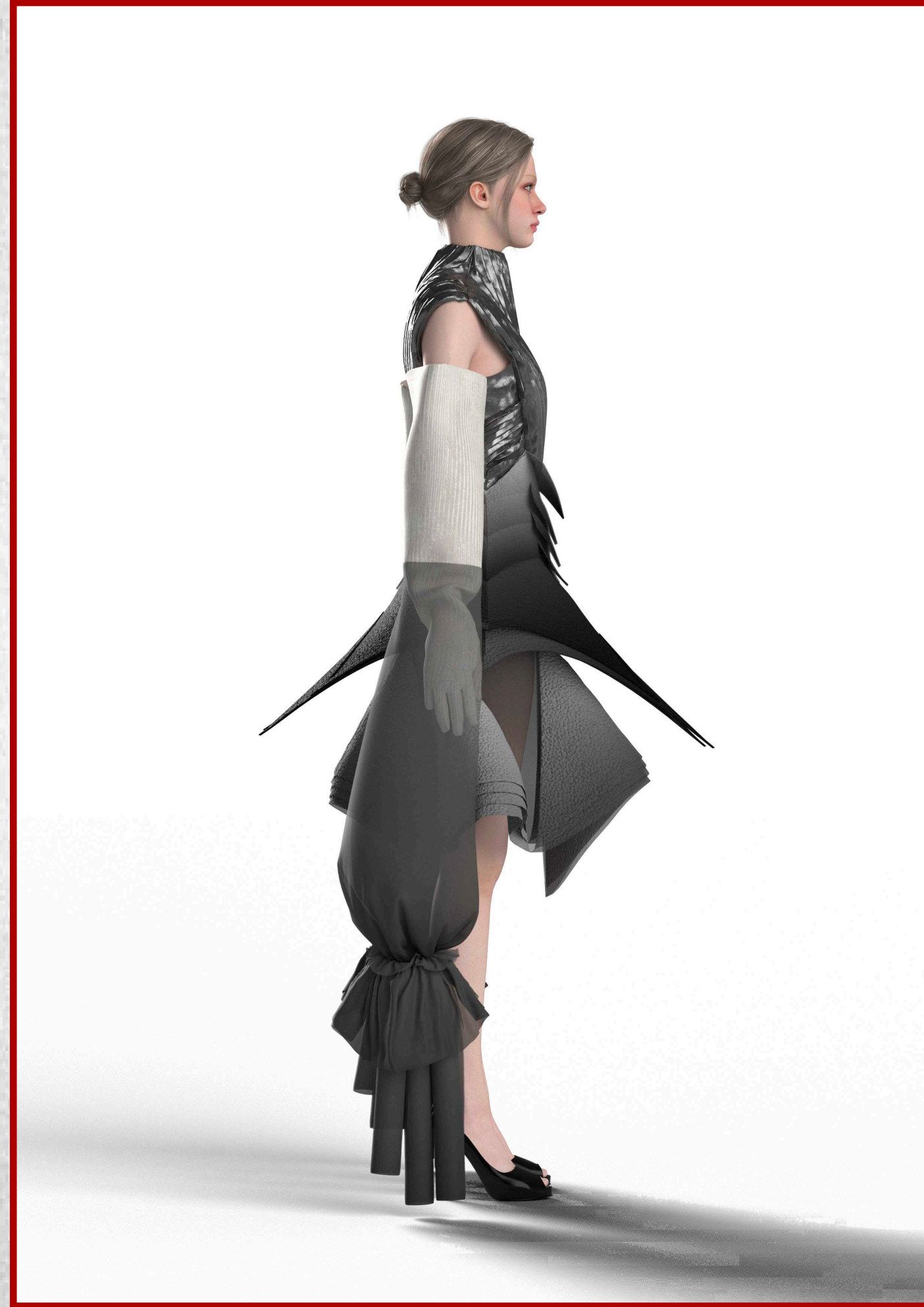
Trap



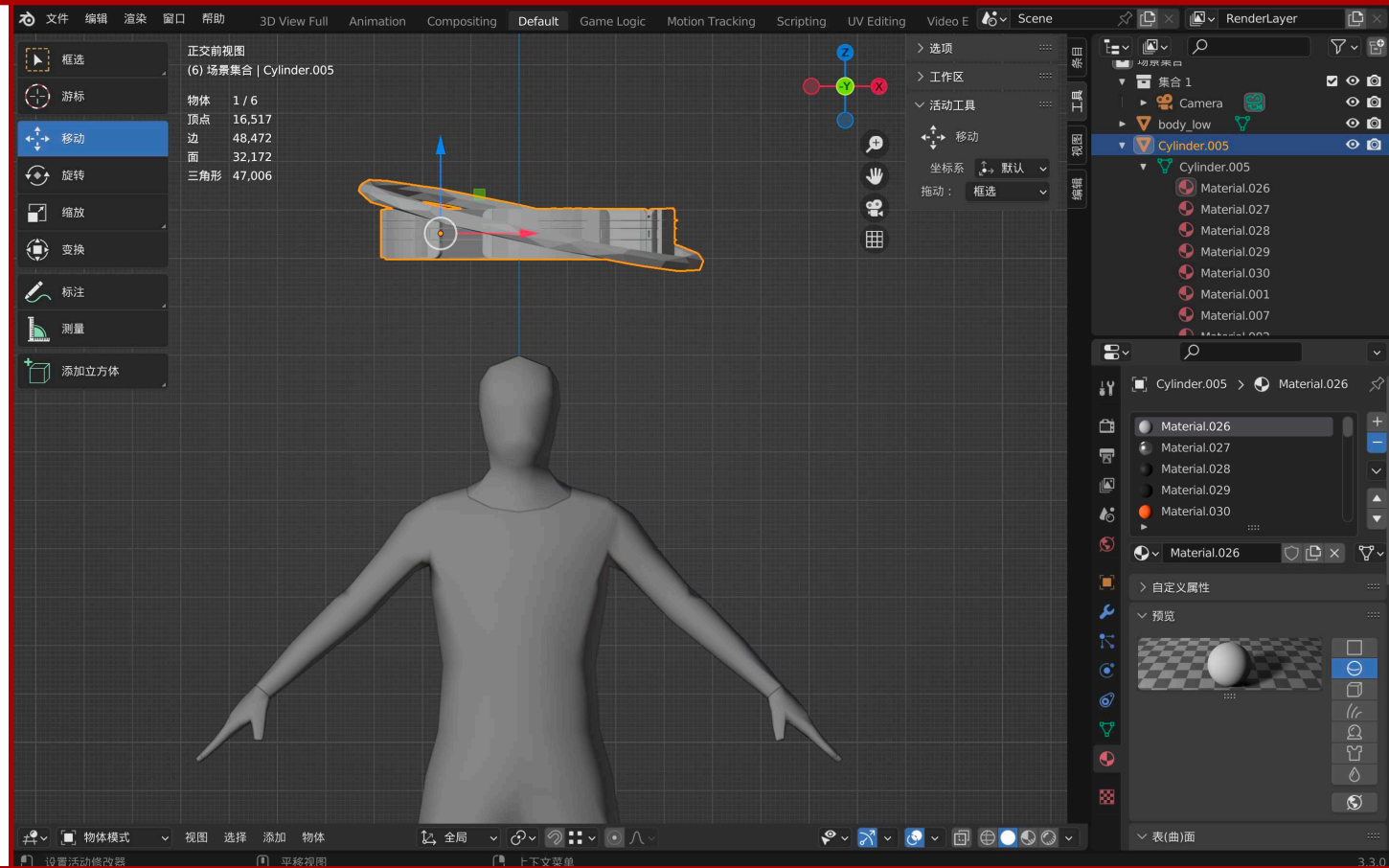
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Look 3

