

Stitching Memory, Weaving Identity: Memorializing the Everyday Through Textile Installation in Philippine Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This practice-based study investigates hand sewing as a form of memory work and textile installation as a means of memorializing the life and creative influence of my grandmother, a seamstress whose practice shaped my identity as a fashion designer. The study documents the creation of forty-two hand-stitched collage tapestries and a house-like installation made from *retasos*, or fabric remnants, accumulated through my fashion design practice. A reflective three-phase process—pre-production, production, and post-production—guided the gathering, arranging, stitching, journaling, installation, and interpretation of the work. During the installation opening at Imahica Gallery, more than thirty visitors entered the work and twelve returned brief feedback forms. Their responses repeatedly connected the sewing machine, dining area, altar, garments, threads, and other domestic elements with memories of grandparents, parents, childhood homes, family values, faith, and loss. The findings suggest that familiar textile and domestic materials can operate as mnemonic prompts through which an autobiographical memorial becomes a site of shared remembrance. The paper positions hand sewing as an embodied memory practice and *retasos* as material fragments capable of carrying personal and cultural associations. It contributes an exploratory practice-based account of how fashion materials and handwork can move beyond garment production into memorial installation, reflective inquiry, and audience memory recall.

Keywords: textile memory, hand sewing, memorial art, practice-based research, Philippine contemporary art

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Introduction

Sewing is often approached in fashion design as a technical practice: joining fabric, constructing garments, repairing cloth, or embellishing surfaces. Yet sewing can also be affective, embodied, and mnemonic. Repetitive textile work may support concentration, meaningful occupation, and social connection, while textile objects themselves can accumulate emotional associations over time (Burt & Atkinson, 2012; Peters, 2014; Riley et al., 2013). From this perspective, sewing is not only a means of producing an object; it can also become a way of returning to people, places, habits, and relationships.

This study centers on *A Memorial for Lola: An Expression of Self-Identity from Stitching Memories of Home*, a textile installation created in memory of my grandmother, a seamstress whose life and work shaped my identity as a fashion designer. She introduced me to sewing not merely as a skill but as a way of seeing, making, caring, and surviving. Her sewing machine, cutting table, tools, habits, and domestic routines became inseparable from my memories of home. The installation emerged from the desire to translate those memories into a material environment rather than leave them only as private recollection.

The material starting point was *retazos*: fabric scraps retained from ready-to-wear collections and commissioned gowns made in my studio since 2017. Such remnants might ordinarily be classified as waste or residue. In this project, however, they became carriers of earlier labor and personal history. This treatment of cloth as memory-bearing material is consistent with scholarship on the mnemonic qualities of textiles and on the role of objects in mediating memory, identity, and relationships with the dead (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Peters, 2014; Prown, 1982).

The work is also situated within Philippine textile histories. Embroidery and fine needlework in the Philippines have developed through domestic, religious, colonial, artistic, and livelihood practices, including the work of *bordadoras* whose skills became culturally and economically significant (Ramos, 2016). Philippine dress traditions likewise demonstrate how textiles such as piña cloth can communicate status, identity, and cultural meaning (Roces, 2013). These contexts do not make the installation representative of all Philippine textile traditions; rather, they locate its personal sewing practice within a wider history in which cloth and handwork are embedded in family, labor, heritage, and identity.

The paper therefore asks how inherited hand-sewing practices and retained fabric scraps can be transformed into a memorial installation, and how viewers respond to that installation as an environment of memory recall. It argues that the project operates across three connected levels: sewing as embodied practice, textile remnants and domestic objects as material prompts, and installation as a spatial encounter. Because the viewer evidence consists of twelve short feedback forms collected during one opening-night event, the findings are presented as exploratory rather than generalizable.

Literature Review

Sewing, Textile Memory, and Material Practice

Textile objects occupy an unusual position between utility and intimacy. They are handled, worn, repaired, stored, inherited, and discarded, and these repeated contacts allow them to acquire meanings that exceed their physical function. Prown (1982) argues that material culture

can be studied as evidence of beliefs, values, and social relations embodied in objects. Within textile research, Peters (2014) similarly describes how cloth may acquire mnemonic value through personal attachment, use, and remembered experience. These perspectives are especially relevant to *retasos*, because a scrap can preserve material traces of a garment, a commission, a period of work, or a relationship even after the original object has passed out of use.

