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## Exhibition review

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## Exhibition review

### Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures

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#### **Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures**

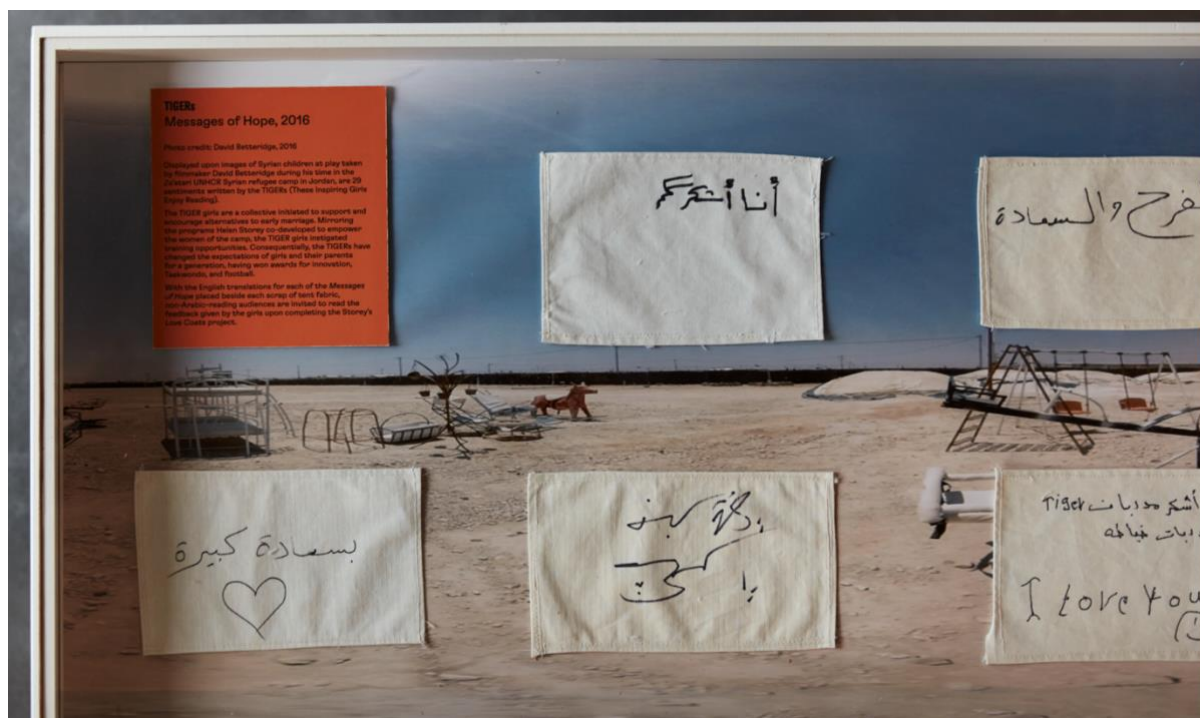
A large, pink handstitched heart, an appliqued sun and earth and handwritten messages of hope occupy three large textile banners suspended in an imposing glass and concrete foyer. Reminiscent of resistance flags of women’s suffrage, trade unions and queer activism, the co-created banners both announce and welcome the exhibition visitor with the words of the makers, confidently showcasing that ‘we have the strength to create change’, ‘we inspire and learn from each other’ and ‘we know we matter!’ (Image 1).

The colourful gestures, identity affirmations and tactile materialities resemble the dreams and aspirations that one would expect in an institution dedicated to art and design education. However, these messages calling for safety, social justice and belonging are not students’ outputs – or dreams. They are the hopes of the refugee communities in the London boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest, contributing to the ongoing AHRC-funded participatory action research project, ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities’ (2022-2024), led by the Centre for Sustainable Fashion’s researcher Dr Francesco Mazzarella.