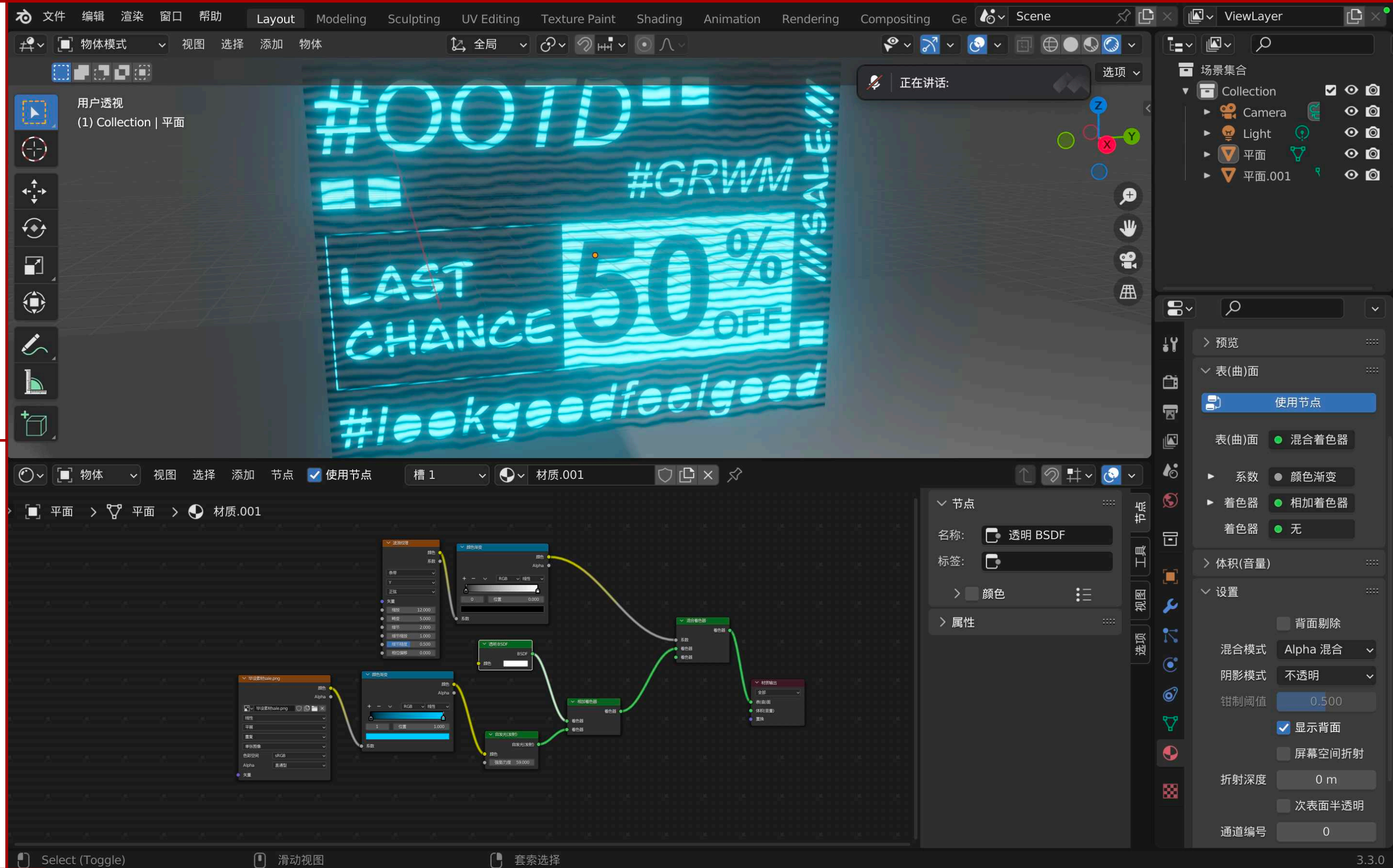
Overflow



Animation Experiments



Additionally, I experimented with modeling and animating some accessories in Blender. However, I ultimately abandoned most of the animation effects because the AR platform couldn't run them after adding a large amount of data.