In the present project, thread and cloth also carry symbolic associations with connection, repair, continuity, and care. Hand sewing joins fragments physically; within a memorial context, that joining can simultaneously evoke the attempt to hold together memories dispersed across time. This interpretation is not presented as a universal symbolism of thread, but as a meaning produced through the artist-researcher's own material history and through the installation's relationship to a remembered domestic sewing environment.

Philippine embroidery provides an important cultural context for this material practice. Ramos (2016) documents the emergence of fine European-style embroidery in the colonial Philippines and the contribution of Filipina *bordadoras* to a tradition shaped by gendered labor, skill, and cultural exchange. Roces (2013), in turn, shows how piña cloth and dress participate in the construction of status and Filipino identity. These sources support a reading of sewing and cloth as cultural practices as well as technical ones. For this paper, they are used narrowly to contextualize the installation's references to sewing, Lumban, and piña-related family memories rather than to claim that the work reproduces a single national textile tradition.

Sewing, Wellbeing, and the Meditative Process

Research on textile craft suggests that repetitive making can be associated with concentration, relaxation, purpose, learning, and social connection. In interviews with quilters, Burt and Atkinson (2012) found cognitive, emotional, creative, and social processes that participants associated with wellbeing. Riley et al. (2013), in a large survey of knitters, likewise reported associations between knitting and feelings of calm, happiness, creativity, and social contact. These studies concern quilting and knitting rather than memorial hand sewing, so they do not establish that the present installation produced therapeutic outcomes. They do, however, provide a basis for understanding why repetitive textile practices may be experienced as focused and emotionally meaningful activity.

This meditative dimension was central to my making process. The repeated actions of threading, pinning, pressing, pulling thread through cloth, knotting, and embellishing created a rhythm in which memories of my grandmother could surface without first being converted into formal verbal narration. The Filipino expression *dadaan ka sa butas ng karayom*—literally, to pass through the eye of the needle—became a personal metaphor for difficulty, endurance, and passage. Needle pricks, heat from pressing, fatigue, and the slowness of handwork made remembrance physically present while the act of stitching provided a disciplined structure for continuing the work.

Installation Art, Memorialization, and Encounter

Installation art organizes objects, materials, and space so that meaning emerges through the viewer's bodily encounter with an environment. Bishop (2005) emphasizes the experiential and spatial character of installation, in which viewers are positioned within rather than simply in front of the work. This quality is particularly useful for a project in which memory is tied to

home. A remembered house is not experienced as a single isolated image: it is encountered through routes, surfaces, tables, machines, objects, textures, and relationships among them.

