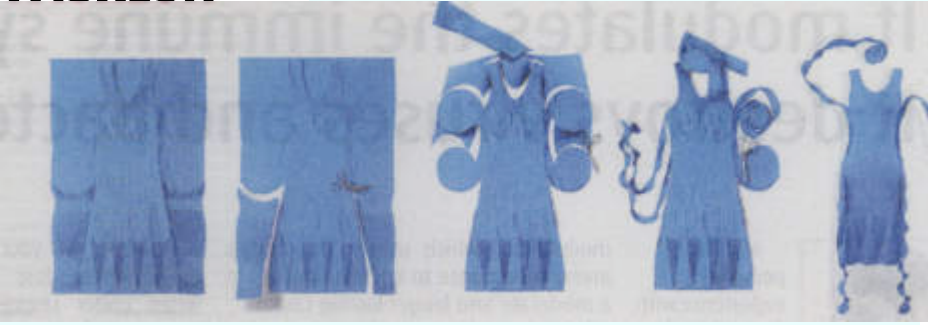


FASHION



THINGS
AREN'T AS
THEY SEAM:
Fujiwara's
no-thread
design

Dai me up

Dai Fujiwara's genius meets design and one of the greatest innovations of our time ensues — push-button fabrication. By Adam Levin

IMAGINE a perfectly co-ordinated outfit that pops off a production line at the press of a button. There is no pattern maker, no seamstress, no thread or needle involved at all.

Imagine you have not only selected the exact colour, design and details of the chosen outfit, but can also customise it further, by altering the lengths without the cotton unravelling. Imagine that, when it finally pops out, you will inspect it carefully and behold the magical absence of a single sewn seam. Abracadabra — if fashion has a future, surely this is it.

The visionary process, "A-POC" (an acronym for 'A Piece of Cloth') was launched by the ingenious Japanese designer and unquestionable emperor of pleats, Issey Miyake, in 1999, in conjunction with Dai Fujiwara, the stubble-headed, cheerful and unaffected 42-year-old who took over as creative director for the brand three years ago. At the time he made it clear in media interviews that he had no intention of sending the brand in a new direction. Instead, he wanted to extend its history by forging a connection with generations to come. If anything, since then, Fujiwara has been so far ahead of his customers that one wonders if they quite get him yet.

Indeed his talk at this year's Design Indaba was as elusive and difficult to grasp as a sliver of sashimi between your fingers — and yet, ultimately just as protein-packed and refreshing. He speaks in analogies, revealing little detail and leaving the listener to piece together the clues. But this interactive approach is also the key to his thinking: Just as he makes his audience work to understand him, so A-POC involves the Miyake customer in the creation of their garments.

So how exactly does A-POC work? The clothing is made using an industrial knitting or weaving machine, programmed by a computer. The process creates continuous tubes of fabric within which lie both shape and pattern. The customer cuts sleeves and skirts exactly to the length they want. It is an idea that not only overthrows the existing standards for making clothes, but is also a new and unique

suggestion for everyday life.

At its inception, A-POC simply produced dresses that looked very much like the ones Miyake was already making, but the radical idea took fashion to its bare essence, in that a single piece of cloth could be transformed according to the needs of the consumer — rendering a plethora of centuries-old steps in the production line unnecessary.

In its essence, A-POC is also far greener and more economic than traditional production methods. Fabric wastage is minimised and all sorts of chemical processes are eliminated in its seemingly magical process. Clearly Fujiwara's baby from the start, he has since taken the idea to a point whereby a thread goes in at one end of the machine and a perfect pair of jeans comes out the other.

Accessories like hats, scarves and gloves come off the production line the way a paper doll's clothes arrive on a cardboard sheet: you simply cut along the perforated lines and the garments are literally "Ready to Wear".

"Look," Fujiwara exclaims during the lecture. "No seams!"

The real challenge of fashion, he expands, is that fabric is two-dimensional, and needs to be transformed into three-dimensional garments.

Although much Japanese clothing, and Miyake's collections in particular, display a careful consideration of the relationship between clothes and the way they wrap and flow around a moving human form, Miyake's most iconic Pleats Please range can only be made from polyester-blend fabrics (cotton would burn in the permanent pleating process). Fujiwara seems quite at ease with this apparent contradiction.

"Nature and technology," he shrugs. "We need both."

Then again, Fujiwara seems at ease with most things. He has none of the air of pretension or ego you would expect from the brain behind such a major global fashion empire.

I ask him to sum up the Miyake brand in three words. "Strong. Simple. Confident," he responds. Only the "simple" part is deceptive — belying an arduous complexity that must remain obscured behind an archetypically Japanese veil of privacy.

So is Issey Miyake still running the business? There is some nervous laughter from the team — Fujiwara; Kumi, the long-haired right-hand man; and the preppy interpreter whom Fujiwara chooses not to use (he learned his English from rock music and cooking shows).

Eventually there is a polite consensus. "This is one question we cannot answer." And so I must deduce that Miyake has stepped aside, leaving the task of running his empire to Fujiwara. "Mr Miyake oversees everything," I am assured, and yet it is Fujiwara's head that will be on the block if next week's men's and Ready-to-Wear Paris collections are not a critical and commercial success.

For someone with such vast responsibility, Fujiwara remains surprisingly relaxed — which is probably just how he pulls it off.

