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# EXPRESSIVE INTERPRETATION AND ELEMENTAL SYMBOLISM IN COSTUME DESIGN FOR EXHIBITION: A STUDY OF *GARMENT OF NATURE*

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***Abstract***

Costume design has increasingly moved beyond its conventional function as distinctive attire in theatrical performances to emerge as a manipulative element of design and expressive communication. However, within exhibition contexts, particularly in educational institutions, there remains limited scholarly attention to how costume functions as an interpretive and symbolic medium that communicates abstract and elemental ideas. This study addresses this gap by examining expressive interpretation in costume design for exhibition, using the creative project *Garment of Nature,* an elemental costume exhibition presented during the UNIBEN Theatre Arts Festival 2025 at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin. The exhibition featured costumes designed by 400-level Costume Design (major) students. The study adopts a qualitative, practice-based research methodology, combining creative production with ethnographic strategies, including participant observation, informal interviews, audience interaction, reflective design documentation, and pictorial evidence. It explores how natural and abstract elements, such as rain, ice, cloud, smoke, and silver are translated into costume through colours, texture, form, and material manipulation. Findings reveal that expressive interpretation enables costume to transcend conventional apparel, functioning instead as a visual and semiotic language that communicates emotion, symbolism, and conceptual narratives. The integration of elemental symbolism within an exhibition framework enhanced audience engagement and interpretive depth, allowing viewers to experience costume as a multidimensional expressive form. This study contributes to costume design scholarship by foregrounding exhibition costume as a site of visual communication and artistic inquiry, demonstrating how practice-based research expands theoretical understanding of expressive interpretation in contemporary costume design.

**Keywords:** Costume Design, Expressive Interpretation, Elemental symbols and visual communication

## Introduction

Costume design has gradually shifted from being understood mainly as functional attire for theatrical performances to being more of a powerful medium of artistic expression and visual communication. In contemporary creative practice, costumes are increasingly exhibited as independent artefacts, encouraging audiences to engage with them as conveyors of meaning through form, colour, texture, and symbolism. Despite this, scholarly

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discourse has not fully addressed how costume operates as an expressive interpretive medium within exhibition contexts, particularly in educational institutions where experimental and practice-based research is central.

The main problem addressed in this study lies in the limited critical study of costume as an expressive interpretation design for exhibition. While scholars such as Keir Elam on costume semiotics and symbolism have provided valuable insights into how costumes communicate identity, narrative, and cultural meaning in performance-based contexts, Roland Barthes explains fashion as a visual language. Barbieri expands this by analysing costume as a semiotic sign system in stage interpretation. However, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how abstract and elemental concepts are translated into costume when performance is absent. Natural and abstract elements such as rain, smoke, ice, cloud and silver possess strong symbolic and emotional associations, yet the processes through which these elements are interpreted and embodied in exhibition costume design have received minimal focused scholarly attention.

The study seeks to address the following research questions:
1. How can expressive interpretation be effectively achieved in costume design for exhibition?
2. In what ways do elemental symbols function within a costume exhibition?
3. How do materiality, colour, texture, and technique shape audience interpretation and emotional engagement in an exhibition setting?

The primary objective of this work is to investigate how expressive interpretation and elemental symbolism are employed in costume design for an exhibition, using the creative project "Garment of Nature", an elemental costume exhibition, as a case study. Through a qualitative and practice-based approach that integrates creative production, reflective observation, and audience interaction, the study examines how elemental ideas are transformed into visual and material forms.

Situated within contemporary scholarly conversations on costume semiotics, This study contributes to the growing recognition of costume design as capable of expressing and communicating through visual language, exploring exhibition costume as avenue for artistic inquiry and knowledge production, the research extends existing theoretical frameworks beyond performance contexts and highlights the potential of expressive interpretation to transform costume design into a multidimensional art form that engages audiences intellectually, emotionally, and visually.