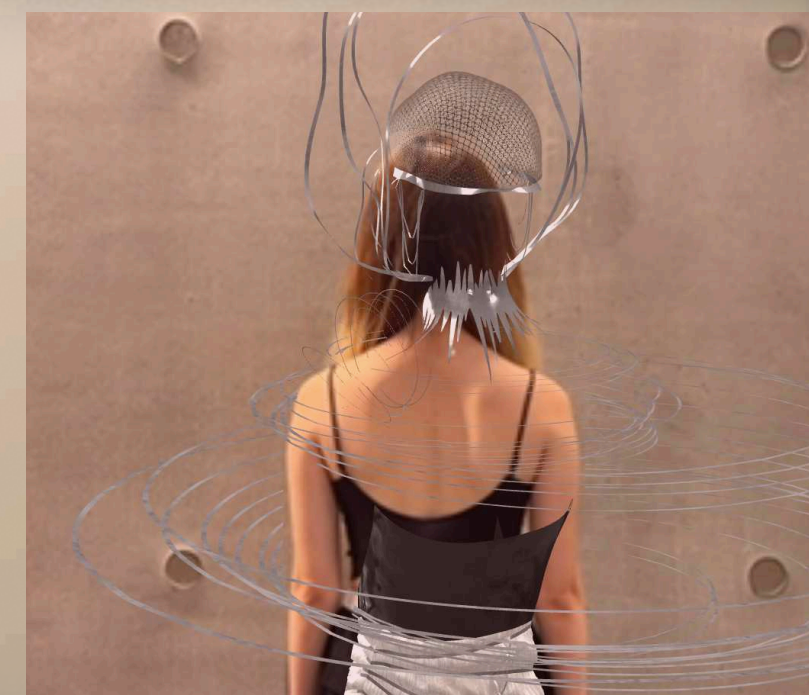


01

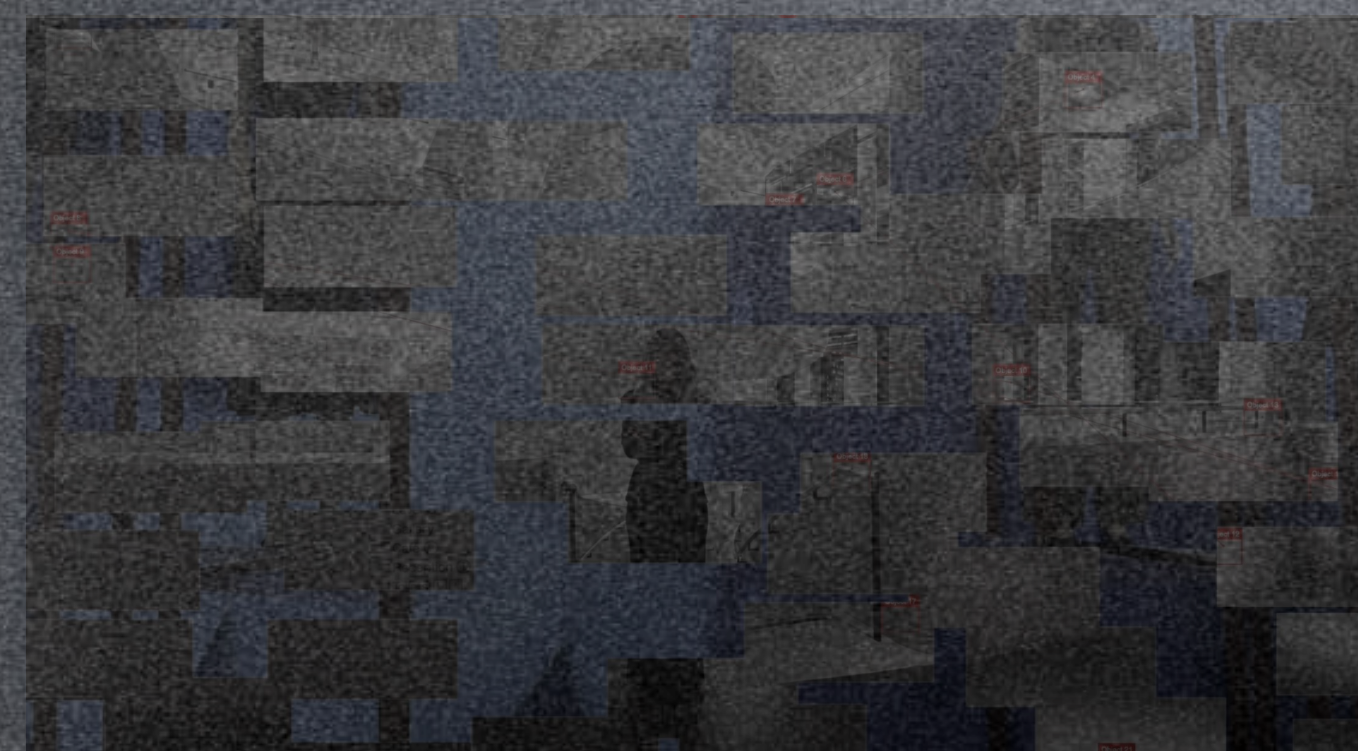
Research

03

Augmented
Reality



Costume
Design



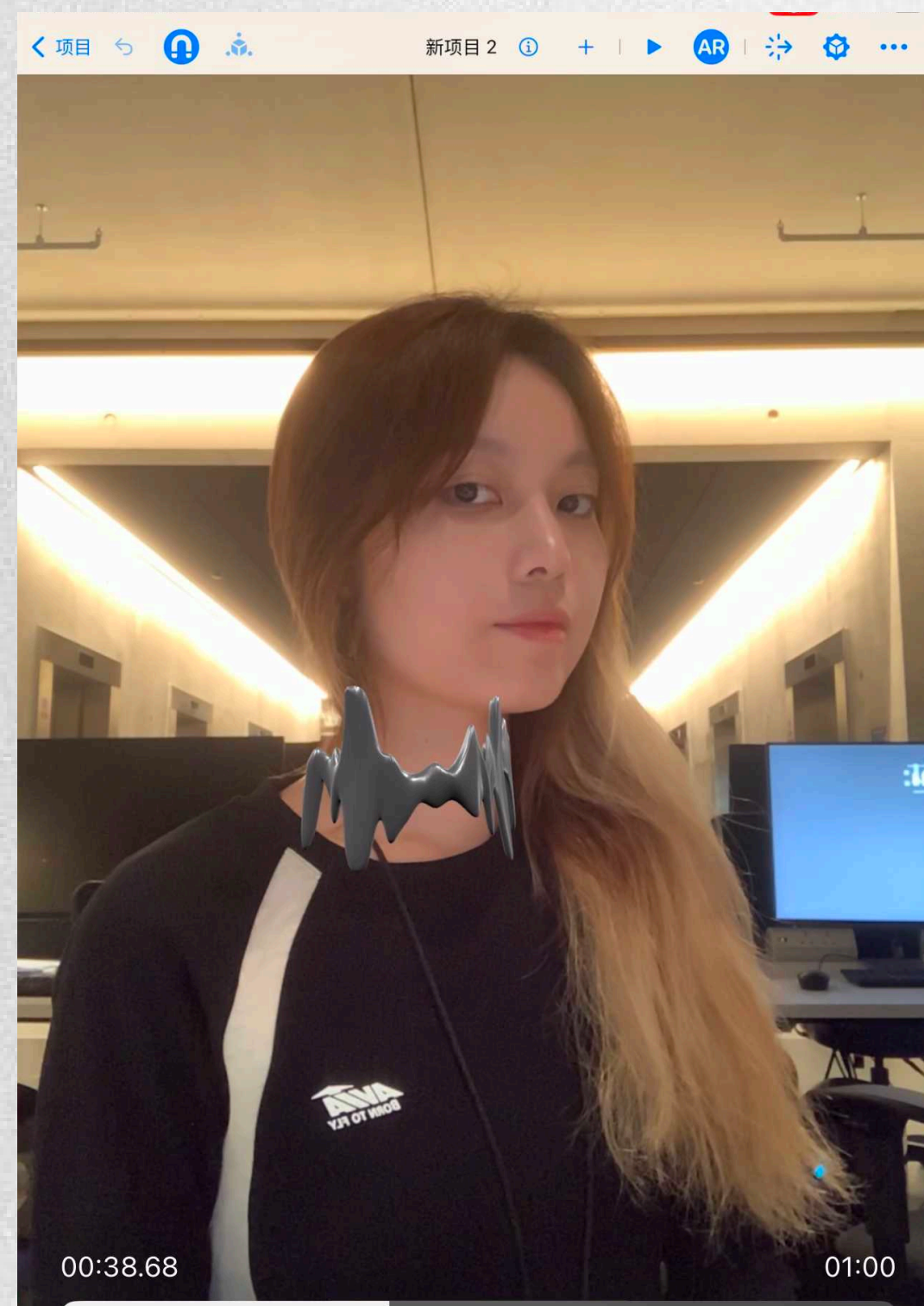
Final
Film

02

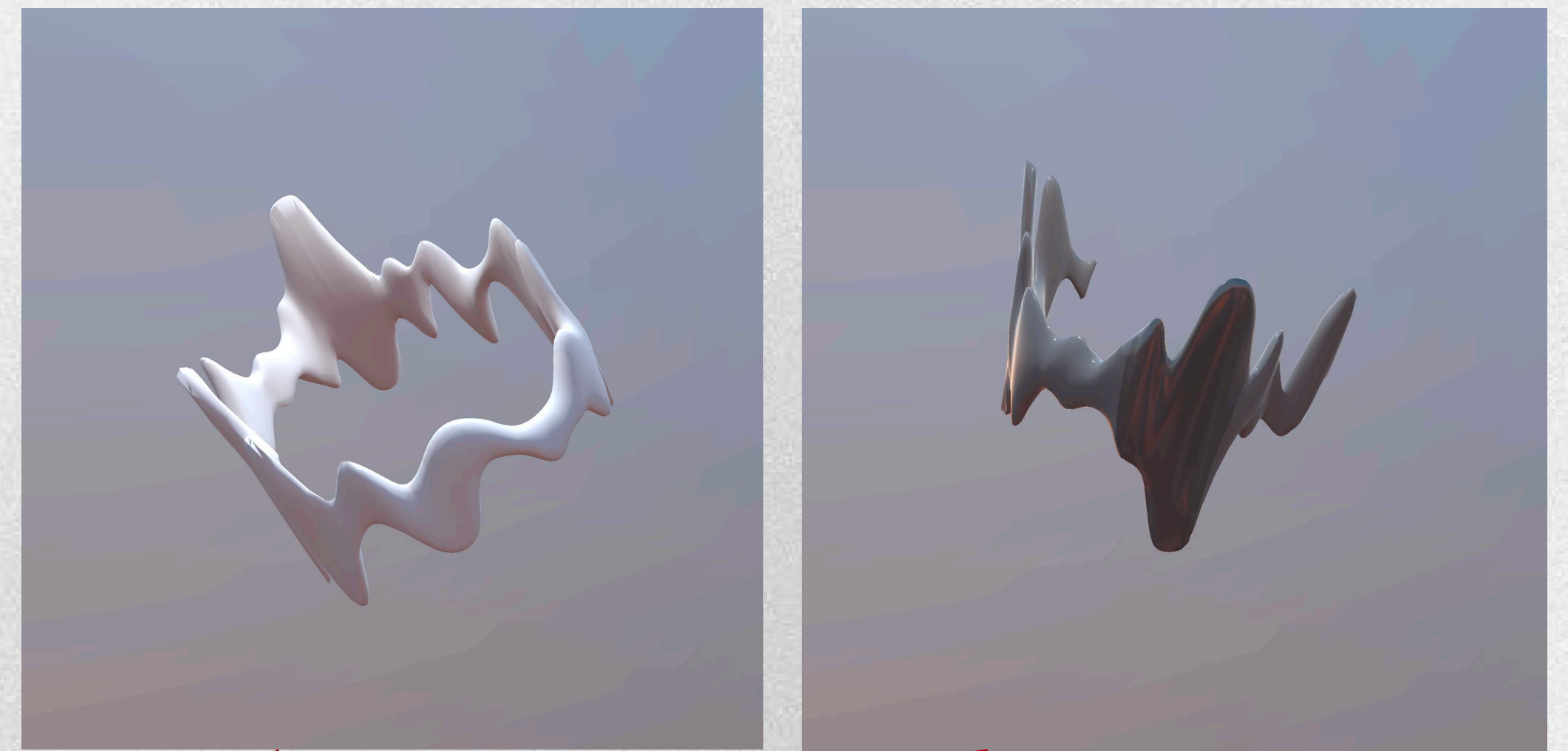
04

AR Test

1.0 Reality Composer



- The first augmented reality platform I tried was Reality Composer. It rendered jewelry very well. However, a major problem was that it could only display the outline of accessories or clothing. If I turned slightly to the side, the accessories would clip through, showing what should have been on the back of the character. Therefore, this test was a failure.