*Image 1: Textile banners and manifestos for a compassionate future co-created in the ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles’ project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

These words and textile gestures seem familiar and relatable, hinting at a world in common. The soft textile banners share the formidable space with its massive windows and concrete surfaces and the exhibition's bright orange signage signalling emergency, danger, and precarity. Suspended orange panels and oversized quotation marks amplify the words and stories that seem to be threatened with erasure, silencing or dismissal. 'Breaking Barriers', 'Shaping a Just Society' and 'Together' echo the concerns stitched in the cloth works and the messages of hope in the glass-topped cabinets at the exhibition's entrance. Handwritten in Arabic on scraps of tent fabric, the *Messages of Hope* (2016) convey the responses of 29 Syrian girls at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan from the These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER) collective upon the completion of the collaborative 'Love Coats' project (Image 2).



*Image 2: 'Messages of Hope' (2016) from the These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER) collective, handwritten on scraps of tent fabric. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

The 'Designed for Life' exhibition coincided with the opening of the impressive new London College of Fashion (LCF) campus at UAL's new East Bank home on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in October 2023. The exhibition celebrated the institution's decades-long commitment to using fashion, design and creative practice as a force for positive social change and comprised diverse projects employing textiles, design, film, photography, artefacts, testimonies and community building, illustrating both the effect of witnessing and the transformative power of creative action. Spread out across five immersive showcase areas, the ambitious inaugural exhibition presented material identities, migrant and refugee testimonies, stitched narratives and tactile touchpoints fashioned from living, fearing, moving, belonging, making, memory, pain, social (in)justices and so much more. 'Designed for Life' was simultaneously designed *for* life as it was designed *from* life.

Drawing on the histories of fashion and textile manufacturing in the East End of London and acknowledging the need for dialogue, inclusion and representation, various community engagement projects preceded the consolidated move of LCF to its new home. 'Traces: Stories of Migration' was one such project led by UAL's

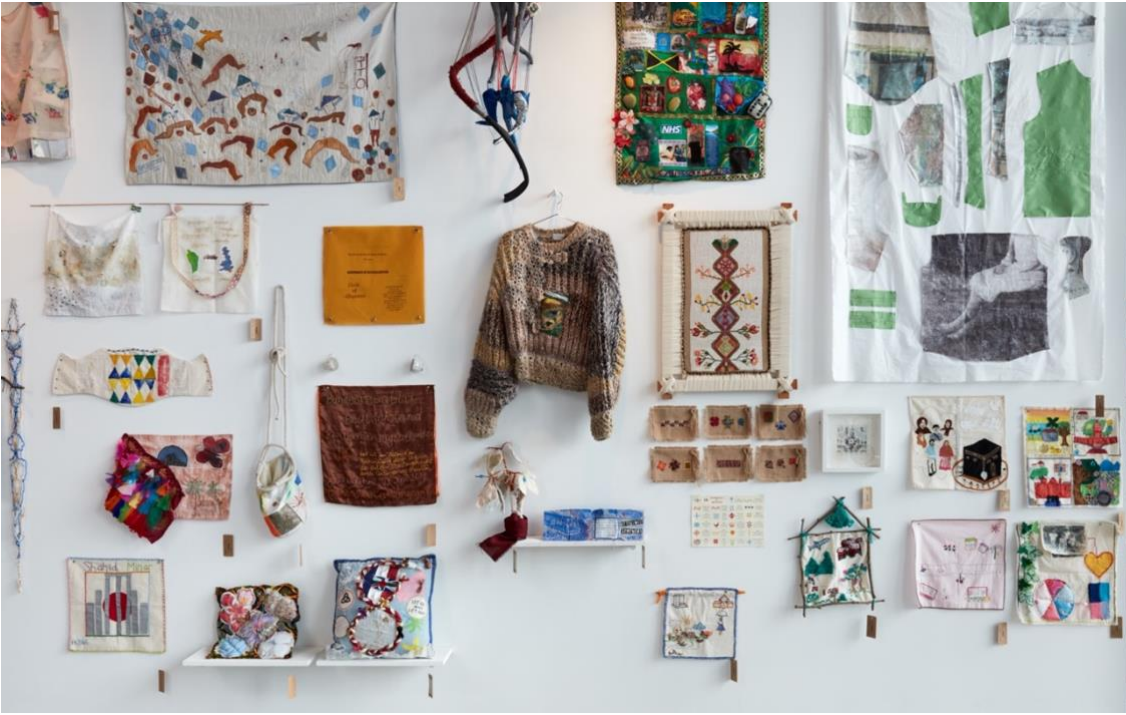
Centre for Sustainable Fashion researcher and visual artist Professor Lucy Orta, resulting in the 'Portrait Gallery' (2022-2023) of 40 large handcrafted, applied and embroidered artworks (Image 3). The collective tapestry of immigrant makers, their fashions, diversities and motifs from their migration stories was the culmination of a two-year collaborative project involving over 80 residents across the East London boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets. It occupied two entire walls in the main gallery.