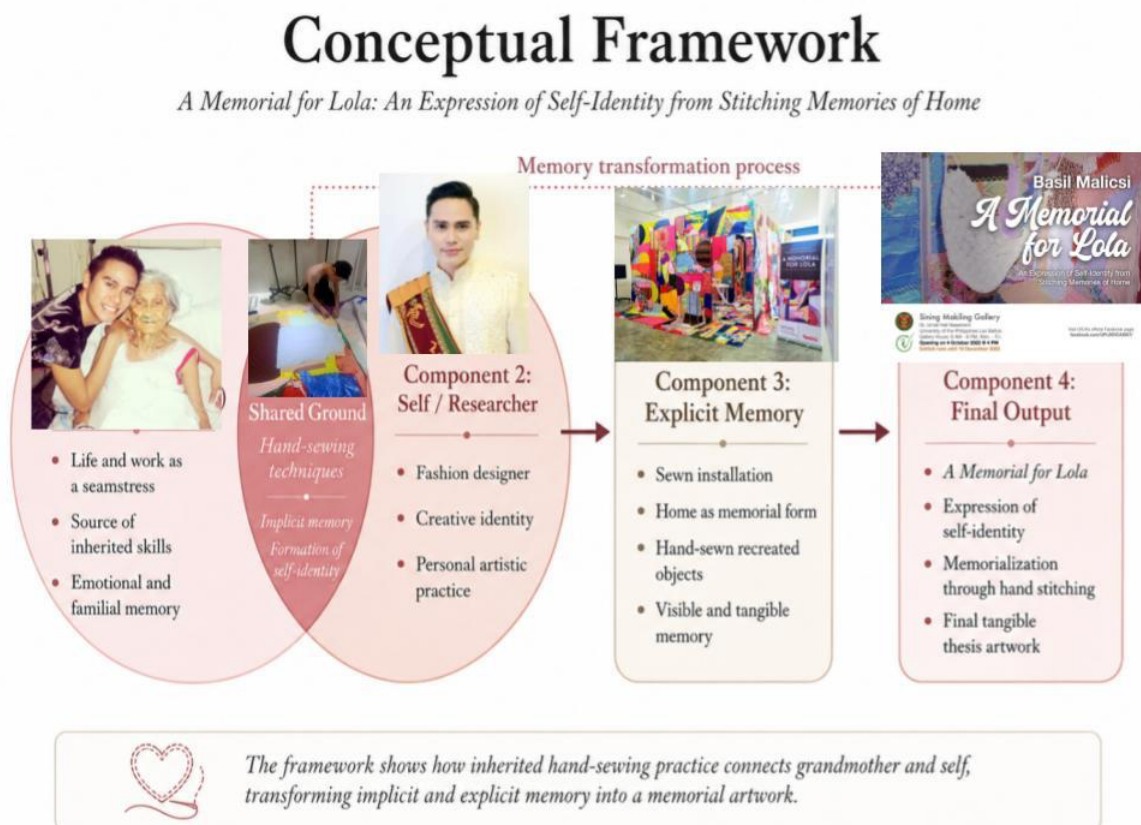
Material culture is also central to memorial practices. Hallam and Hockey (2001) describe how belongings and material forms can mediate relationships between the living and the dead, while Wolterstorff (2015) treats memorial art as socially situated practice rather than as an object whose meaning is exhausted by formal appearance. Together, these perspectives support the use of a house-like textile installation as more than a visual tribute. Its domestic objects and stitched surfaces can become an encounter through which private remembrance is offered to others, who may then bring their own histories to the space.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework links four elements: my grandmother as seamstress, myself as fashion designer-researcher, hand-sewing practice, and the resulting memorial installation. The framework also distinguishes between embodied forms of remembering and consciously recalled autobiographical memories. Schacter's (1987) distinction between implicit and explicit memory is used here as a heuristic rather than as a clinical classification of the artwork. Repeated bodily familiarity with sewing—how the hands hold cloth, guide a needle, judge tension, or recognize a sequence of actions—represents an implicit layer of learned practice. Deliberate recollections of my grandmother, her tools, the household, and particular episodes represent an explicit layer of remembrance. Figure 1 summarizes this memory-transformation model.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Memory Transformation Through Hand-Sewing Practice



The first component is the grandmother, whose identity as a seamstress forms the emotional and creative foundation of the work. Her sewing practice shaped early experiences of care, discipline, patience, resilience, and creative labor. The second component is the self as fashion designer-researcher. My professional practice with cloth, construction, texture, color, and embellishment developed later, but it remains entangled with the domestic sewing environment in which I first encountered textiles.

Hand sewing forms the shared ground between these two identities. It is both inherited practice and present action. Repeating sewing techniques allows the body to revisit an acquired way of making, while the reflective process of selecting and stitching particular remnants brings autobiographical memories into conscious attention. The process therefore does not treat sewing itself as a storage device containing complete memories; rather, sewing acts as a structured practice through which embodied familiarity and conscious recollection can interact.