## Costume Design Concept as Expressive Practice

Costume design is an element of the theatre that extends beyond garment production to encompass conceptual thinking, visual storytelling, and symbolic representation. Costume design is an element of the theatre that extends beyond garment production to encompass conceptual thinking, visual storytelling, and symbolic representation. According to Oliogu, "The use of costumes in Nigerian theatre is a non-verbal method of portraying narrative that conveys a meaning even before speaking occurs" (91)

According to Delligatti, costume is a deliberate act of interpretation in which fabric, colour, silhouette and texture are orchestrated to convey meaning (3). In a costume exhibition, the costume must independently sustain viewer engagement and interpretation. Clancy argues that exhibition costume demands heightened conceptual clarity, as the designer must rely

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solely on visual and material strategies to communicate intent (52). This places emphasis on design decisions such as abstraction, symbolism, and the expressive use of materials.

The design process itself becomes a site of inquiry. In practice-based costume research, the act of designing is inseparable from critical reflection. Monks notes that costume designers often "think through making," allowing conceptual ideas to evolve through material experimentation and iterative construction (67). Costume speaks through the language of sign and visuals for proper appreciation. Barbieri explains that costume operates as a visual code system, where design elements function as signs that audiences interpret through cultural and aesthetic frameworks (15). While these scholars express costume as semiotic and visual language, anchoring their analysis in a theatrical performance context, exploring costume as an independent exhibition artefact capable of communicating abstract, environmental and elemental concepts without dramatic narrative support remains minimal. This study creates a theoretical space for studying costume as both a research method and an expressive object within academic practice. The elemental focus in *Garment of Nature*, rain, smoke, ice, cloud and silver were not depicted literally but interpreted through symbolic design choices carefully created to encourage contemplation rather than narrative closure.

It is also important to note that the choice of material is very significant in actualizing design concept for a costume production of this kind. Cunningham emphasises that the tactile and structural qualities of costume materials directly influence how meaning is perceived, particularly when movement and performance are absent (94).

## Expressive Interpretation in Costume Design

Expressive interpretation in costume design refers to the intentional translation of abstract ideas, emotions, and concepts into visual and material forms that communicate meaning beyond function. Expressive interpretation communicative potential of costume as semiotic object noted by Pantouvaki is "embedded with interactive and material symbolism…. Transmit emotions, experiences and meanings beyond static visual form (179-196). Underscoring how costume functions as an expressive language that communicates conceptual and emotional intent beyond performative art.

Costume is more than body adornment in performance; it is a visual language that communicates feelings, concepts and emotions through various elements of costume. Costume operates as a structured sign within the semiotic system, as Keir Elam observes that theatrical objects are sign which functions within a system of signification (7). Within the exhibition context, costume therefore becomes a signifying object whose meaning is produced through visual codes rather than narrative dialogue. Similarly, Barthes affirms that clothing is a system of signs (5). According to Efimova, the sign system and social meaning of costume have developed gradually throughout its whole (213).
Pravina noted that dress inherently performs, since "clothing always signals identity, intention, and cultural belonging, whether in everyday life or in art" (27). Costume to Barbieri constitutes a performance (3). Costume, as described by Pantouvaki, serves as an active agent in performance (181).

In theatre, costume expresses the concept of the performance, the mode and time, the local and setting of the performance, and is structured for easy interpretation. Costume design in the theatre is often tied to characters and the play's storyline. However, in concept-driven exhibitions, costume transcends its conventional function and operates as an autonomous expressive medium. Within the context of *Garment of Nature*, costume was not conceived as

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attire for performers but as a visual and symbolic embodiment of natural and elemental ideas. Elements such as rain, smoke, and silver, ice, and cloud were interpreted through form, texture, and materiality, allowing intangible forces to be translated into tangible visual statements. This approach reflects Elam's assertion that "things serve only to the extent that they mean" (35).

