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### Transforming Waste Fabrics into Art: Collaborative Innovations in Textile Design and Sculpture

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#### Abstract

This study investigated the transformation of waste fabrics into collaborative sculptural artworks with a focus on sustainability, cultural relevance and innovative art education. Anchored in Ecocriticism, Material Culture Theory and the Anthropology of Art, the research situated textile-based sculpture within broader discourses of environmental responsibility and cultural identity. Using a life-size camel sculpture as a case study, discarded fabrics were collected, categorised and repurposed through processes such as armature construction, fabric layering and surface treatment. The findings highlighted three key outcomes: first, the expressive and structural versatility of fabric waste as a sculptural medium; second, its ecological value in diverting significant amounts of textile waste from landfill; and third, its pedagogical potential in fostering sustainable practices within art and design education. The study also identified challenges including limited scholarly discourse on textile-based sculpture, lack of integration in art curricula and prevailing reliance on traditional materials. By demonstrating how discarded fabrics could be re-contextualised into meaningful works of art, the research contributed to sustainable design discourse, offered practical models for art pedagogy and extended the creative boundaries of sculpture. It concluded by recommending that art institutions, policymakers and cultural bodies adopt textile sculpture as a sustainable medium for both studio practice and public art engagement

**Keywords:** Textile Sculpture, Fabrics, Sustainability, Economic Reform, Indoor Design.

## Introduction

Textile design and sculpture occupy unique but interconnected spaces within the creative arts. Textile design involves the aesthetic and functional manipulation of fabrics into patterns, colours, and textures that embody cultural identity and everyday utility. Sculpture, on the other hand, transforms materials into expressive, symbolic, or monumental forms. When waste fabrics—once deemed useless—are integrated into sculpture, they become mediators between textile design and sculptural practice. The concept of transforming discarded fabrics into art rests on constructs such as sustainability, collaboration and innovation. The key variables in this creative experiment include the material resource (waste fabrics), the artistic process (collaborative transformation) and the outcome (sculptural or textile-based works that address both aesthetic and ecological concerns). This dynamic intersection of fabric and form provides a fertile ground for rethinking how design and sculpture respond to environmental and cultural challenges.

From an anthropological perspective, textiles have long served as vital components of material culture, encapsulating identity, status, spirituality and ecological relationships. Sculpture, likewise, has historically functioned as a spatial and symbolic expression of

community beliefs, rituals, and memory. Both traditions demonstrate a deep-seated human tendency to repurpose, transform and give meaning to materials in ways that sustain cultural life. Historically, collaborations between textiles and sculpture can be traced to practices such as fabric drapery in classical statuary, the integration of woven forms in architectural decoration, and the use of cloth in ritual sculpture across African societies. In Yoruba tradition, textiles such as *Aso Oke* and indigo-dyed Adire were not only worn but also incorporated into ceremonial and spiritual sculptural forms. These practices demonstrate that the fusion of textile and sculpture is not new; however, the deliberate collaboration of artists and designers to transform waste fabrics into sculptural forms introduces a contemporary layer of innovation, where ecological sustainability is integrated with cultural expression.

Across Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, several contemporary artists have pioneered the reuse of discarded materials to create monumental sculptural works. El Anatsui, though Ghanaian by origin but long resident in Nigeria, is globally renowned for transforming bottle caps, aluminum, and fabric-like assemblages into shimmering wall sculptures that evoke African textile traditions while critiquing consumerism and waste (Binder, 2012; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Olu Amoda has reimaged scrap metals into intricate sculptural forms, while Adeola Balogun integrates discarded rubber and textiles into sculptures that respond to urban ecological realities (Bashorun, 2020). Dotun Popoola has established himself as a “transformer of waste,” working collaboratively with communities to create large-scale animal sculptures from discarded metals and fabrics, while Fidelis Odogwu employs repurposed industrial materials in ways that highlight resilience and innovation in Nigerian art (Oloidi, 2019). Collectively, these artists exemplify how waste can become a medium of cultural commentary and sustainability. However, most of their work still privileges metal and industrial waste, while fabric waste—despite its abundance and symbolic weight—remains relatively underexplored in sculptural practice.

Textile-sculpture remains a relatively underexplored field, making this study both timely and important. Scholars note that integrating environmental science, cultural studies, and art offers powerful pathways for sustainable expression (Niinimäki, 2015; Fletcher & Tham, 2019). The reuse of waste in art, however, is not a new practice. Pioneers like El Anatsui and Louise Nevelson have long transformed discarded materials into works that challenge conventional notions of value, form, and permanence (Binder, 2012).