The installation is the material and spatial outcome of this interaction. Forty-two stitched tapestries and reconstructed domestic elements externalize selected memories into a house-like environment. The installation does not function as “explicit memory” in the psychological sense; instead, it is a material representation produced from explicit recollection and embodied practice. This clarification strengthens the framework by separating a psychological category of memory from the artwork that gives remembered experience visible and spatial form.

Methodology

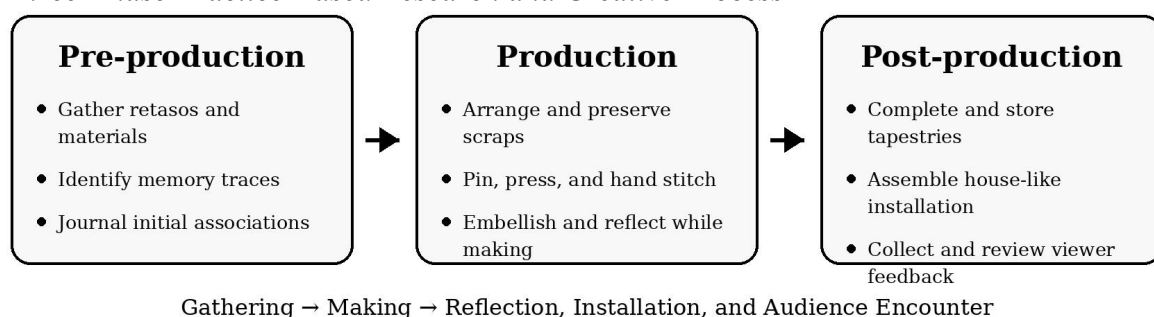
Research Design

The study used a practice-based and reflective qualitative approach. In practice-based creative research, making is not merely an illustration of a pre-existing argument; the creative process and resulting artefact can contribute to the production and communication of knowledge (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Sullivan (2010) likewise positions visual arts practice as a legitimate mode of inquiry in which making, reflection, interpretation, and contextualization operate together. Consistent with these approaches, this study treated material experimentation, hand sewing, journaling, installation, and audience feedback as interconnected parts of the inquiry.

The working process was organized into three phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. The phases describe both the technical development of the installation and the movement from collecting memory-bearing materials, to transforming them through handwork, to placing them within a public environment where viewers could respond. Figure 2 summarizes the three-phase research and creative workflow.

Figure 2

Three-Phase Practice-Based Research and Creative Process



Pre-production: Gathering and Preparation

Pre-production began with gathering *retasos* stored in plastic bags in my design studio in Los Baños. The scraps came from ready-to-wear collections and commissioned gowns produced since I began my fashion design practice in 2017. At first they appeared to be leftover material, but handling them reactivated associations with earlier garments, clients, occasions, labor, and periods of my own creative development. Gathering therefore functioned simultaneously as material preparation and autobiographical recollection.

Other materials included *pelon*, thread, yarn, pins, sequins, crystals, lace, and a journal. Journaling accompanied the making process so that memories, emotions, decisions, and emerging interpretations could be recorded rather than reconstructed only after the installation was complete.

Production: Selection, Placement, Pinning, and Sewing

For each textile surface, I laid approximately four yards of *pelon* on the floor and treated it as a potential wall of the house-like structure. The *retasos* were arranged intuitively rather than according to a predetermined pattern. Some edges were aligned like puzzle pieces; others overlapped. Two working principles guided the arrangement: the scraps were preserved in their existing shapes rather than cut into standardized pieces, and placement was allowed to develop without judging irregularity as defect. These principles retained evidence of each scrap's prior use.

After a composition reached a provisional sense of wholeness, the scraps were pinned and pressed onto the *pelon* and then stitched by hand. Early works used ordinary thread; later works incorporated more visible colored yarn, along with leftover sequins, crystals, lace, and satin-stitch embroidery. The visible stitches became both construction and embellishment. Repetition, occasional needle pricks, heat from pressing, and the time required to complete each surface also became part of the reflective experience of making.

Post-production: Reflection, Installation, and Viewer Feedback

When a tapestry felt visually and intuitively complete, it was rolled and stored. Journaling continued between works, providing a record of memories and decisions that linked one tapestry to the next. The completed textile surfaces and domestic elements were then assembled as a house-like installation that visitors could enter.