Costume design in this context functions as both craft and visual language. The designer draws upon the fundamental elements of design line, shape, form, colour, value, texture, and pattern, and applies the principles of design such as balance, proportion, rhythm, unity, and harmony to construct expressive forms. These design tools enable the translation of abstract concepts into coherent visual expressions. Costume design in exhibition contexts is therefore not limited to the production of visually appealing garments but is rooted in a process of interpretation and conceptual inquiry. It engages cultural symbolism, material experimentation, and visual communication to convey meaning without reliance on performance or dialogue. As a result, costume becomes a central expressive language through which ideas are articulated and experienced by the audience.

The communicative power of costume is underscored by Clancy's observation that costumes are often among the most immediately discussed aspects of a production, capable of enhancing or disrupting audience engagement (12). This highlights the importance of a thoughtful design process grounded in research, interpretation, and creative synthesis. In exhibition-based works such as *Garment of Nature*, costume design is not simply about dressing a body but about constructing a visual dialogue between material form and conceptual intent. As Clancy further emphasises, costume design is an art form in its own right, requiring the designer to shape a visual narrative that resonates independently while remaining conceptually cohesive.

Within contemporary costume scholarship, expressive interpretation is closely linked to the designer's creative process. Clancy notes that costume design becomes expressive when the designer consciously manipulates colour, texture, silhouette, and materials to evoke ideas or sensations that resonate with the viewer (37). Colour, texture, and silhouette create mood and atmosphere in design interpretation. For instance, dark-coloured material may suggest the unseen, depth, mourning, fear, terror, danger, inner struggle, complexity or things beyond ordinary understanding, which reflects the psychological state of a character in the theatre. Costume, therefore, functions both psychologically and symbolically.

In exhibition contexts, where costume is removed from performance and narrative dialogue, expressive interpretation becomes even more critical, as meaning must be conveyed entirely through visual and material cues that explore abstract ideas or natural forces. For example, in a design inspired by the desert element, the costume might use lightweight, bright fabrics such as cotton, linen, and chiffon, along with layered, flowing materials to suggest the movement of sand and wind, with loose, elongated silhouettes for airflow. Therefore, the desert becomes an embodied expression made visible through fabrics and patterns.

In *Garment of Nature*, expressive interpretation functions as the core design principle, guiding the transformation of elemental ideas into costume forms. Rather than replicating natural elements literally, the designs interpret their emotional and symbolic qualities through abstraction.

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**Visual Communication in Costume Design**

Costume design serves as an important element in visual communication, using costume elements such as colour, silhouette, line, texture, and fabric to interpret a character's personality and to give psychological interpretation to a design concept. Costume is a silent voice that communicates through visual design; it is a key tool in the theatre because it helps connect actors to their characters and the audience to the performance. For a costume to effectively communicate in the theatre, it means that the designer has adequately made use of the necessary design elements associated with the costume interpretation. Exhibition costume design functions primarily as a mode of visual communication, relying on the viewer's interpretive engagement to complete the meaning-making process. Unlike performance costume, exhibition costume must communicate without narrative progression or actor embodiment. As such, audience perception becomes a critical measure of expressive success. Semiotic approaches to costume analysis emphasise the role of the audience in decoding meaning.

In Elam's submission on the functions of Theatrical costumes and stage sets as semiotics, is more of a sign language. In his view, "What exactly is a theatrical costume or a set that represents a house on stage? When used in a play, both the theatrical costume and the house set are often signs that point to one of the signs characterizing the costume or the house in the play. In fact, each is a sign of a sign and not the sign of a material thing" (33).

Clancy highlights that the lighting, spacing, and presentation of exhibition environments significantly influence how audiences engage with costume as an expressive object (44). When combined with strong symbolic design, these factors enhance emotional and intellectual engagement. Audience feedback from *Garment of Nature* indicates that viewers responded intuitively to elemental references, often identifying emotions and narratives embedded in the costumes. Images were examined for their symbolic representation of natural elements.

