

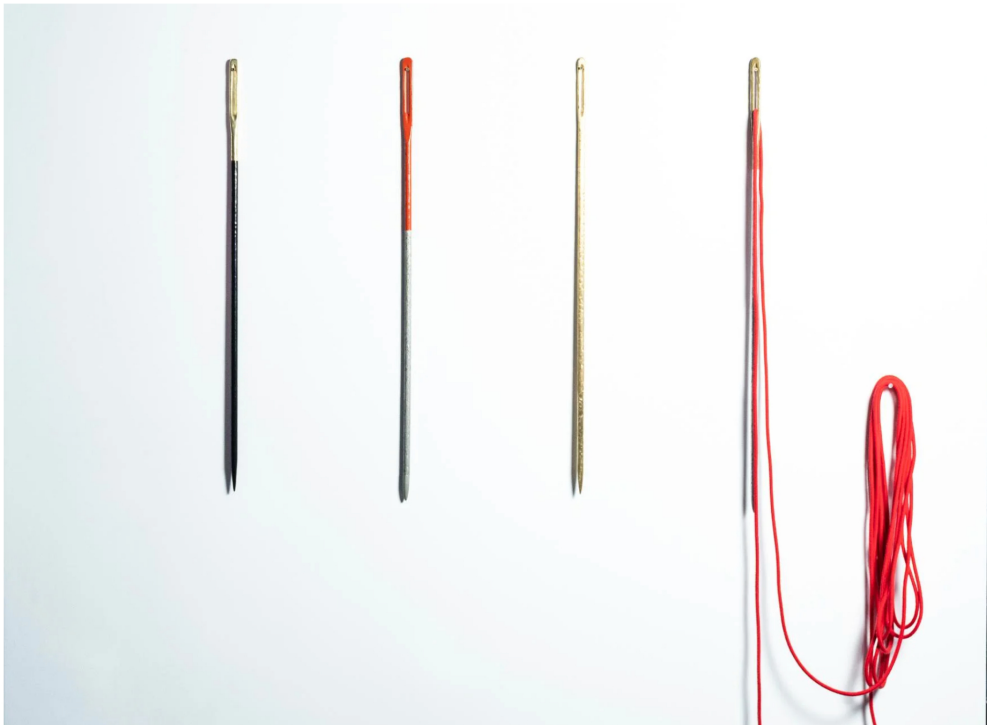
DESIGNERS

Deborah Milner on Collaborating with Makiko Harris for Needle Dance

February 26, 2025

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***Needle Dance* by Makiko Harris with Costume Design by Deborah Milner**



Oversized needles and red rope used in *Needle Dance*; Photo: Ben Pipe Photography

Needle Dance is a short film by American-Japanese interdisciplinary artist Makiko Harris inspired by the Japanese legend of the red thread of fate which states that there is an invisible red string binding two people destined to meet. The string may stretch or tangle but ultimately it cannot be broken; it represents a force beyond human control.



Makiko Harris; Photo: Ben Pipe Photography

Harris explores this myth in terms of how it contradicts the contemporary feminist ideal of self-determination: do women need to accept the path dictated by tradition? Can they control their fate?





L-R: Carlos Baslisco, Peter Gray, Makiko Harris, Deborah Milner; Photo: Ben Pipe Photography

The film was created in collaboration with director Peter Gray, who has contributed to editorial shoots for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, costume designer Deborah Milner, who has consulted for *Alexander McQueen*, and composer and executive producer Carlos Baslisco. The violin score that serves as the backdrop to the film was co-composed and performed by Makiko Harris.

I spoke with Deborah Milner about her role on the film and also her career and personal projects – not only has she worked with *Alexander McQueen* but she has also dressed celebrities including Isabella Blow and Helena Bonham Carter.

Needle Dance Costume Designer Deborah Milner

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Deborah Milner: Her Work on *Needle Dance*



Needle Dance Costume Design by Deborah Milner; Photo: Carlos Basílico

Carlos Basílico initially approached Deborah Milner to connect him and Makiko Harris with Peter Gray, as Basílico admired the films Milner had previously made with Gray. This led to Milner's involvement in the project.

"I was thinking about the invisible thread that binds us and asking myself how could I make it visible so that the costumes became part of the narrative rather than just being accessories."