During the opening night at Imahica Gallery, more than thirty guests visited the installation. Feedback forms were offered and twelve were returned. The form contained two open-ended questions: (1) "As you entered the replica of the house, what childhood memories did you remember and with whom?" and (2) "Which object or element inside the house was most meaningful to you and why?" The responses were used as exploratory audience feedback rather than as a representative survey.

The twelve responses were read descriptively for recurring people, objects, settings, emotions, and values. This procedure was informed by the organizing logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but the dataset and two-question form did not support a full-scale qualitative thematic study. Repeated patterns were grouped into concise themes and then compared with

the conceptual concerns of memory, domestic space, sewing, and memorialization. Respondent names are omitted in this proceedings version.

Results and Discussion

The Installation as a Memory-Recall Environment

The audience feedback indicates that the installation extended an autobiographical memorial into a setting that prompted viewers to recall their own family histories. Respondents referred to grandparents, parents, childhood homes, play, family meals, sewing, garments, faith, and loss. This does not establish that every visitor experienced the installation in the same way, but it shows that several participants did not remain focused solely on my grandmother. Familiar domestic and textile elements became prompts through which they connected the work with their own remembered people and places. Figure 3 shows the scale and walk-in character of the completed installation.

Figure 3

Exterior View of the House-Like Memorial Installation at Imahica Gallery



The finding is consistent with material-memory perspectives in which objects acquire significance through use, attachment, and personal history (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Peters, 2014; Prown, 1982). In the installation, the sewing machine, dining table, altar, thread, and garments did not operate as neutral props. Viewers interpreted them through prior experiences, effectively layering their own memories onto the material environment. Figure 4 provides a closer interior view of the layered retaso assemblage and visible hand stitching that created this material environment.

Figure 4

Interior Detail of Layered Retaso Assemblage and Visible Hand Stitching



Table 1

Thematic Summary of Viewer Feedback

Feedback question	Major response pattern	Key objects / memory triggers	Interpretation
Q1. What childhood memories did you remember, and with whom?	Grandparents, parents, childhood homes, play, family meals, sewing, and domestic routines.	Grandmother, father, dining area, sewing machine, threads, needles, garments.	The house replica functioned as a mnemonic environment that prompted several viewers to connect the artist-researcher's memorial with their own family histories.
Q2. Which object or element inside the house was most meaningful, and why?	Objects were linked with familial, spiritual, and domestic meanings; the sewing machine was especially prominent, followed by the dining table and altar.	Sewing machine, altar, dining table, threads, needles, garments, house interior.	Domestic objects acted as affective anchors through which viewers associated material forms with people, values, faith, grief, and remembered labor.

Childhood Memory and Intergenerational Recall

The first feedback question asked what childhood memories the installation brought to mind and with whom those memories were associated. One participant described entering the house replica as “my childhood all over again” and said that it felt “like a memorial for my own grandma.” This response is significant because it shows how a work rooted in one grandmother-grandchild relationship could become legible as a structure for remembering another grandmother. The installation did not erase the specificity of my own memorial, but it created enough familiarity for another viewer to enter the work through personal experience.

Another participant recalled grandparents through the values of *sipag*, *tiyaga*, *sakripisyo*, and *tiis*—industry, perseverance, sacrifice, and endurance. The response suggests that the memories activated by the installation were not limited to visual nostalgia. They also included inherited values and moral formation. In this sense, domestic memory encompassed what relatives did, what they taught, and how their habits continued to shape adult identity.

Several responses were closely tied to sewing. One participant remembered being corrected by a grandmother after playing with the sewing machine, threads, and needles. Another remembered a father helping a grandmother sew a piña barong in Lumban, Laguna. These memories connect domestic craft with play, discipline, intergenerational labor, and local textile heritage. The Lumban reference is especially resonant within documented histories of Philippine embroidery and piña-related dress traditions (Ramos, 2016; Roces, 2013), although the participant’s individual family memory remains distinct from those broader histories.