*Image 3: Forty immigrant makers and their portraits in collaboration with Lucy Orta for the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

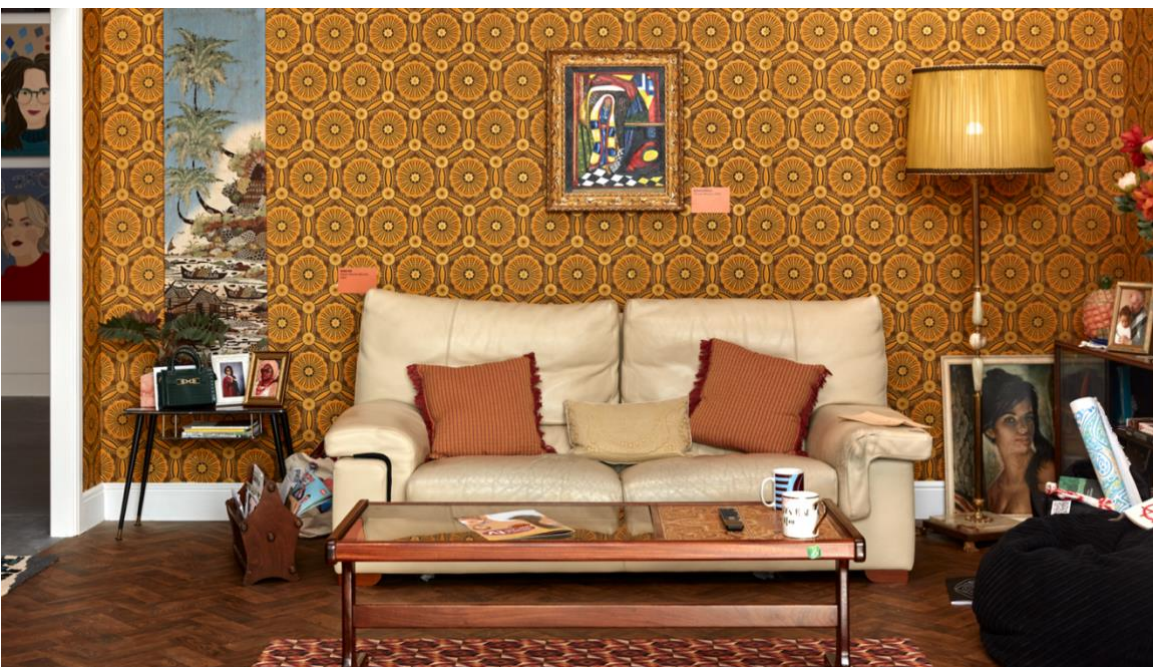
The portraits manifested diverse cultural identities and brought their material expressions into the heart of UAL. Collaborator evenings and various opening events also welcomed the long-silenced, largely immigrant communities of East London into the institution. As an act towards diversity and inclusivity, towards an idea that can accommodate cross-cultural exchange and innovation, the textile portraits boldly confront fashion's ongoing transnational inequalities.