El Anatsui’s monumental installations, crafted from bottle caps and metal scraps, exemplify how waste can embody both historical critique and aesthetic innovation. His practice set a global precedent for using unconventional materials in sculpture. In Nigeria, artists such as Dotun Popoola and Adeola Balogun extend this legacy by reimagining scrap metal and tires into hybrid forms. Yet, despite these advances, fabric-based sculpture remains notably absent in scholarly discourse and exhibitions—leaving a vibrant gap that this study seeks to fill.

### Statement of the Problem

The exponential growth of fabric waste poses urgent ecological, cultural and artistic challenges. While global initiatives advocate sustainable practices, the integration of textile waste into collaborative art production, especially sculpture, remains marginal in Nigeria and

across much of Africa. Existing literature has extensively documented textiles as heritage symbols and fashion commodities, but has given limited attention to their sculptural possibilities. Likewise, sustainable design discourse has centred on fashion and product design, leaving a gap in the systematic incorporation of textile waste into sculpture. Although pioneering artists such as El Anatsui, Adeola Balogun, Dotun Popoola, Yinka Shonibare and Fidelis Odogwu have demonstrated the creative power of discarded materials, their practices have yet to generate structured methodologies within textile-based sculptural production, particularly in educational contexts. This neglect reflects a disconnection between environmental imperatives and artistic pedagogy, where sculpture education still relies heavily on traditional materials and overlooks innovative alternatives. Consequently, the potential of waste fabrics to function as sustainable sculptural media and collaborative design tools remains underexplored. This study, therefore, addresses the urgent need to reposition discarded textiles as valuable resources in collaborative artistic production—bridging sustainability, cultural anthropology and contemporary design innovation.

### Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore the prospects and challenges of transforming waste fabrics into collaborative works of art, with particular emphasis on textile design and sculpture, using the experimental production of a life-size fabric camel sculpture as a case study to promote sustainability, cultural relevance, and innovative art education.

Other specific objectives are to:

- 1) Examine the potential of waste fabrics as alternative materials for sculptural and textile design production;
- 2) Investigate how collaborative artistic practices can enhance the transformation of waste fabrics into meaningful artworks;
- 3) Analyse the role of textile-based sculpture in addressing ecological concerns while preserving cultural identity;
- 4) Document and evaluate the production process of a life-size fabric camel sculpture as a case study in fabric-waste transformation;
- 5) Identify the challenges hindering the adoption of waste fabrics in sculptural and textile design practices; and
- 6) Propose strategies for integrating fabric-waste art into art education and sustainable design discourse.

### Research Questions

- 1) In what ways can waste fabrics be utilised as viable materials for sculptural and textile design production?
- 2) How can collaborative artistic approaches enhance the creative transformation of waste fabrics into art?
- 3) What role can textile-based sculpture play in promoting sustainability while reflecting cultural anthropology and identity?
- 4) How does the production of a life-size fabric camel sculpture demonstrate the potential and limitations of waste fabrics in large-scale artistic creation?
- 5) What are the key challenges limiting the use of fabric waste in sculptural and textile design practices?

- 6) What strategies can be developed to integrate waste-fabric art into art education and sustainable design frameworks?

The significance of this research lies in its potential to model a sustainable and innovative approach to artistic production. It contributes to global waste reduction efforts, enhances environmental awareness through creative expression, and proposes a viable framework for integrating sustainability into art and design education. Moreover, it offers a practical resource for artists, educators, policymakers and environmental advocates seeking to harness the expressive power of art in addressing ecological crises.

**Scope and Limitations:** This study is confined to the creation and analysis of fabric-based sculptural art within a studio context, using commonly discarded textiles such as offcuts, old garments, and industrial remnants. It does not extend to commercial or industrial recycling processes, nor does it engage with non-fabric forms of textile waste such as synthetic microfibers.

### Theoretical Framework

The research is grounded in Ecocriticism, Material Culture and Anthropology of Art Theory (Morphy & Perkins, 2006; Miller, 2005), which situates artworks within symbolic and social contexts. Ecocriticism explores the relationship between cultural production and the natural environment, emphasising the role of art in fostering ecological awareness and critique (Buell, 2005; Oppermann, 2016). Material Culture Theory, on the other hand, interrogates the ways in which objects—especially those made or altered by humans—embody and communicate cultural meanings (Miller, 2008). While Anthropology of Art Theory (Morphy & Perkins, 2006) situates artworks within symbolic and social contexts.

Together, these frameworks offer critical lenses through which to examine how textile waste, re-contextualised through sculptural practice, can serve as a vehicle for environmental discourse and material innovation.

### Literature Review

The literature review of this paper includes a critical study of some artists who use waste fabrics or textile materials to produce three-dimensional artworks, basically sculptures.