The dining area also prompted memories that were not directly about sewing. One participant recalled “the good times in the dining area with the whole family” when her father was still alive. This response reinforces the importance of the installation as an environment rather than a collection of isolated textile works. The remembered home included making, eating, worship, play, discipline, and family gathering. Memorial meaning therefore accumulated through the relationships among objects and spaces.

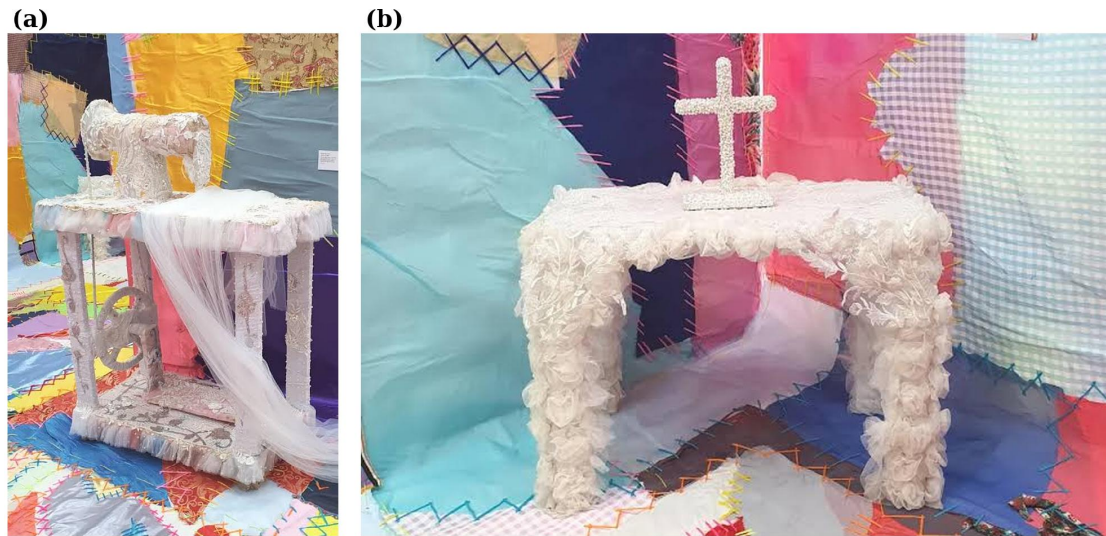
Meaningful Objects: Sewing Machine, Dining Table, and Altar

The second question asked which object or element was most meaningful and why. Across the returned forms, the sewing machine was the most prominent object. It directly connected with memories of grandmothers sewing clothes, family members assisting in garment making, and children playing around sewing equipment. The machine therefore appeared not only as a technical device but as a marker of provision, labor, discipline, creativity, and affection.

The altar introduced another dimension of remembrance. A participant associated it with a grandmother’s religious devotion and teaching of God’s Word. The dining table likewise recalled family meals and a deceased father. These responses widened the work beyond textile memory alone. The house environment linked sewing with faith, food, kinship, and everyday routines, demonstrating how domestic objects can carry multiple layers of meaning depending on the viewer’s history. Representative reconstructions of the sewing machine and altar are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Reconstructed Domestic Objects Within the Memorial Installation: (a) Sewing Machine and (b) Altar



This object-centered response supports the project's treatment of materials as active prompts in meaning-making. Material culture does not possess a fixed memory independent of people; rather, objects become meaningful through the relations, uses, and narratives that gather around them (Prown, 1982). The installation's preserved scraps and reconstructed objects provided viewers with recognizable forms through which personal associations could be activated.

From Personal Memorial to Shared Remembrance

Taken together, the feedback suggests three functions of the installation. First, it operated as a mnemonic environment in which familiar domestic and textile forms prompted memories. Second, it became a relational memorial: my act of remembering my grandmother created an opening through which viewers could remember their own relatives. Third, it provided a public setting for reflection on family, faith, loss, and continuity. These functions align with scholarship that treats memorial art as a social practice and material remembrance as a way of sustaining relationships with the past (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Wolterstorff, 2015).