**Visual Interpretation of "Garment of Nature" Costume Exhibition**

Rain



Fig.1 Rain Costume design at *Garment of Nature Exhibition*. Photographed by the researcher in 2025

Figure 1 above is a *Rain* costume designed by Favour Orodjie Egbaran, a 400-level Costume Design major student, produced under the supervision of this researcher as part of her final practical project for the exhibition *Becoming the Element*. Within the context of this study, the costume functions as a visual communication artefact rather than a performative garment, relying on symbolic form, materiality, and spatial arrangement to convey meaning to the viewer. Although the element was assigned through a random ballot, the designer approached the task with conceptual clarity, transforming an abstract natural phenomenon into a legible visual narrative.

The concept of this costume was informed by environmental observation, a process central to visual communication design where meaning is derived from life experience and translated into visual form. The designer identified rainfall as a phenomenon defined by movement, translucency, and atmospheric connection between sky and earth. These qualities shaped the expressive intent of the costume, positioning rain not merely as water but as a visual symbol of transition, calmness, and natural rhythm. To support this process, the designer engaged in both environmental and visual research. Direct observation of rainfall was complemented by the study of visual references sourced from digital platforms. This combination aligns with established visual communication practices, where designers draw from both primary observation and secondary imagery to refine symbolic clarity. Through this research, the designer developed a strategy for representing the ephemeral quality of rain using materials that interact with light, space, and movement.

The cloud form was constructed using fibre foam, chosen for its soft volume and ability to suggest atmospheric density. Raindrops were represented through transparent white beads suspended on invisible threads, creating a vertical visual rhythm that mimics the natural downward motion of rainfall. In visual communication theory, such repetition and alignment guide the viewer's eye and reinforce conceptual meaning. The suspended beads operate as visual signs, immediately readable as falling rain through their transparency, spacing, and reflective interaction with light.

The headpiece was supported by a straw hat base, which provided structural stability while remaining visually unobtrusive. Beneath the installation, a black tunic served as a contrasting background. This choice reflects an understanding of the figure–ground relationship, a key principle in visual communication. The dark surface enhanced the visibility of the translucent beads and symbolically referenced a rain-heavy sky, thereby strengthening the costume's visual legibility from a distance.

The design process progressed from preliminary sketches to material experimentation and construction, carried out with continuous supervision. During the construction stage, the designer observed that the cloud structure appeared visually flat and lacked expressive depth. In response, tonal variations of grey were introduced through surface spraying. This adjustment enhanced visual contrast and atmospheric mood, demonstrating an iterative design process in which visual feedback informs refinement. Such decision-making reflects a communicative awareness of how tonal value influences perception and emotional response.

From a visual communication perspective, the costume succeeds by encoding meaning through material contrast, spatial arrangement, and symbolic abstraction. The transparency and lightness of the beads communicate delicacy and impermanence, while the textured cloud mass suggests density and weight. Together, these elements create a balanced visual

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composition that communicates rainfall as both gentle and powerful. Observed audience reactions indicated immediate recognition of the rain motif, suggesting successful visual encoding and decoding of meaning. The headpiece emerged as the focal point of engagement, confirming its strength as a symbolic visual anchor. The project contributed significantly to the students' technical and conceptual development, reinforcing their understanding of costume design as a communicative medium that translates abstract environmental phenomena into visually intelligible narratives.

**Ice**



Fig.2 Ice Costume design at *Garment of Nature Exhibition*.
Photographed by the researcher in 2025

Figure 2 above is *Ice* costume designed and modelled by Miss Sharon Macaulay, a Costume Design major student. The designer reframed the assignment as a creative challenge. This repositioning of constraint as opportunity is consistent with design pedagogy that emphasises problem-solving and conceptual flexibility. Rather than approaching Ice as a literal object, she sought to explore its visual and sensory qualities, clarity, coldness, rigidity, and stillness through material experimentation.

Her inspiration was closely linked to a pedagogical prompt introduced during the course, which emphasised that costumes can be constructed from unconventional materials. This idea motivated her to treat Ice as a conceptual and material exploration rather than a representational exercise. From a visual communication perspective, this approach prioritises abstraction and symbolic suggestion, allowing meaning to be encoded through material choice and surface treatment rather than figurative imitation.