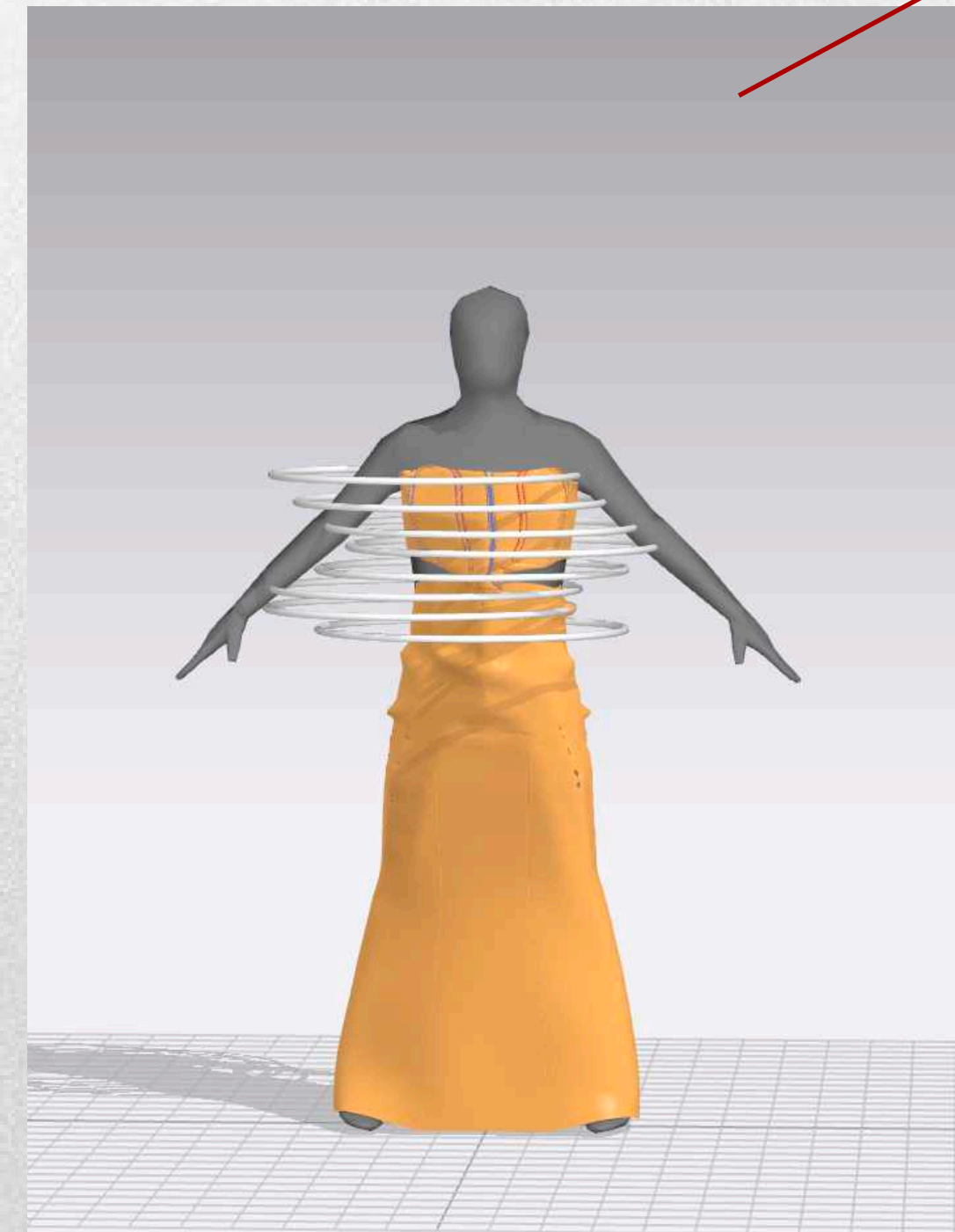
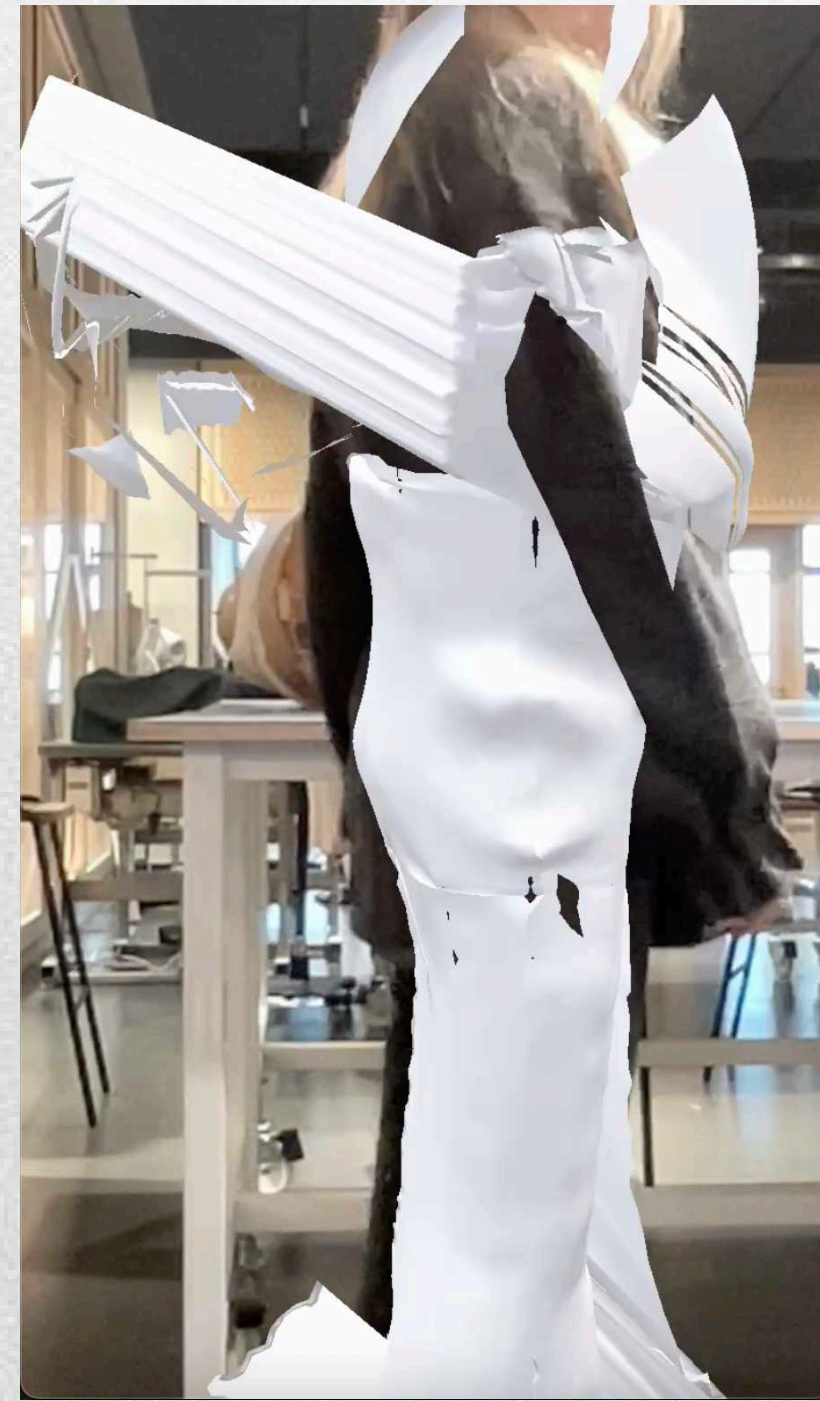
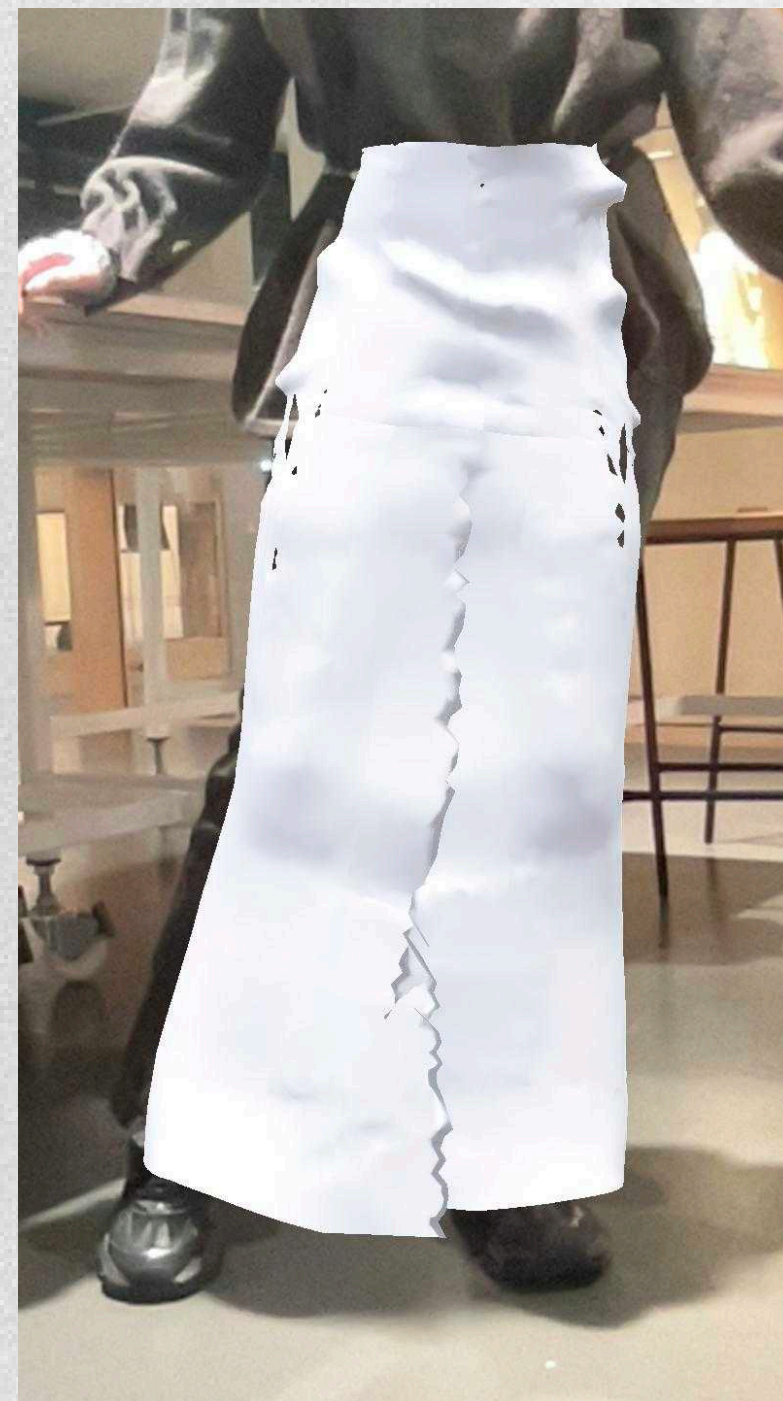


- This is my accessory model. Since Reality Composer displays the back of the accessory on the front as well, I had to cut off the back.

AR Test

2.0

Lens Studio



□ The model of the right image is an initial attempt I made in Lens Studio during the early stages of modeling. This model is still far from the details I envisioned for my final garment. Even so, it's already unable to run stably in Lens Studio.

- Lens Studio is a platform developed by Snapchat specifically for creating AR filters. However, it still has some areas for improvement in virtual try-on. While Lens Studio can fully stretch clothing according to the user's movement during virtual try-on, something the other two platforms can't do, my clothing model exceeded the size Lens Studio can import. I needed to significantly streamline my virtual clothing. Many details couldn't be rendered. This is not what I expected.

AR Test

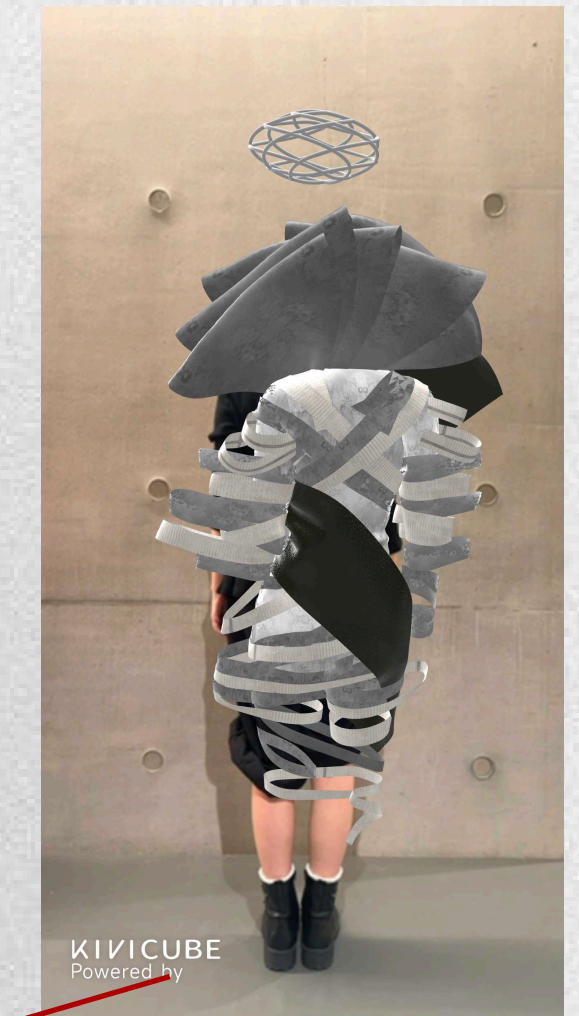
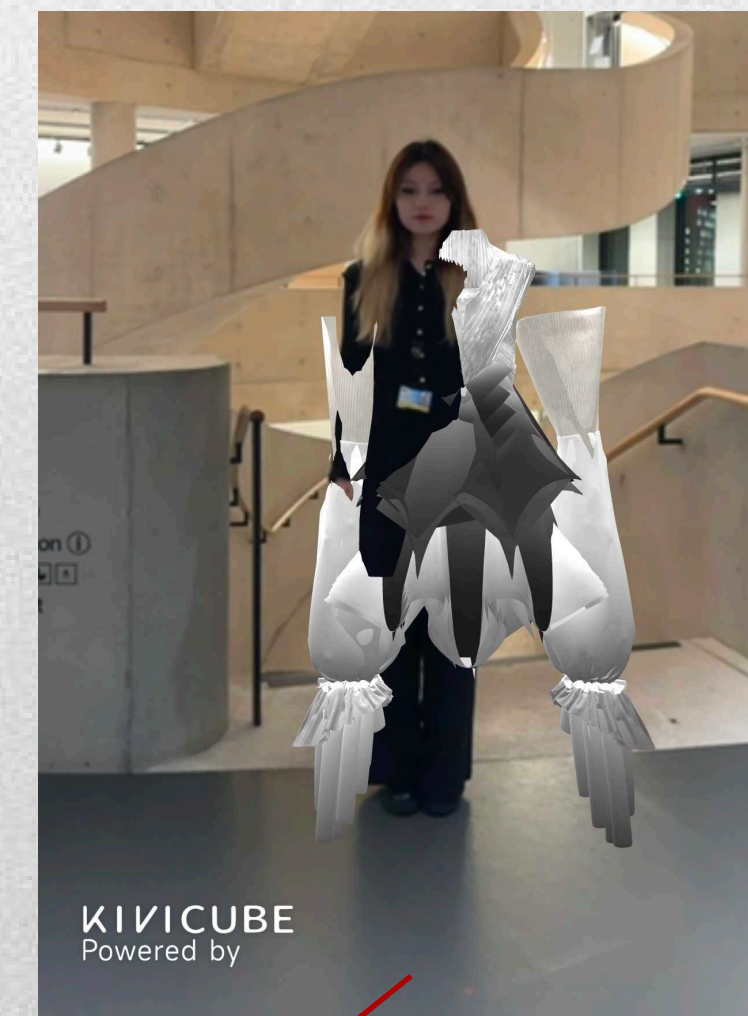
3.0 Kivicube