The term *healing* should nevertheless be used cautiously. The feedback forms captured immediate recollections and meanings, not clinical or longitudinal evidence of psychological recovery. The strongest claim supported by the data is that the installation facilitated memory recall and shared reflection for several respondents. Its potential contribution to grief work or healing remains a question for future research rather than an outcome demonstrated by the present study.

Contributions to Fashion Design Research

The project contributes to fashion design research by treating sewing, remnants, and installation as modes of inquiry rather than limiting fashion practice to finished garments. In practice-based research, creative activity can generate knowledge through the interaction of making, reflection, documentation, and contextual interpretation (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). Here, the knowledge claim emerges from the documented transformation of

leftover fashion materials into a memorial environment and from the meanings reported by a small group of viewers.

A central contribution is the framing of *retasos* as memorial fragments. In conventional production they may be classified as excess, but within this project their irregular shapes and histories were preserved rather than standardized. This allowed each scrap to remain connected to previous acts of making while becoming part of a new textile surface. Peters's (2014) account of mnemonic attachment to textiles helps explain why such fragments can acquire value through association, while the project extends that insight by placing remnants within a spatial memorial assembled through visible hand stitching.

The study also demonstrates the value of slowness and handwork as research conditions. Hand stitching imposed time, repetition, physical attention, and a degree of unpredictability that differed from rapid garment production. These conditions enabled reflection to occur within the act of making itself. The contribution is therefore methodological as well as artistic: the project documents one way a fashion designer-researcher can use inherited craft practice, retained materials, journaling, spatial installation, and audience feedback to investigate memory and identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that hand-sewn textile installation can function as a meaningful practice-based method for memorializing a loved one and investigating the relationship among inherited craft, material memory, and creative identity. Through forty-two hand-stitched tapestries, retained *retasos*, and reconstructed domestic elements, memories of my grandmother were translated into a house-like environment rather than represented through a single portrait or object. The making process joined embodied sewing knowledge with deliberate autobiographical recollection, while the installation provided material and spatial form for those memories.

The viewer feedback adds an important relational dimension. Twelve returned forms from the opening night show that several visitors connected the sewing machine, dining area, altar, garments, threads, and other elements with memories of their own grandparents, parents, childhood homes, values, faith, and losses. The most defensible interpretation is therefore not that the installation proved a therapeutic effect, but that it created conditions for memory recall and shared remembrance. An intimate tribute became a site where different family histories could briefly meet.

The paper's principal contribution is the positioning of hand sewing as an embodied memory practice and *retasos* as material fragments that can be recontextualized for memorial inquiry. It also demonstrates how fashion design research can move beyond garment construction by using material remnants, handwork, domestic space, reflection, and audience encounter as research resources. In this sense, what is ordinarily left over from fashion production becomes central rather than peripheral: a scrap is no longer simply waste, but a material trace capable of entering a new network of meanings.

The study has clear limitations. Audience feedback was collected from only twelve respondents during a single opening-night event, using two short questions. The sample was event-specific and was not designed to represent a wider population. The feedback captured immediate recollection rather than longer-term effects, and it does not support claims of psychological

healing. Future research could include a larger and more diverse viewer group, semi-structured interviews, repeated encounters with the installation, and more systematic documentation of how memories change before, during, and after the viewing experience. Comparative studies could also examine whether other forms of inherited craft or discarded fashion material generate similar kinds of remembrance.

Within those limits, the project demonstrates the research value of attending closely to ordinary materials and repeated gestures. Through hand stitching, discarded fragments were transformed into memorial surfaces; through installation, private recollection became shareable space; and through viewer response, one family history opened toward others without losing its particular origin. The work therefore proposes a modest but useful pathway for practice-based fashion and textile research: to treat making not only as production, but as a disciplined way of remembering, interpreting, and placing personal history into relation with a public.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with language clarity and readability, APA 7 in-text citation and reference formatting, and bibliographic verification. The author reviewed and revised the resulting text and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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