Prior to construction, the designer conducted material research focused on transparency, reflectivity, durability, and cost. These considerations were essential in ensuring that the selected materials could visually communicate the crystalline quality of Ice while remaining structurally viable. Resin was identified as a key material due to its clarity and glass-like appearance, while supporting fabrics were selected for their translucency and ability to interact with light.

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In translating concept into form, the designer combined creative intent with technical experimentation. Ice cubes were fabricated using clear resin poured into silicone moulds, while icicles were shaped with hot glue and foil paper. Quinoline mesh was selected for the shirt and trousers because of its transparency, despite its discomfort when worn. This choice reflects a deliberate prioritisation of visual communication over physical comfort, reinforcing the costume's role as an exhibition artefact rather than a performance garment. The resulting "glassy" surface quality enhanced the visual association with Ice.

The design was a two-piece ensemble consisting of a long-sleeve shirt and palazzo trousers. Resin cubes and icicles were carefully arranged across the garments in balanced and symmetrical patterns, visually referencing the structured and geometric nature of frozen forms. From a visual communication standpoint, this symmetry and repetition guide viewer perception and reinforce the conceptual association with Ice as stable, ordered, and still.

Lighting played a critical role in amplifying the costume's communicative impact. During the exhibition, stage lighting interacted with the resin cubes and quinoline mesh, producing reflective and refractive effects that mimicked the shimmer and translucency of ice surfaces. This interaction between light and material enhanced visual legibility and emotional resonance, demonstrating how exhibition conditions contribute to meaning-making in costume display.

In terms of expressive intent, the designer aimed to communicate calmness, clarity, and emotional restraint qualities she associated with Ice. Audience observation during the exhibition suggested that the visual cues of transparency, reflection, and cool-toned surfaces supported immediate recognition of the elemental theme. The shirt, in particular, emerged as the focal point of visual engagement, effectively anchoring the symbolic reading of the costume.

Reflecting on the experience, Sharon noted that the project strengthened her patience and expanded her understanding of costume design as an open-ended and experimental practice. She described the process as transformative, pushing her beyond perceived limitations and reinforcing the idea that creative interpretation can emerge from any material or concept.

**Silver**



Fig.3 Silver Costume design at *Garment of Nature Exhibition.* Photographed by the researcher in 2025

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Figure 3 above is *Silver* costume designed by Efetobore Michelle Onokohwemu, motivated by its visual distinctiveness, reflective qualities, and conceptual depth. The creative direction for the Silver costume was informed by cultural and historical associations, particularly medieval armour. Armour was interpreted as a visual symbol of endurance, authority, and resilience qualities commonly associated with silver as a metal. Rather than reproducing historical costume literally, the design contemporized the armoured aesthetic to maintain relevance within a modern exhibition context. This approach aligns with visual communication theory, where meaning is constructed through culturally recognisable symbols that are adapted to contemporary visual codes.

Preliminary research involved surveying existing silver costume representations, many of which appeared repetitive or overly simplistic. This gap prompted a conceptual shift toward armour as a more layered and communicative form. Further investigation into armour construction techniques, specifically breastplates, pauldrons, arm guards, and leg guards, led to the adoption of EVA foam as a primary material. This discovery became central to the design's direction, enabling the simulation of metallic surfaces while maintaining wearability and affordability.

The translation of Silver's reflective essence into a wearable form required deliberate material selection and surface treatment. The design process began with sketch development. Armour-based design was developed digitally using Ibis Paint and subsequently approved. Material sourcing was carried out. Silver satin was used for the skirt component of the costume, providing softness and fluid reflection that contrasted with the rigidity of the armour. The breastplate was constructed using EVA foam patterned directly from the body through paper and cellophane wrapping, a method that ensured anatomical accuracy. In the absence of specialised tools, an iron was used as a substitute for a heat gun to shape the foam. Surface finishing involved layered painting, top bond, white acrylic, black undercoating, and silver spray paint to create depth and a subtly tarnished metallic effect. This layered treatment enhanced visual realism, allowing light to interact dynamically with the surface. Additional elements included a sword constructed from a mirror card with foam detailing, as well as silver ear cuffs that completed the ensemble.