**El Anatsui:** Transforming Discarded Materials into Monumental Art: Ghanaian artist El Anatsui is renowned for his large-scale installations crafted from repurposed materials such as aluminium bottle caps and copper wire. These works, resembling metallic tapestries, challenge traditional notions of sculpture and textile art. Anatsui's approach emphasises the potential of discarded materials to convey complex narratives about consumption, waste, and transformation. His installations are noted for their flexibility and adaptability, allowing them to be reshaped in different contexts, thus engaging with themes of impermanence and change. (Barber, 1994; Picton & Mack, 1989).

**Yinka Shonibare:** Exploring Identity and Colonial Histories through Fabric. British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare employs Dutch wax-printed cotton textiles to create sculptures and installations that interrogate colonial histories and cultural identities. His works often feature figures dressed in these vibrant fabrics, juxtaposing European historical references with African textiles to question authenticity and hybridity. Shonibare's art serves as a commentary

on the complexities of post-colonial identity and the global interconnections shaped by history and trade. (Rapoport, 2005; Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Birtwistle & Moore, 2007; Shonibare. 2025)

**Nnenna Okore:** Engaging with Environmental Sustainability through Organic Materials, Nigerian-American artist Nnenna Okore focuses on environmental themes by creating sculptures from biodegradable and organic materials, including recycled paper, burlap, and food waste. Her labour-intensive processes, such as weaving and dyeing, are inspired by traditional Nigerian crafting techniques. Okore's work highlights the life cycles of materials and the potential for renewal, aligning with ecological concepts and promoting sustainability within artistic practices. (Gablik, 1991; Brady, 2021; Okore, 2025)

**Seyi-Gbangbayau P.S. and Akinbohun Elizabeth T.:** Integrating Textile Waste in Contemporary Nigerian Art. While specific scholarly articles on Akinbohun Elizabeth is still very unknown, Seyi-Gbangbayau have authored several intellectual writings on waste management-related themes. However, the two have artistic practice in Nigeria that involves the innovative use of textile waste to create sculptural pieces that reflect on environmental issues and cultural narratives. His work contributes to the discourse on sustainability in art by demonstrating how discarded materials can be transformed into meaningful artistic expressions, fostering a dialogue between tradition and contemporary environmental concerns. (Seyi-Gbangbayau and Ajayi, 2019; Seyi-Gbangbayau and Akinbohun, 2025)

**Orifabric Technique:** A Novel Approach to Repurposing Textile Waste: Researchers John Oyewole Adenle and Oluwambe Akinmoye introduced the "orifabric" technique, which involves repurposing textile waste into visual artworks through the creation of sonobe cubes. This method not only addresses the environmental impact of textile waste but also offers a new medium for artistic expression, blending principles of design, sustainability, and cultural aesthetics. (Adenle & Akinmoye, 2024)

Other scholars such as Dormer (1997) and Adamson (2010) have traced the evolution of fibre art and emphasised its capacity to integrate craft, design and fine art. Studies on El Anatsui's bottle-cap tapestries (Ottenberg, 2012) show how discarded materials tell stories and advocate for sustainability.

Few studies address textile-sculpture, underscoring the significance of this research. Interdisciplinary approaches integrating environmental science, cultural studies, and art highlight its potential for sustainable creative expression (Niinimäki, 2015; Fletcher & Tham, 2019). While reuse of waste in art is longstanding—as seen in El Anatsui's monumental works with discarded metals (Binder, 2012) and in contemporary Nigerian artists like Dotun Popoola and Adeola Balogun—fabric-based sculpture remains largely underexplored in scholarship and exhibitions.

Despite these theoretical underpinnings, few educational models systematically incorporate textile waste into sculpture curricula. Existing literature often focuses on craft or design-based recycling projects, with minimal exploration of how textile waste can function as a primary medium in fine art sculpture (Gwilt, 2014). This study thus addresses a significant research and pedagogical gap by developing a methodology for fabric-based sculptural practices that are both environmentally sustainable and artistically rigorous.

Gaps in Scholarship and Pedagogical Implications



Although sustainability in art and design is increasingly studied, textile-based sculpture remains underexplored. While sustainable fashion and upcycling in product design are well-documented (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Niinimäki, 2015), their application in fine arts, especially sculpture, is limited. Educational models also underemphasize waste reuse in sculpture curricula (Gwilt, 2014). As Seyi-Gbangbayau (2023) highlights, upcycling in art links ecological awareness with cultural heritage, underscoring its pedagogical and sustainable value.

### Categorisation of Fabric Artists

From the reviewed literature, fabric and textile artists can be broadly grouped into three categories:

- i. Textile designers who specialise in traditional or modern fabric creation.
- ii. Fabric painters such as Afis Quadri, who use waste textiles as their painting medium.
- iii. Sculptors who repurpose various forms of textile waste into three-dimensional or relief sculptures.