Another series of textile-based artworks from the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project, 'Story Cloths' (2023), adorned the remaining gallery wall (Image 4). Delicately fashioned textile objects depicted the intimate and personal, physical and metaphorical migrant journeys of each maker involved in the creative research workshops. Each carefully rendered object fashioned a unique and personal textile narrative. Inspired by a migration journey from Panama to London, project participant JC used a cyanotype printing technique on silk-organza, layering and holding the resulting four silk squares with a simple red stitch. Jasmine Karis used old family photographs and garments from her grandmother's wardrobe to collage her fashion journeys from that time. In another story, Shama's stitched cloth 'Made in Bangladesh' in Bengali used a kantha traditional heritage technique to connect with the artisans who 'make our clothes'.



*Image 4: 'Story Cloths' created by the participants in the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

These intimate and personal invitations to listen and sit with the narratives in the 'Story Cloths' resonate with the exhibition's centrepiece, the 'Living Room Project', curated by Dr Leila Nassereldin and inspired by a Victorian terrace in Leytonstone (Image 5). The 'Living Room Project' offered an immersive East London domestic setting, co-curated by community members Pallavi Chamarty, Omolara Obanishola, Dave Sohanpal and Anh Tran with the support of Dr Michael McMillan. Filled with Lover's Rock vinyl records, vintage wallpaper, Avon cologne, parquet flooring, a pot plant, television and sewing corner, as well as a weathered leather sofa, its warm nostalgia afforded a distinctly different habitus from the University's modernist, concrete interiors.



*Image 5: Dr Leila Nassereldein curated the 'Living Room Project'. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

When barriers to home ownership, access to social housing and the constant threat of eviction are strikingly present in the lives of many East Londoners, this display offered a poignant and powerful touchpoint of home, being and belonging. With a large proportion of international and diasporic students at UAL, it would be interesting to note the affective impact of the 'Living Room' on their student journeys when thinking of home or finding their creative communities in London. The precarious lives of the East Londoners, impacted by ongoing gentrification, biases and erasures, were absent from this homely display. What did the 'Living Room' offer in the face of design education when the ambivalence of nostalgia erases the ongoing realities of cultural othering and exclusion?

Reflections of home, journeys and placemaking and the realisation of diverse identities and minority experiences in a fashion world were materialised throughout 'Designed for Life' as one of the exhibition's key threads. Between bits of coloured cloth, close communal listening and connecting to tradition, complex questions of geopolitical belonging and racial and socio-cultural hierarchies were confronted, explored, expressed and repaired. Addressing questions of diversity, decolonisation and access concerning current art and design curricula, the exhibition ambitiously threaded marginal cultural histories to sustainability discourses and stitched them into contexts where relations to heritage have been most ruptured.

A second essential thread in the exhibition lay at the intersection of design and conflict – the meeting of art with the extreme scale of human suffering. Whether the exhibition successfully bridged these polarities for the students and staff at LCF and its wider communities – to radically shift future design praxes for kinder, more ethical worlds to come – may not be measurable in the short term but may redirect some future praxis towards repairing the polarities of power that continue to produce the cultural and planetary violence that some of the exhibition's more haunting contributions shared.

Syrian war refugee and ex-construction worker, Tarek Mohammed Hamden, carved his life journey into the handle of a domestic broom over six weeks at the Zaatari refugee camp. Time haunts the intricately detailed 'Holding Hands Hammer' (2019), 'Man on a Pole Hammer' (2019), 'Chain Hammer' (2019) and 'Life Broom' (2020) (Image 6). So, too, does the brutality of displacement and the sheer scale of pain that no longer having a home to sweep or fix or care for must entail. The wall text avoids this protracted trauma of stasis and suspended life and directs the reader to the economic opportunities that skilled craftsmanship such as Hamden's affords.



*Image 6: 'Holding Hands Hammer' (2019), 'Man on a Pole Hammer' (2019) and 'Chain Hammer' (2019) by Tarek Mohammed Hamden. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

Another gallery space – past the reception of LCF, a coffee shop, a students' mingling area and more concrete and glass – offered a deeper exploration of these global traumas and displacements. Drawing on the work of UAL's Centre for Sustainable Fashion's researcher and United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Designer in Residence Professor Helen Storey's long-term projects with Syrian refugees in the Zaatari refugee camp, the darkened gallery witnessed both enigmatic beauty and the traces of extreme suffering. The smell of jasmine and adhan (the call to prayer) filled the room.