The costumes themselves evolved through a number of conversations about the setting for the dance. Initially strands of chiffon or another light fabric were discussed as these could wind and unwind around the figure. However, with the decision to shoot underwater, Gray suggested using rope instead.

"However, once we decided to shoot underwater, I thought floating fabrics had been done too much and Peter suggested doing something like the rope corset which I had made some years before. This worked beautifully with Makiko's giant needles as a magnified thread."





Art by Makiko Harris

Harris sourced the rope based on Milner's specifications, selecting the red color to reflect the tones in her paintings.

Shooting underwater came with its challenges, the main one for *Needle Dance* being the behaviour of the rope underwater. Although the weight of the wet rope worked well for keeping the dancers underwater, it made the rope float much less than was desired.

"...the rope didn't float as much as we would have liked so we had to keep throwing it back into the water and letting it slowly sink down."



Still from *Needle Dance*

Milner's experience involved both the rope corsets mentioned above along with dancers' costumes; her studio created all the costumes for *Eonnagata*, the 2009 ballet with costume design by Alexander McQueen.

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Deborah Milner's Career: Past, Present and Future

Having been a consultant with *Alexander McQueen* and heading the couture studio, I couldn't help but ask Deborah what she thought about the brand's latest creative director, Seán McGirr, especially with the poor reception of his debut collection. She believes that although the first collection was not the most compelling, the brand is getting stronger and McGirr needs to be given space to grow into his position. As for McGirr's predecessor Sarah Burton, Milner is very much looking forward to her first collection for *Givenchy* and believes that she is the perfect choice for the brand.

"It's very difficult to take over a brand like McQueen where people have such strong opinions of how it should be."

Dressing celebrities including Isabella Blow, Helena Bonham Carter and Tara Palmer-Tomkinson is another of Milner's career highlights. Milner considers her job to be capturing the essence of a person and how they wish to look and feel when wearing the piece, which necessitates a thorough consultation first. Once a design has been decided on, there would usually be a minimum of three fittings, with the client being able to express their views during this process.

"...we would always have a long consultation first as to their hopes and desires prior to designing."

Milner launched her sustainable couture project, *Ecoture*, in 2005. We discussed the current challenges facing sustainable brands, especially in light of the closures of labels like *Mara Hoffman* and *Hera*. Since Milner works in couture, she hasn't faced the same difficulties as prêt-à-porter brands when it comes to sourcing sustainable fabrics or selecting production facilities. However, she acknowledges that there are no simple solutions to the broader challenges of sustainable fashion.

"It comes down to cost, availability and compromise and then the client has to be persuaded to buy..."

Deborah Milner is set to launch her own sustainable prêt-à-porter line this year, describing it as *"a small pilot collection of simple luxury pieces working within a no waste or as little waste as possible framework."* Fabric selection and production will be approached as sustainably as possible, and she is also exploring the viability of using solely natural dyes for the line.

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Deborah Milner: Getting to Know the Designer

We wrapped up the conversation with 10 quick questions:
Favourite Genre of Music: All types! Particularly Bossa Nova and Tropicalia
Going on Holiday – City or Nature: Nature
Paisley or Stripes: Neither – I don't particularly like either
Perfume – Floral or Woody: Woody
Favourite Book: *Kids* by Patti Smith
Jeans – Skinny or Wide leg: Both
Boots or Sneakers: Sneakers
Favourite City: Mexico City (currently!)
A Person I Look Up To: Jane Goodall
Your Personal Motto for 2025: Just do it!

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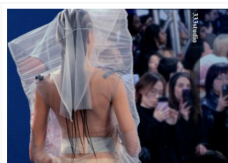
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Needle Dance will be on view until March 2nd at art'otel London Hoxton.
For more information, visit: <https://artotellondonhoxton.com/> or <https://www.makikoharris.com/exhibitions/49-needle-dance-kristin-hjellegjerde-gallery-x-artotel/overview/>



Still from *Needle Dance*; Photo: Carlos Basileisco

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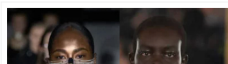
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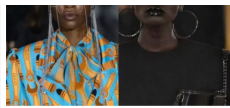


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