Kivicube was the last augmented reality platform I tried, and it was also the one I ultimately chose. Its advantage is its ability to reproduce my model with maximum fidelity. When importing my virtual clothing model into Kivicube, I didn't need to make significant simplifications. When I wore the virtual clothing on Kivicube, it achieved the effect I wanted.

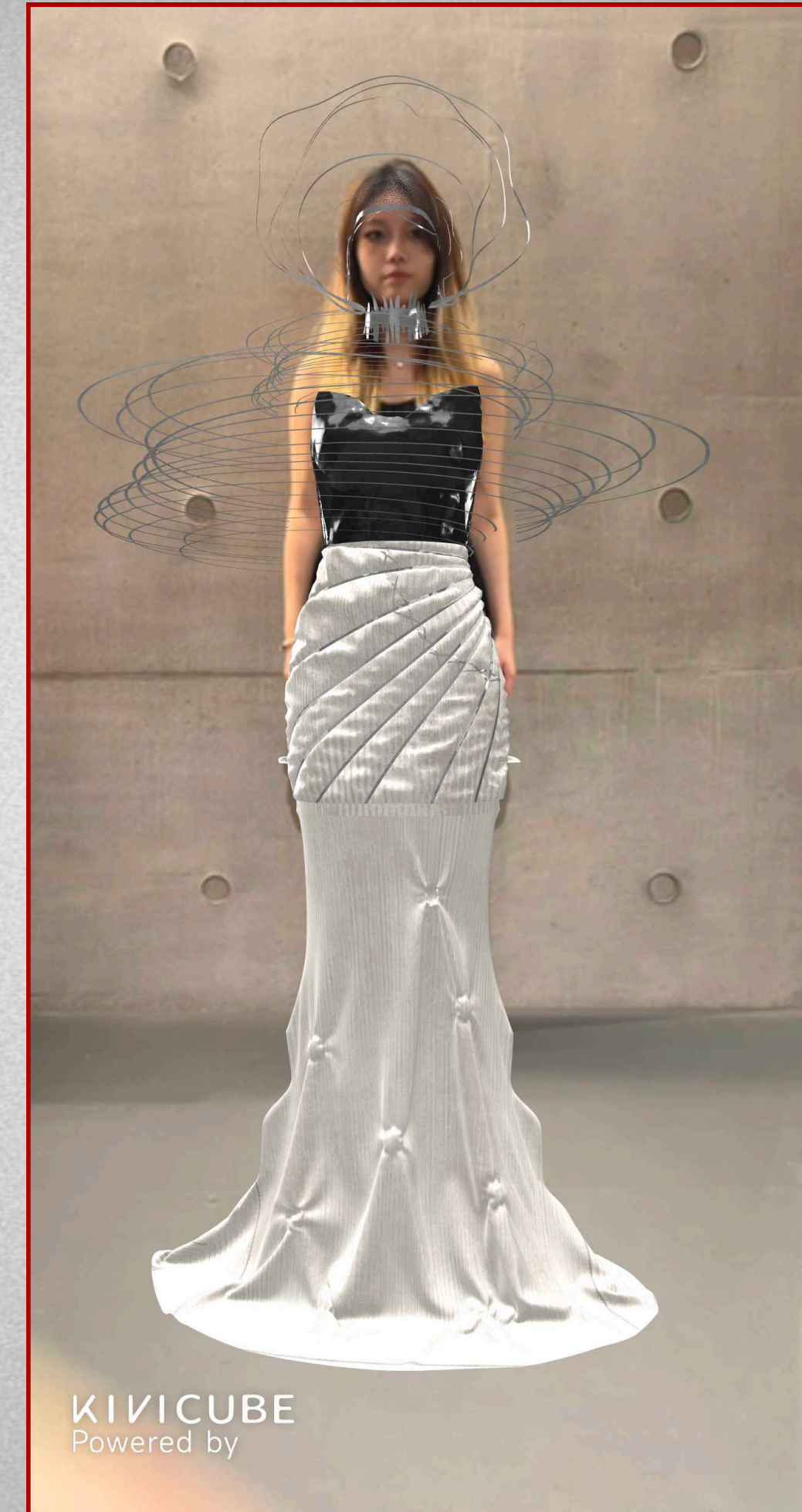
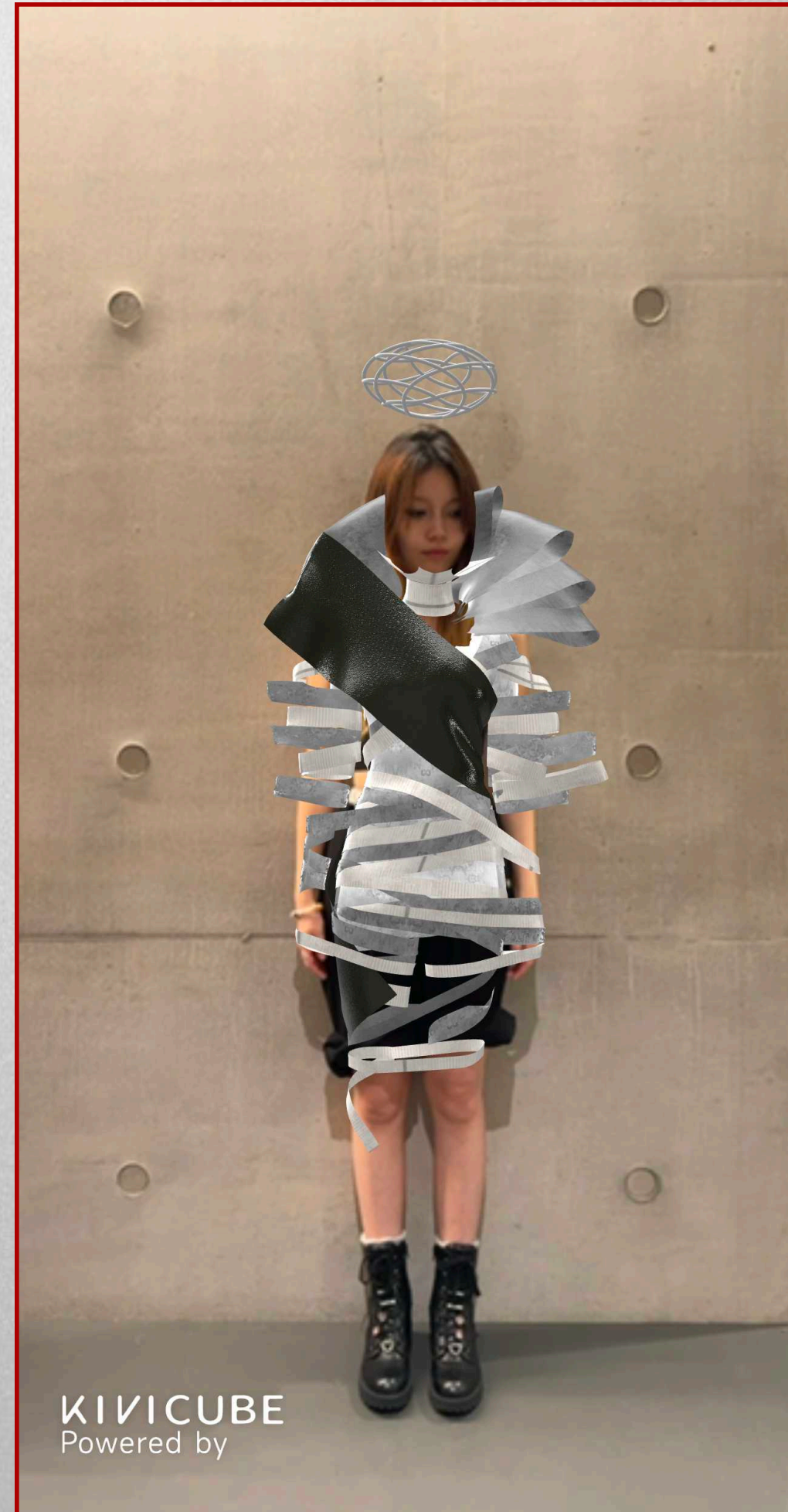


However, its drawbacks remain. First, it can't make the clothing stretch according to the model's movements like Lens Studio. Second, it can't display the clothing from 360 degrees and ensure no clipping. Finally, it still simplified some details of my clothing, such as the hand graphic on the dress in Echo.