Under exhibition lighting, the costume responded dynamically, producing highlights and shadows that reinforced the illusion of metal. This responsiveness enhanced audience engagement and supported immediate thematic recognition.

Symbolically, Silver was interpreted as a metaphor for strength refined through endurance. The slightly weathered appearance of the armour suggested resilience rather than flawlessness, communicating the idea that wear and history contribute to beauty and meaning. The intended aesthetic of a "warrior princess" combined power with elegance, allowing the costume to convey authority without sacrificing grace.

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**Cloud**



Fig.4 Cloud Costume design *at Garment of Nature Exhibition*. Photographed by the researcher in 2025

Figure 4 is *Cloud*, a costume designed and modelled by Kate Owhoaridowho, a Costume Design major. The conceptual inspiration for the costume emerged from observation of the sky and its ever-changing cloud formations. Kate was particularly influenced by the softness, fluidity, and subtle harmony of clouds interacting with sunlight. From a visual communication perspective, this approach aligns with the principle that abstract phenomena can be encoded through texture, colour, and form to convey mood and conceptual meaning. Here, the costume communicates calmness, serenity, and aesthetic grace, reflecting both the physical qualities of clouds and their cultural associations with peace and tranquillity.

To inform her design, the student conducted both environmental and symbolic research. She studied cloud types, formation patterns, and their aesthetic and cultural meanings, establishing a knowledge base to guide material selection and construction. Translating such an intangible phenomenon into a tangible costume required thoughtful abstraction. Cotton wool was chosen to evoke softness and shapelessness, while soft blue fabric provided a sky-like backdrop, establishing both figure-ground contrast and colour-coded symbolism. These choices demonstrate the application of semiotic principles in visual communication: materials act as signs that encode the qualities of clouds for the audience to interpret.

The construction process involved a combination of sewing and hand-application. The gown was tailored to fit, after which cotton wool was meticulously applied using adhesive to simulate cloud clusters. Accessories were designed to complement the costume: a blue wig created from treated hair extensions reflected the sky, while the headpiece, constructed from leftover embellishments and gum paste and adorned with silver highlights, visually echoed the reflective and transient qualities of clouds. Colour and texture were carefully

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orchestrated to create harmony, balance, and visual rhythm, reinforcing the piece's expressive intent.

Reflecting on the design process, Kate emphasised that *Cloud* enhanced her understanding of costume as a medium for expressive interpretation. She observed that careful manipulation of form, colour, and texture could communicate mood and conceptual meaning beyond literal representation. The project reinforced the idea that costume design is a visual language, capable of storytelling through material and compositional choices.

## Smoke



Fig.5 Cloud Costume design at *Garment of Nature Exhibition*. Photographed by the researcher 2025

Figure 5 is *Smoke*, a costume designed and modelled by Justina Chielo, a Costume Design major, produced. Her engagement with the Smoke concept evolved through an emotionally driven and visually informed design process. She explained that as she researched and sketched, she became increasingly drawn to the element, responding not only to its physical qualities but also to its emotional resonance. This emotional investment shaped her interpretive approach, reinforcing the idea that expressive costume design often emerges from an interplay between personal response and visual observation.

To translate Smoke into costume form, Justina conducted focused visual studies of smoke in different contexts, including enclosed spaces and moving environments. These observations guided her understanding of smoke as light, drifting, transient, and consuming. Online visual references further informed her interpretation, helping her identify materials that could suggest weightlessness and fluid motion. From a visual communication perspective, this process reflects the abstraction of natural phenomena into symbolic forms that audiences can intuitively recognise and interpret.