The UNHCR gifted a decommissioned refugee tent to Storey's ongoing project. 'Dress For Our Time' (2015) was made from this tent (Image 7). The dress in the darkened room visualised real-time data of people's movements due to war, climate change or the ongoing impact of extractive economies. In collaboration with Holition, pixels of light travel up from the hem of the dress, with each pixel representing 100 human beings fleeing for their lives. The lights flowed from six points representing the continents refugees had left before finding shelter in new locations. The dress mesmerises whilst simultaneously making visible the inconceivable scale of global displacement and unbelievable harm in the world.



*Image 7: 'Dress For Our Time' designed by Helen Storey. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

'Dress For Our Time' joined two other projects in this gallery as responsive objects that made visible and tangible both the measurable and immeasurable impacts of violence and displacement. 'Jacket of Wishes' (2021), made from the leftover fabric of the UNHCR tent, became a worn tablet upon which the voices and wishes of women in the Zaatari camp were inscribed. 'Love Coats' (2017) followed another collaboration with Helen Storey and the TIGER girls at the camp, transforming thermal refugee blankets into high-fashion coats. Each girl kept one coat to battle the sub-zero winter temperatures in the camp and gifted another to a loved one.

What conditions for rethinking the world could we nurture that would open up alternative routes of inhabiting the world, of living and being in common and of connecting with a planetary consciousness? Mobilising fashion as a site of activism offered some empowerment for these refugee girls and women at the Zaatari camp. However, the more profound questions of thinking about an open and fair future that moves beyond the deeply entangled histories of oppression, violence and war demand that institutions and their students grapple equally with the shared responsibilities towards repair and change and new understandings of sustainable and ethical life futures.

Seen as a constellation of crosses from above, 'Designed for Life' also occupied the mezzanine area at the base of the building's central, swirling concrete stairway, announced with another large bright orange plinth secured to a concrete pillar with orange tape.





*Image 8: View of the ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities’ project installation. Photo by Merhdad Pakniyat.*

Twenty-five textile autobiographies stitched on embroidery hoops were installed at eye-level on individual stems, prompting face-to-face engagement with a diverse community. Rich in symbolism and featuring loose threads, meandering lines, colourful stitches and shy smiles, the portraits spilled out beyond the hooped frames with colours, trims and tales (Images 8 & 9). Reading as personal manifestos on the reverse of each visage, the makers shared their reflections on reciprocal learning, inclusion, co-creation and community building. Instead of studying the refugee participants, the project team actively engaged in the co-creation process, sharing their own stories and producing ‘textile autobiographies’.

The artwork of Project Lead Dr Francesco Mazarella looks like a patchwork of the diverse cultures which he absorbed in his migration journey in search of better education and employment opportunities. As he wrote, the piece is “*a reminder of my role in life, seeking constant change, and crafting (my and other people’s) life journeys*”. Postdoctoral research fellow Dr Seher Mirza wrote: “*We are the sum of our experiences’ [...]. I made a feature of imperfect stitches to show we all have flaws and weaknesses*”. These artworks are in dialogue with those of the refugees participating in the project, like Madusu, whose piece is a statement of “*fighting for her freedom*” or Ghonche, who reminds us that we are all human and advocates for “*Women, Life, Freedom!*” The pieces intend to shift negative narratives around refugees and showcase the skills and resilience of their makers whilst calling for love and safety and dreaming of a brighter future.



*Image 9: 'Textile Autobiographies' were created in the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

A short film by David Betteridge peopled the room with a community of voices, aesthetics and faces often excluded from design institutions. Making visible and working with the censored histories and creative practices of the many marginalised communities of East London was a vital element of the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project. A map of colourful threads and colours re-imagined a world-making network of transient people who build resilience within themselves and in their new communities to fulfil their needs and aspirations. The map connected the dynamic and diverse makers and their rich folk histories with London's boroughs and centres of global South conversations in imagining and decolonising fashion practices. The cultural networks and possibilities featured in the project point to other creative futures beyond the conventions of standard fashion curricula. The refugee's fashioned portraits reflected the lived hybridities and practical negotiations between the local, global, past, present and future as necessary pathways to integrating, adjusting and becoming whole again.