As you can see from the images, when I turn to the side or move slightly, the clothing's tracking becomes quite unstable.

Final AR Effect



Please scan the QR code to try on three sets of AR virtual clothing



Echo



Trap



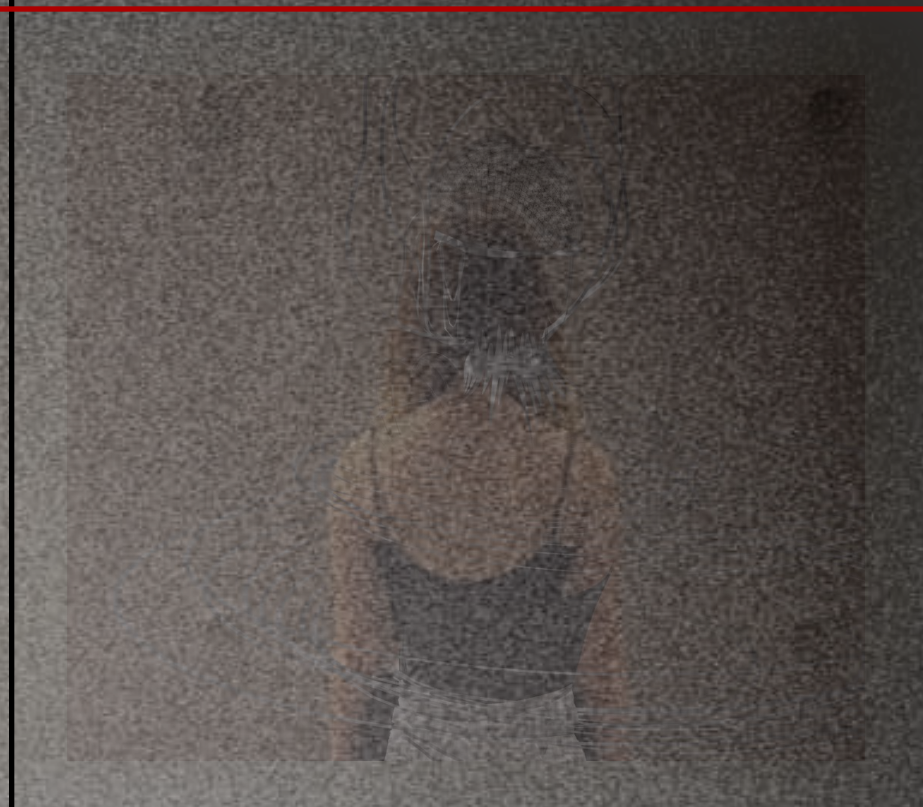
Overflow

01

Research

03

Augmented
Reality



Costume
Design

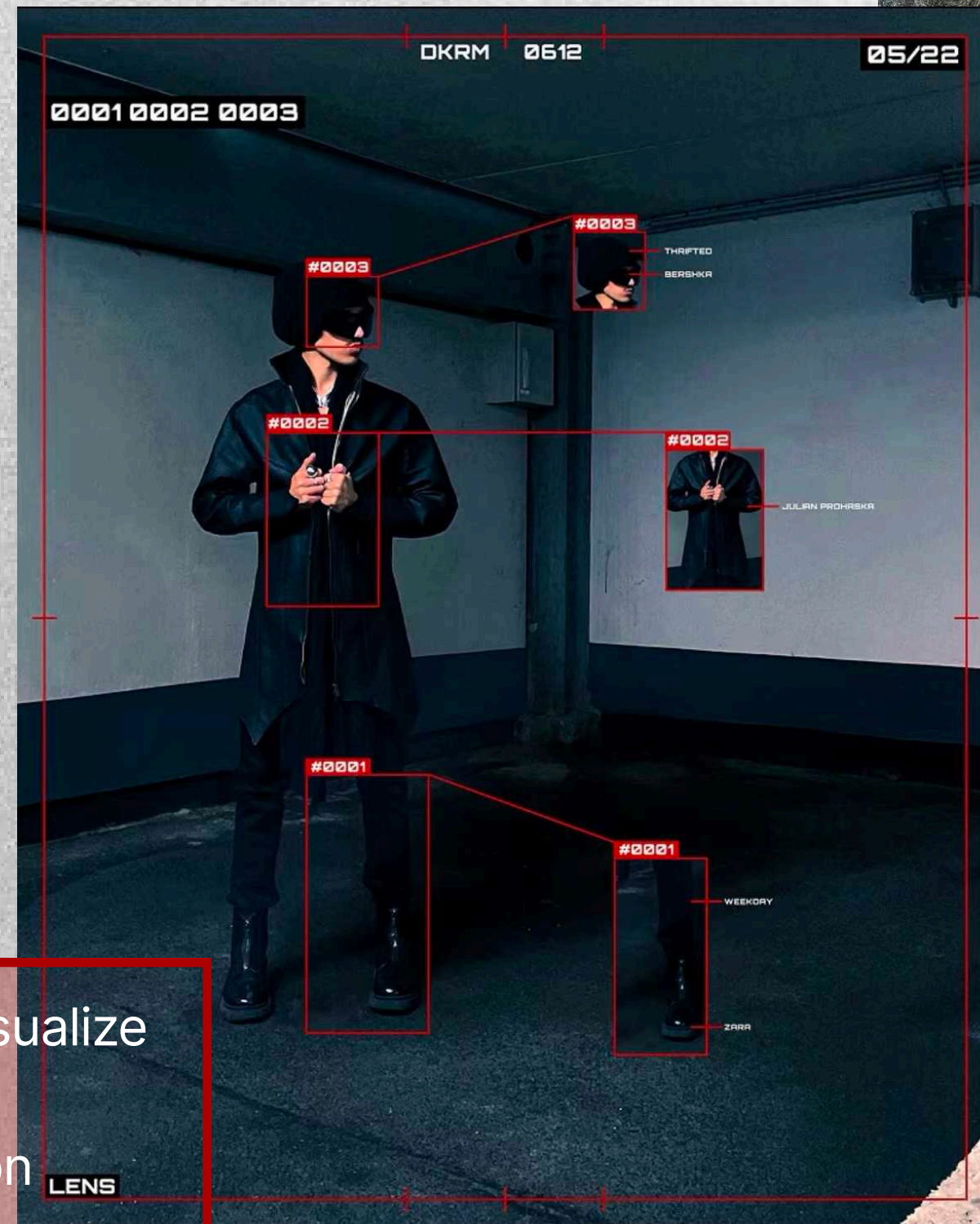


Final
Film

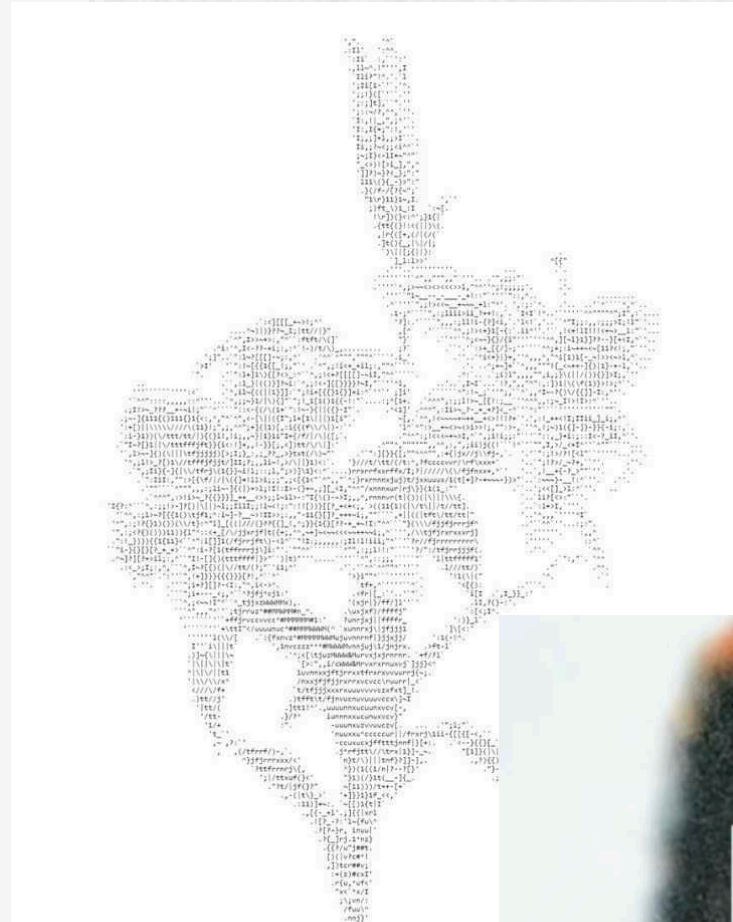
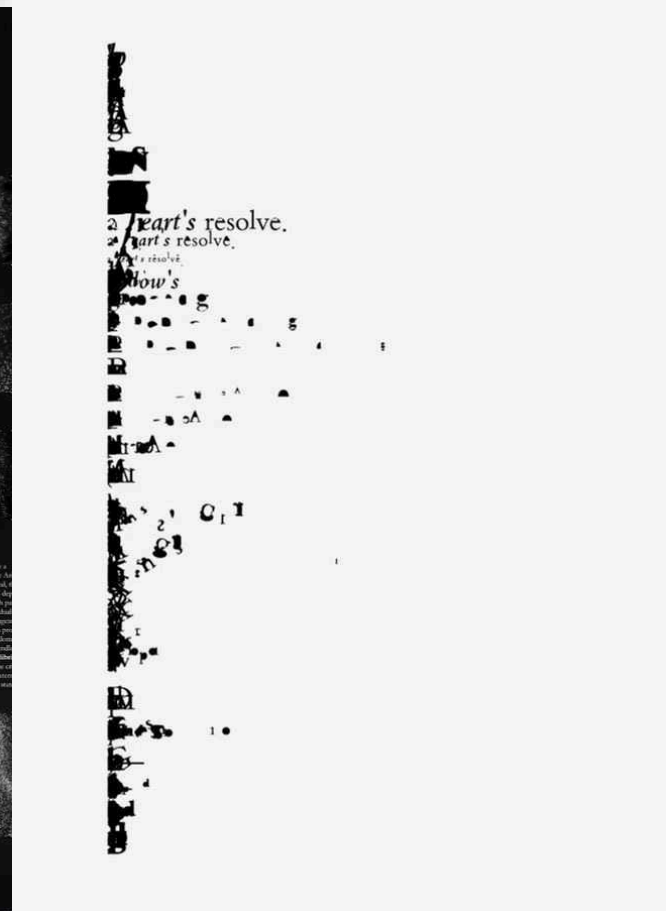
02

