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“Dichotomies in Silk: Sheer and Opaque”

by
Yuh Okano

Since my days as a student of design, I was interested in fiber as a means to express myself creatively, influenced largely by Junichi Arai’s innovative works in the 1980s. As an artist, I emphasize the material itself and how it takes on shape in the same manner as that of a sculptor. It is in my character as an artist and designer to play with diverse materials and experiment with an array of techniques that can be applied to them. Illustrated by slides, I would like to share my creative exploration using silk fabric and recent technical improvements in surface design processes.

Having had the opportunity to explore a huge array of polyester fabrics in the 1990s, I experimented with the thermoplastic characteristics of polyester using various shaping processes and heat. This gave me the foundation to open the potential of silk when I later worked with Isao Negishi, a chemical engineer who perfected the process of silk cloque in combination with traditional Japanese paste-resist dyeing techniques of *kata-zome* (stenciled) and *tsutsu-gaki* (hand painted).

Sheer silk fabric may be either screen printed or hand-painted with paste-resist, then immersed in chemicals. This causes the exposed areas to crimp and condense into opaque sections, puckering the fabric. The resulting design is much like a bas-relief pattern set against the reserved areas of the original sheer fabric. A stronger chemical solution (or thinner reserve paste) yields greater shrinkage. The possibilities in achieving expressive textural patterns are endless and silk fiber, being natural, behaves like a living entity with its subtle nuances seen in each piece.