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The costume's construction followed a layered design strategy. A short fitted dress formed the base, constructed from padded crepe and hand-painted with acrylic to depict fire. This lower fire motif functioned as both a conceptual and visual anchor, establishing the origin from which smoke emerges. Over this base, Justina created a voluminous detachable skirt composed of multiple layers of net in white and brown tones. Net was deliberately selected for its translucency and lightness, qualities that visually echo the drifting and unstable nature of smoke. Crinoline mesh was added beneath to enhance volume and sustain the skirt's floating silhouette.

The contrast between the fitted corset bodice and the expansive, flowing skirt was a deliberate application of design principles. Proportion, balance, and movement were carefully considered to communicate transformation: fire giving rise to smoke. The restrained colour palette of whites, greys, and browns reinforced the ethereal and ambiguous qualities of smoke, while the layered textures created depth and visual rhythm. Through these choices, the costume communicates its meaning without literal representation, relying instead on visual suggestion and symbolic form.

Beyond the costume itself, Justina collaborated with lighting, sound, and staging elements to enhance audience perception. Light interaction with the layered net amplified the illusion of motion, while atmospheric staging supported the immersive experience. This integration demonstrates how costume functions as part of a broader visual communication system, where meaning is co-constructed through multiple sensory cues.

She identified the hand-painted fire bodice as the most successful element of the costume, noting that it required both technical skill and artistic intuition. The bodice became the visual focal point, symbolising energy, transformation, and origin.

Overall, *Smoke* demonstrates how expressive interpretation and visual communication principles can be employed to materialise an intangible element. Through contrast, layering, and controlled abstraction, the costume transforms smoke into a readable visual language, inviting the audience to engage emotionally and imaginatively with the concept.

## Conclusion

This study examined expressive interpretation in costume design for exhibition through a practice-based and qualitative analysis of five elemental costumes: Rain, Ice, Silver, Cloud, and Smoke presented in the *Garment of Nature* exhibition. By foregrounding costume as a visual and symbolic medium rather than as functional performance attire, the research demonstrates how costume design can operate as an independent form of visual communication capable of conveying abstract ideas, emotions, and elemental forces.

The findings reveal that expressive interpretation in costume design is achieved through deliberate abstraction of natural elements, strategic material selection, and the application of design principles and elements. Materials such as net, cotton wool, resin, foam, beads, and satin functioned not merely as construction resources but as semiotic tools that encoded meaning and guided audience interpretation. Through colour, texture, movement, and form, each costume communicated its elemental concept with visual clarity, enabling immediate audience recognition without reliance on narrative explanation.

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The study further establishes that costume design for exhibition differs significantly from costume for theatrical performance. While performance costume is often subordinated to character and script, exhibition costume prioritises symbolism, visual readability, and conceptual coherence. In this context, costume becomes a standalone artifact an expressive object that invites contemplation and emotional engagement. The success of the elemental costumes confirms the capacity of costume to function as a multidimensional art form that bridges fashion, sculpture, and visual storytelling.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the research highlights the value of practice-based costume exhibitions within theatre arts education. The design process fostered critical thinking, material experimentation, and creative confidence among students, while challenges such as limited resources encouraged innovation and problem-solving. The exhibition framework also provided a platform for students to engage with research-led design, reinforcing the relationship between theory, practice, and visual analysis.

In conclusion, this study contributes to scholarly discourse on costume semiotics, expressive interpretation, and visual communication by demonstrating how elemental symbolism can be effectively translated into exhibition-based costume design. It affirms costume's potential as a powerful communicative medium beyond theatrical performance and positions exhibition costume as a site of artistic inquiry and knowledge production. By integrating semiotic theory, expressive interpretation, and visual communication frameworks, the study provides a theoretical model to understand costume as both an art object and a meaning-making system.

The study further suggests avenues for future research, including digital and virtual costume exhibitions, cross-cultural interpretations of elemental symbolism, and the evolving role of costume within contemporary visual art and museum spaces.

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