04

Mood Board



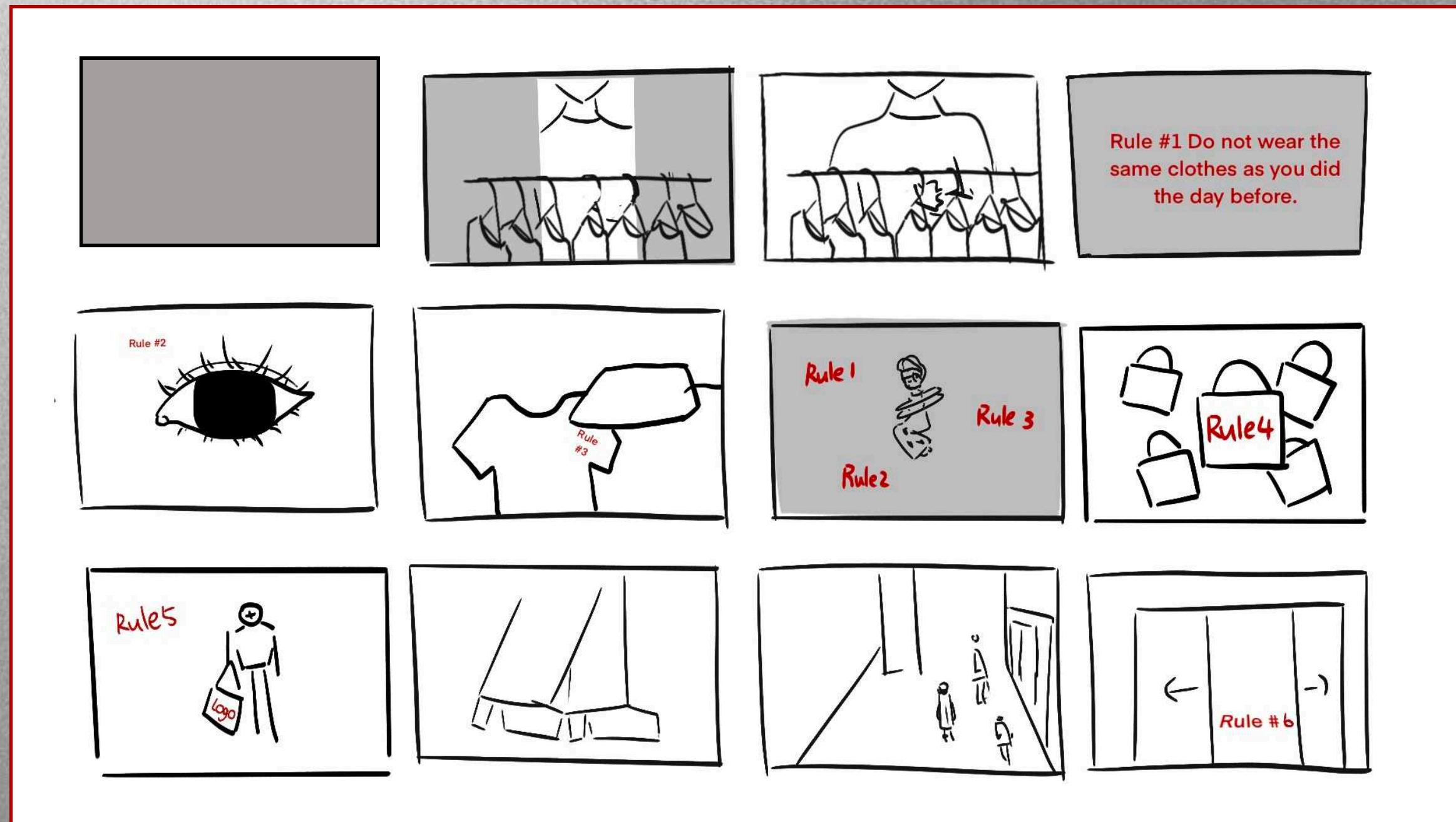
Images sourced from the internet



For the final film, I plan to visualize the nine hidden rules I've discovered within the fashion system in the most intuitive way possible. My overall visual style is algorithmic gaze. I will use geometric shapes and line segments to represent how our actions are influenced by algorithms and surveillance.