Working with vulnerable communities through the lens of fashion does not reduce their marginality, but it can help shape languages and safe spaces for sharing. Bringing these tacit explorations – expressions of self and pain – into sites of privilege requires care to deflect the often destructive power dynamics between privilege and precarity. Using fashion as social repair also situates these crafting encounter workshops in contested terrains, as participants are hopeful. Yet, their world realities remain uncertain and on hold. A striking benefit expressed in the words of many refugee participants is the power of community building through reciprocal learning and making, where the stitches and selections of colourful textiles are moments of care, hope and glimpses of a different and more compassionate future.

Projects celebrating 10 years of LCF, UAL's social responsibility work, now known as the Portal Centre for Social Impact, occupied the lower levels of the new East Bank campus. First established by the Ministry of Justice and LCF in 2014, the Portal Centre for Social Impact convenes projects and training programmes that cultivate inclusive and collaborative learning experiences for students across different learning

pathways with diverse local communities, involving external creative practitioners, youth in rehabilitation centres, women in prison and other vulnerable individuals.

Each glass vitrine showcased a different Portal Centre collaboration, demonstrating various knowledge exchanges and artistic outputs from projects with fashion brands, designers, community centres, institutions and festivals. ‘Radical Weaving’ (2017, 2019) showcased handwoven textiles from industrial waste, such as paper and plastic wires (Image 10). This was a co-creation project with LCF students from the BA (Hons) Fashion Technology Menswear course and BA (Hons) Cordwainers Fashion Bags and Accessories courses, San Patrignano (a rehabilitative centre for youth struggling with addiction) and HMP Downview, a closed category prison for women.



*Image 10: ‘Radical Weaving’ vitrine showcasing work from the Portal Centre for Social Impact. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

The ‘Making for Change’ vitrine – a curated cabinet filled with high-fashion collaborations with designer Bethany Williams, aprons for Abel & Cole using their lorry tarpaulin and a Harris Tweed off-cuts recycling project – showcased the outcomes of various training programmes run by the garment manufacturing unit that opened in 2019 at Poplar Works, a fashion hub in East London. Building on the success of earlier work with HMP Downview since 2014, the new Making for Change unit connects LCF graduates and marginalised communities to interact, engage and collaborate in pioneering projects.

Collectively, the different projects showcased in the ambitious ‘Designed for Life’ exhibition produced a patchwork quilt of underrepresented voices, global crises and diverse communities, bringing into view various pieces of knowledge, global emergencies and some fresh perspectives (Image 11). These practitioners’ physical acknowledgement and ongoing commitment to using creativity to change the world enriched the students’ exchanges and mutual learning. Thinking from sites of suffering, survival and resistance, and conjured up by materials that connect and converse, the exhibition’s positioning of East London as home, a classroom and a realm of emergent futures situated the projects and participants as the

new teachers. Resilient, strong, capable. Making the self in a broken space. Fashioning pathways to positive social change. Finding home. Healing.



*Image 11: One of the public events, the Collaborators' Celebration for 'Designed for Life', was held on 11 December 2023. Photo by Merhdad Pakniyat.*

For any effective reframing of fashion education, transformative decolonisation and equitable sustainability work to happen, conventions need to change. Many more ontological, philosophical, economic and political assumptions and logic must be replaced with research from contexts and perspectives that pose challenges, draw on diverse values and offer different pathways. Research, where empathy and culture are activated and society's well-being is a truly shared endeavour, demands to be undertaken through alternative forms and formats. It requires the tenacity to ask beyond the familiar.

Finding these brave spaces where socially engaged artistic practices and projects hold space for challenging issues, not just for the students and staff at UAL, LCF, but for a future fashion system that will expand the possibilities for people to live well together in a more-than-human world, will shift the contemporary narratives of emergency to new narratives of emergence towards radically refashioning new ways of living.