

# ARTS & LIFE

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## Style in motion

**Ying Gao** wins the Phyllis Lambert grant thanks to playful garments that transform when they interact with light and air

EVA FRIEDE  
GAZETTE FASHION EDITOR

A fashion designer and teacher has won the Phyllis Lambert Design Montréal grant to continue her work on the transformative potential of clothing.

Ying Gao, 35, a professor at UQAM's École supérieure de mode, will get \$15,000 to create four "modulatable" garments linked to Nagoya and

Berlin, UNESCO design cities along with Montreal.

She will be an ambassador for excellence in Montreal, said Giovanna Borasi, curator of contemporary architecture at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and a member of the jury for the award, created in honour of CCA founder Phyllis Lambert.

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ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

UQAM's Ying Gao has won \$15,000 to pursue her fashion project.

## GAO In mourning for haute couture

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Among Gao's current works hanging in her airy atelier at LaSalle College are garments that appear wearable and those that don't: a white shirt consisting of a collar and shredded ribbons; a translucent gold hoodie anorak with slits for armholes; and a dress of lavish roses with light-sensor boxes on the back. When the dress, titled Living Pod, hangs in the dark and light is sensed, the roses blossom and deflate.

White origami dresses from a series titled Walking City have pleats that volumize and deflate when touched by air.

"It's very playful," Gao said. "I just wanted to integrate abstract elements – not tangible elements – like light and air. Making clothes is so tangible – cloth and threads."

A modulatable garment, Gao added, is something that transforms: a garment that can become a house or a house that can become furniture.

The concept is not that new, she said when asked whether Hussein Chalayan, the Turkish Cypriot-British designer who has made skirts that resemble stacking tables, was an influence. It's always the interpretation that is different, she added.

Gao said she creates cloth-

ing that is not necessarily wearable because she is sad about the state of haute couture, "because it is dying. I thought it was the most artistic, experimental part of fashion design."

Just this month, French designer Christian Lacroix closed his couture house.

"Maybe it is dated," Gao said of haute couture, with its clients in gilded chairs and dresses costing in the tens of thousands of dollars. "Maybe we can say something new with digital technology so that experimental design can

about movement, travelling, networks and places where we wait.

"I have the idea that our lives are in suspension."

She and assistant Catherine Métivier were already working on that notion with a Japanese white "super-organza," the lightest fabric in the world, Gao said, made of 100 per cent polyester. "It's like smoke," she added, presenting a strip of white gossamer fabric that almost floated on its own.

Indeed, the fabrics as well as the concept are experimen-

tal.

"There's something incestuous in fashion design," she said of the obsession with retro looks. "Fashion designers don't look enough to other fields – architecture, cinema, literature, music.

"They look to older garments."

Gao noted that we live in a wasteful environment, not limited to fashion.

"In all domains, we waste – we buy, buy and buy and throw away," she said.

"In fashion, if we make things well with beautiful fabric that people pay a lot for, we will stop throwing it away."

Gao said she hesitated to apply for the Lambert grant, now in its second year, and was surprised to win.

Last year's winner was graphic designer and publisher Philippe Lamarre. This year's hopefuls included a broad spectrum of architects, landscape designers and graphic designers, the CCA's Borasi said.

Despite Gao's surprise, Borasi said there is a long tradition starting with Bauhaus in which architects were very interested in clothes. She added that Lambert, who was not on the jury, has a broad interest in design – "everything that has a broad impact on the way you look at cities."

Gao worked to define a relationship between the body and clothes, Borasi suggested. "You will inhabit your clothes as the ultimate smallest space you can inhabit," she said.

Gao also reflects a vein of research in Montreal involving a growing interest in the disciplines of technology, fashion and textiles, she added.

The award is given by the city of Montreal. The grant is worth \$10,000; the city contributed another \$5,000.

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**CHANGE OF CLOTHING**  
See more photos of Ying Gao's designs, and videos of her garments in motion.

*"(People are) not sensitive anymore to new things. They're not brave enough."*

YING GAO

still have its place in the fashion design field."

Gao, born in Beijing to "francophile" French-professor parents, moved to Switzerland and then to Montreal in 1994. She has been teaching here since 2003.

The Berlin and Nagoya inspiration comes from massive transportation infrastructures there: a new airport to open in Berlin in 2011 and the largest train station in the world, in Nagoya.

"So the whole theory is

tal. The gold anorak fabric comes from Swiss haute couture manufacturer Jakob Schlaepfer and is used to treat burn victims, Gao said. It is not on the market.

Gao expressed some dismay on the state of fashion in Montreal, on the current culture of disposable clothing and in the creativity of her students.

The fashion scene in Montreal lacks an audience that encourages good work, she said, naming Denis Gagnon, Renata Morales, Marie Saint Pierre and Karl Latraverse (now in industrial design and with whom she has worked on a series of anoraks) as designers she respects.

"Experimenting is very important," she said. "Copying is detestable."

People are numb today, she observed. "They're not sensitive anymore to new things. They're not brave enough."

As for her design students, they're not good enough yet – although she does see great improvement as they get to the third year of the program.

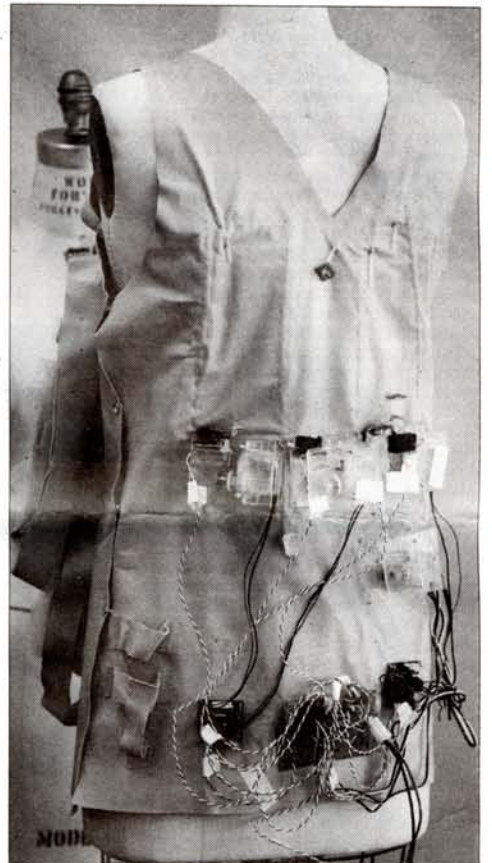
"It's not good enough to have a good idea. The object must be well done."

Runway fashion, Gao continued, is sometimes very well thought out; conceptualist Martin Margiela is among her favourites – "simple but visionary"

Often, however, we see too much of the same thing, she



Front and back views of Ying Gao's Living Pod dress, featuring roses that blossom and deflate when light is sensed.



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