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Story Board



1



2

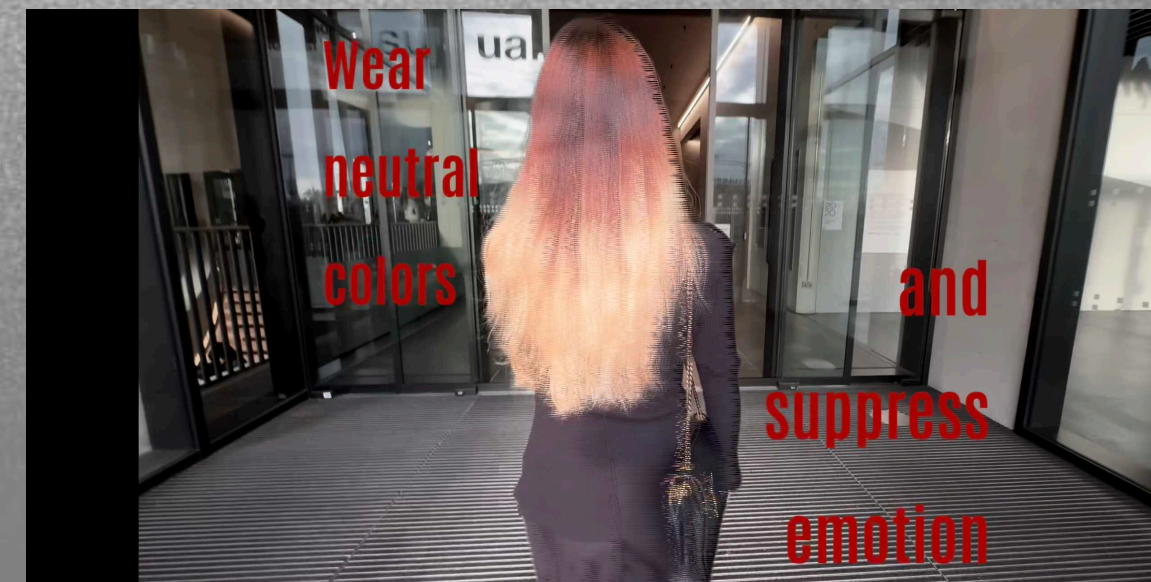
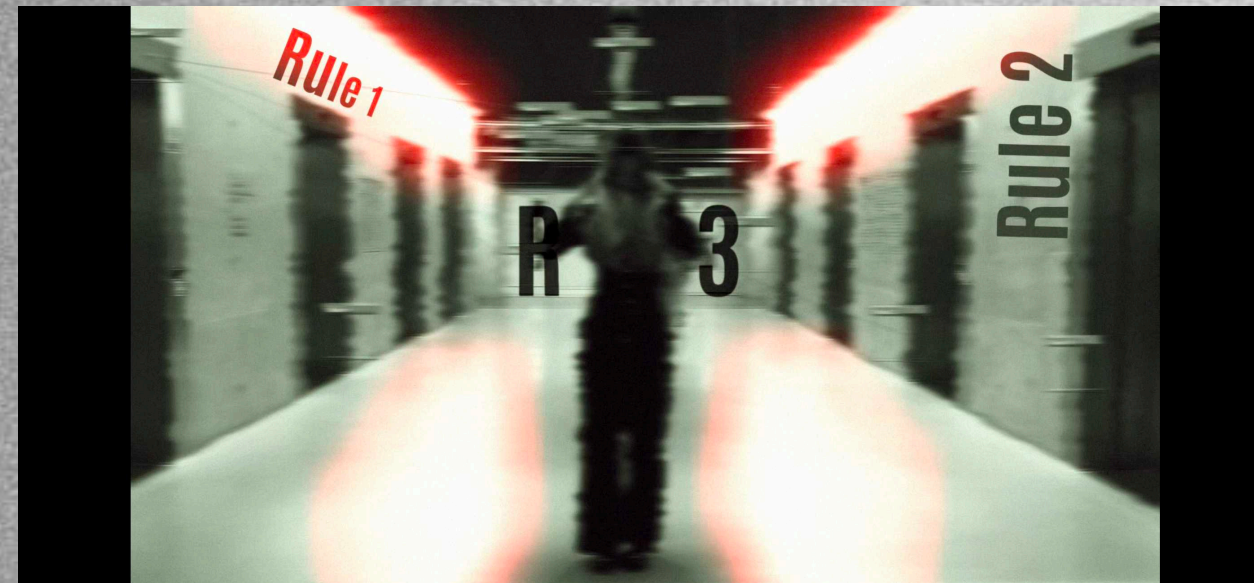
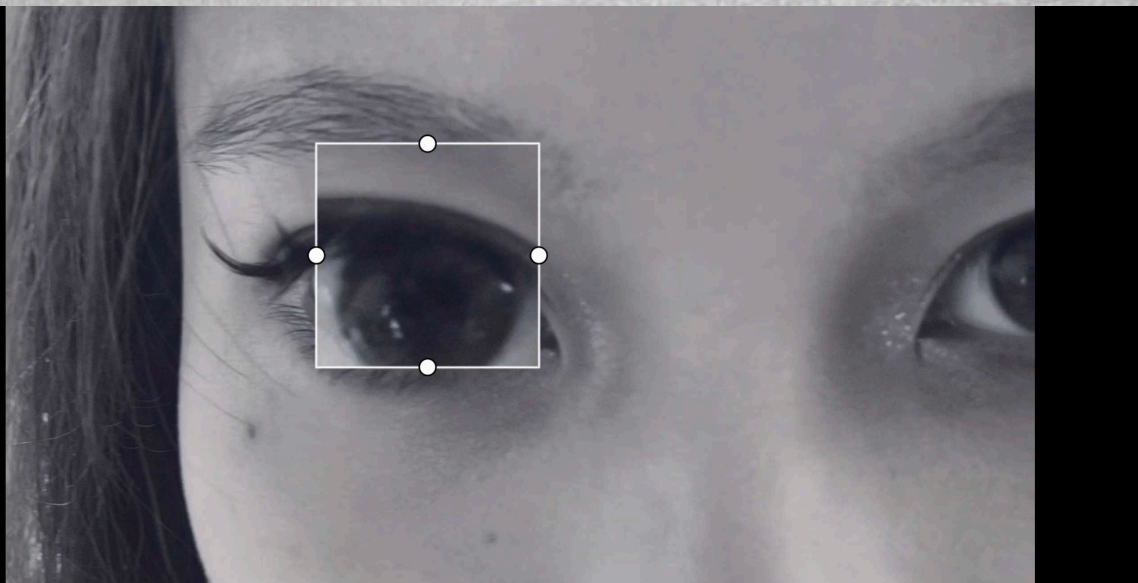
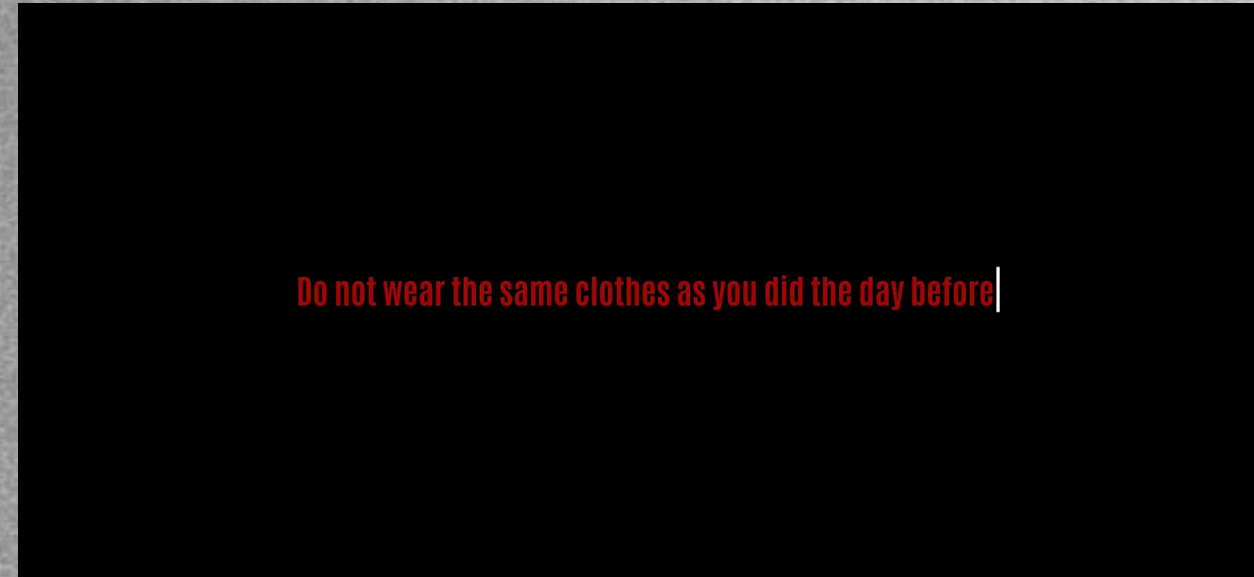


I introduced these ubiquitous controls in daily life to the audience in chronological order. The video's scenes shifted from the protagonist's home to school and then to a shopping mall. These familiar settings allowed viewers to better immerse themselves and connect with the nine rules.

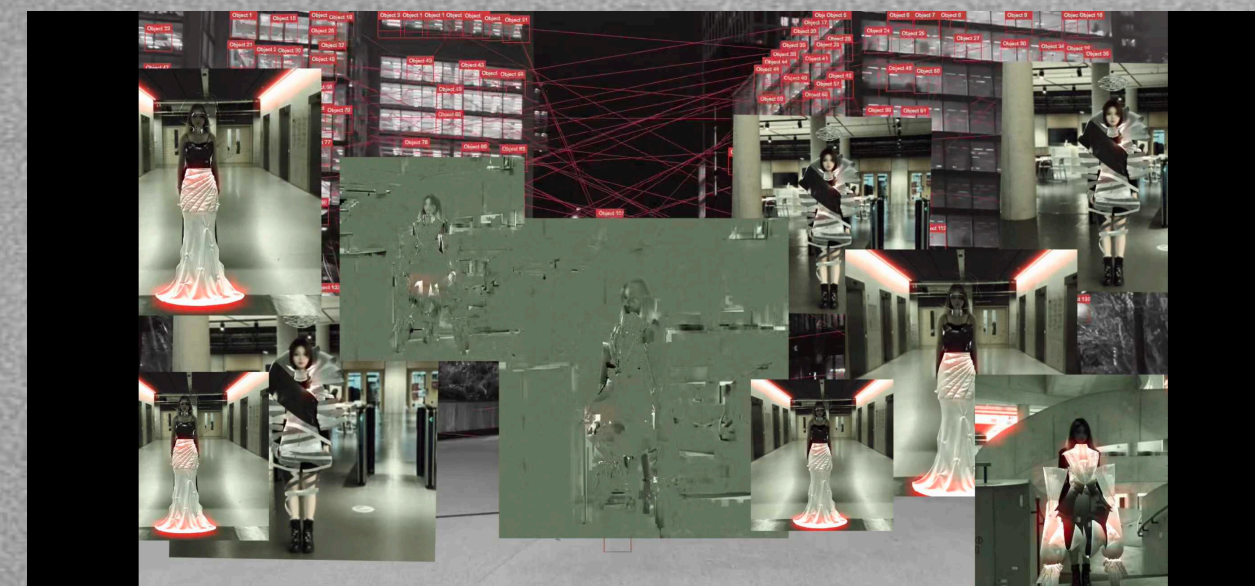
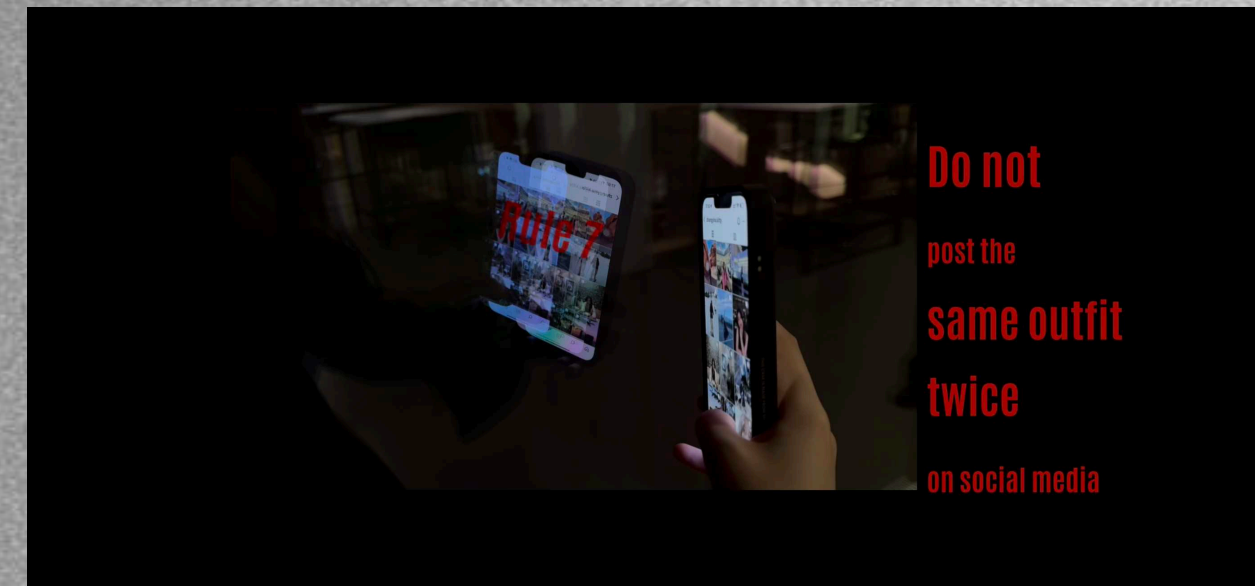
Then, I interspersed videos of the protagonist wearing three sets of virtual AR clothing throughout the introduction of the nine rules, gradually showing how the protagonist, after being controlled by the rules, wore these clothes symbolizing the rules themselves.

Filming Process

Final Film



Final Film



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