

## Fantastical New Bodies

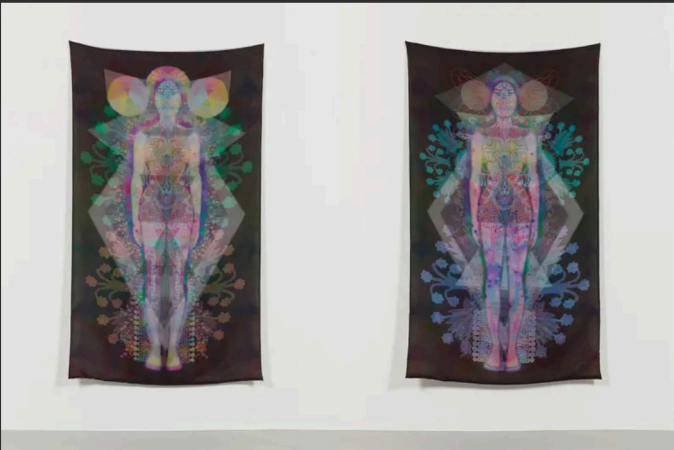
By Saya Woolfalk

I began to make garments when I was undergraduate in college. I was studying with feminist artists at Brown, and my work at the time attempted to complicate ideas of femininity and sexuality. I was deeply inspired by Judith Butler’s ideas around the performativity of gender, and wanted to make artworks in which a performer could become a part of an alternative symbolic language and inhabit a new body. My family sold textiles in post-war Japan and I had spent every summer of my childhood making garments with my Japanese grandmother. When I began to make these new sculptural bodies, sewing, textiles, and garmenting resurfaced as a way for me to make artwork.

In 2002, I moved to Brazil on a Fulbright to study folkloric performance traditions and carnival. I would watch practitioners transform as they inhabited the narratives embedded in their garments. In their fantastical new bodies, they would tell folk stories that fused the history of slavery with Afro-Brazilian mythologies about the natural world. As a black, white, and Japanese-American woman, I also wanted to tell stories and make garments that reflected my hybrid experience.

Garments operate in my practice as a way for people to become something else. For the last ten years, I have worked on a multi-part fiction about a group of women called the Empathics. The Empathics, and their corporation ChimaTEK, use technology-infused wearables to enhance the bodies of users of their Life Product System. My exhibition *ChimaCloud and the Pose System* includes digitally printed silk bodies that become skins for inhabitants of a virtual installation called the *ChimaCloud*. I made these skins thinking about how garments can act as extensions and enhancements to our bodies. By using 3D animation, I fuse the garment onto a virtual body. I am currently designing architecture, virtual reality experiences, augmented reality-infused meditation, and breathing techniques, as well as interior design related to this project.

Recently, exploring the Empathics complements designing products that mobilize a sophisticated exploration of hybridity through *accessible* consumer objects that can enhance thinking about intergroup contact in American culture. When asked what role fashion has in visual art, I thought of my recent exploration of this idea through digitally produced intercultural garments for a pop-up Culture Lab hosted by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. The theme was “Imagined Futures,” and so I designed an intercultural textile pattern, garment and wall paper by compiling patterns from around the world. The diverse selection of imagery came from Colombia, Spain, Mexico, England, France, Morocco, Sweden, Japan, and Puerto Rico, pieced together in a kaleidoscopic pattern. The pattern was then animated in a video of a domestic interior made of the same pattern. As the camera pans over this space, floating over a blue sky, both the wall and the screen periodically glitch, the interior of the digital space mimicking the wall in the physical space. I recently used this intercultural design in a packaging proposal for Perrier sparkling water.



Saya Woolfalk, *Cloudskin I, II*, 2016, Inkjet prints on silk, 70 x 40 inches each. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



Kawani Textile Company, Gifu City, Japan, ca. 1960. Courtesy the artist's personal family archive.

**Saya Woolfalk** creates works of art that incorporate the African American, European American, and Japanese influences of her family background. Also alluding to science fiction, feminist theory, mythology, anthropology, archaeology, Eastern religion, and fashion, she re-imagines a utopian, empathic world through painting, sculpture, video, performance, multimedia installations, and public artworks. She is currently working on a mid-career survey titled *Empathic Universe*, to be presented at the Museum of Arts and Design in the Spring of 2025.