

## Watch your back, girl!

The story behind *The Dress for the Hunchbacked Girl* by product and creative concept designer KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ. Current postgraduate in Design Products at Royal College of Art in London.



“A very special date for all your calendars – save the date!” I just found out that we’re in the middle of International Scoliosis Awareness Month and that there’s a specially dedicated day on 27 June. As instructed, I saved the date. It was surprising to find that I’d never heard of this awareness campaign for my lifelong, agonising health condition, and even more of a surprise to find its online literature accompanied by this image:



*“International Scoliosis Awareness Day (ISAD) falls on the last Saturday of each June. It’s a very special day for all of your calendars – save the date 27th June 2020”<sup>1</sup>*

I spent a long time thinking what I might have in common with this image, what it represents, and – as an art historian once upon a time – how best to read the message behind this visual representation. Having suffered from severe scoliosis my entire life, a condition which put me through a very special kind of physical and mental hell, why couldn’t I understand what this picture was meant to be saying? Convinced it was some kind of mistake, I began to draft a message to the association promoting the awareness campaign, in a bid to find out what was going on, but finally I couldn’t bring myself to send it.

I guess it’s because I secretly knew what the image meant. I just didn’t really want to say it out loud.

When you are ‘disabled’, there is always someone that you have to lean on, someone who supports you when you can’t walk; who answers your cries for help; who makes you smile while secretly crying behind your back.

I know what it is, because I haven’t just been through it myself, I made a dress out of that very feeling. A few years ago, I decided to challenge my own understanding of being ‘less able’. I deconstructed the words that officially described me in the three languages I could speak: ‘dis-able’ [English], ‘minusválidos’ – ‘less capable’ [Spanish], ‘niepełno-sprawna’ – ‘not fully functional’ [Polish]. You get the idea. I was challenged by my mentor and current tutor of critical design thinking Lucas Tom Verweij to ask what it actually means to have this kind of condition. What are the questions it poses and how can I, as a designer, actually respond to them?

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<sup>1</sup> image source: Scoliosis association UK <https://www.sauk.org.uk/get-involved/international-scoliosis-awareness-day> [accessed 15.06.2020]

While working on the problem I took part in a sewing course at the School of Form in Poland where I was undertaking a BA in Domestic Design. While creating and cutting a classic dress, my technical support tutor asked, “Why aren’t you cutting this straight? You don’t have a hunchback.”

Well lady, you’d be very surprised...



NORMAL:

What is standard size and shape? Classic dress analysis: standard, symmetrical model for reference.

Rather than inform her of the multiple operations to correct my scoliosis, I thought, “Well, what if I did?” *The Dress For The Hunchbacked Girl* was envisioned as a dialogue with my own disability, an exploration of an alternate present without the corrective procedures that rendered my disability invisible, made by draping material on a specially created model using cut-outs from the classic dress.

At once I knew that it’s not dis-ability, it’s the feeling of being a cut-out from the classic conception of ‘normality’.



**INSIGHTS:**

Disability definition; scoliosis and personal experience as a starting point; what beauty standards mean for a woman and for a designer; aesthetic and ethical issues.

**SEWING AND MODELING PROCESS:**

Saving cutouts of the fabric for the next stage; draping on a specially created model from cutouts from the classic dress.



It is about design that asks inherently political questions of society's relationship with disability and mainstream beauty standards. My answer is inconvenient, for both myself and the viewer. Physical impairment is a nuisance to a society in which architectural, educational and economic adjustments are done as favors –

band aids instead of corrective solutions. It's like adding child protection to your adult home. Imagine feeling like that child for your entire life.

Independence for the disabled person is a privilege. Cities, schools, bars and social relations are sewn just like the classic dress. If you're 'lucky' enough you'll have a cutout garment, or maybe a pint in an accessible bar. It's not about having less, it's about the obligation to a deeply hidden feeling of gratitude that there are Paralympics and beauty contests organised especially for you, standing apart from their mainstream equivalents and with special care provided. That there is a dedicated seat on the bus or the tube, made easier to ask for by virtue of the special badge with which you have to brand yourself. A blue badge; your favorite colour.

In case you're wondering, I don't wear this dress. It represents a particular feeling under the skin, that you love the people who are keeping your mouth in the shape of a smile and helping you walk, but you hate them at the very same time. The dress might work, it might form an elegant shape, or prove functionally helpful, but it will never be the same as a 'normal dress'.



*The Dress For The Hunchbacked Girl*

Project Title: *The Dress For The Hunchbacked Girl*

Short description:

Designing and cutting a classic dress, my tutor asked, “Why aren’t you cutting this straight? You don’t have a hunchback.” Rather than inform her of the multiple operations to correct my scoliosis, I thought, “Well, what if I did?” The Dress is a dialogue with my own disability, an exploration of an alternate present without the corrective procedures that rendered my disability invisible. Made by draping material on a specially created model using cutouts from the classic dress.

A design that asks inherently political questions of society’s relationship with disability and beauty standards.

Keywords: Scoliosis Awareness, Design for Disability, Inclusive Design, Critical Thinking, Design as a Catalyst for Change

### **Website**

Author: KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ

Mentor: Lucas Tom Verweij

Photo: Irina Grishina/ KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ, model: Viktoriia Zybina, set: KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ

**[kamila.izykowicz@network.rca.ac.uk](mailto:kamila.izykowicz@network.rca.ac.uk)**

**Website** [kaizykowicz.com](http://kaizykowicz.com)

**Vimeo** [Kamila Iżykowicz](#)

**LinkedIn** [Kamila Iżykowicz](#)

# KAMILA IŻYKOWICZ

Poetic Designer  
MA Design Products  
Royal College of Art  
London, UK



Product and concept design practitioner, visual artist and non-practising art historian. BA cum laude at Domestic Design, Postgraduate MA student in **Design Products** at **Royal College of Art** in London. **Tate Modern: Staged on Screen** invitee with video performance art summer 2019. Special Prize winner of **Grand Challenge 2020** organised by **Royal College of Art** with **CERN** and **Logitech**. **Creative Conscience 2020** award winner.

Winner of the **Art and Fashion Forum by Grazyna Kulczyk 2015** [Poland] in the Fashion Jewellery category and awarded a summer course at **Central Saint Martins**, Speaker at the **Design INDABA** conference in Cape Town [RSA] in March 2017.