Among these, the third category is the least explored in scholarly discourse, further emphasising the relevance and urgency of the current study. The practices examined illustrate the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration—between art, sustainability, and anthropology—to transform textile waste into sculptural forms that are both meaningful and ecologically sound.



**Figure 1 & 2:** El-Anatsui, fabric works, *Triumphant Scale* and *Old man cloth*

**Photographs Courtesy:** Textile Forum Blog, 2025

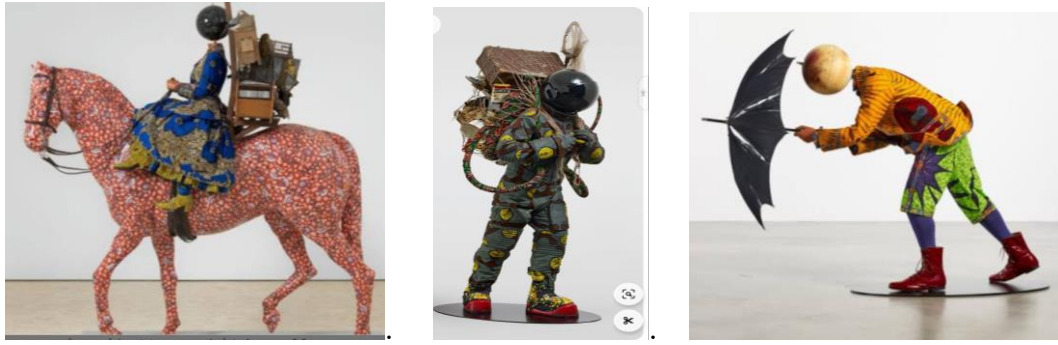


**Figs. 3 & 4:** Nnenna Okore' works.



**Fig. 5:** Orifabric technique by Adenle J.

**Photographs Courtesy:** Omenka Gallery, 2025, **Photographs Courtesy:** Tailor & Fabrics online



**Figs. 6, 7 & 8:** Representational realism, Yinka Shonibare's works, 2025

**Photograph courtesy:** Yinka Shonibare- Pinterest, 2025

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, combining literature review and studio-based experimentation to investigate the artistic and environmental potentials of waste fabric in sculptural practice and anthropological observation. The literature review encompassed academic texts, journal articles, exhibition catalogues, and artist interviews related to sustainability in art, textile waste management, fabric-based sculpture and African contemporary art practices. This provided a theoretical foundation and contextual framework, guiding both conceptual development and practical execution. The studio Experiment involves a life-size camel textile sculpture created using discarded fabrics, indigenous textiles, and structural supports.

A camel sculpture served as the focal example for demonstrating the transformation of waste textiles into a sustainable, culturally meaningful art piece.

**Materials and Tools:** Several materials can be used for the production of fabric sculptures, few of which include:

- i. Cotton – Lightweight, flexible, and easy to manipulate. Suitable for wrapping and layering.
- ii. Canvas – Strong and durable, ideal for creating structured forms.
- iii. Burlap (Hessian) – Coarse texture, excellent for rough, organic sculptural effects.
- iv. Silk and Satin – Used for smooth, elegant finishes; suitable for decorative textile sculptures.
- v. Nylon/Polyester – Synthetic and stretchable; often used in combination with resins or stiffeners.
- vi. Old Clothes or Textile Waste – Repurposed materials ideal for eco-conscious sculpture practices.

### Tools:

- Scissors and rotary cutters – For cutting fabric.
- Needles and thread – For hand stitching or reinforcing forms.
- Sewing machine – For faster stitching and joining.
- Adhesives (glue gun, fabric glue) – For bonding fabrics.
- Wire – To build internal support structures (armature).
- Plaster, PVA glue, or starch – For stiffening and shaping fabrics.

- Wood, foam, cardboard – Used as backing for reliefs or bases for 3D work.
- Paint and brushes – For finishing and surface decoration.
- Staple gun or pins – For fixing fabric in place during work.
- The selection of these tools and materials reflects a commitment to low-energy, eco-conscious studio practices and aligns with international standards in sustainable textile art production (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Gwilt, 2014).

## The fabric camel sculpture unfolded in the following phases

### Phase 1: Material Collection and Categorisation

Textile waste was collected from tailoring workshops, household donations and second-hand fabric markets. The fabrics were sorted by type (cotton, burlap, canvas, polyester), texture, flexibility, and colour. All materials were washed using eco-friendly detergents, sun-dried and then ironed for added smoothness and sterilisation. For the camel sculpture, cotton and burlap were selected as the primary wrapping layers for their pliability and natural texture, while canvas offcuts were used for reinforcement in structurally sensitive areas such as the legs and neck.

### Phase 2: Production Process

**Step 1: Conceptualisation and Sketching:** Initial sketches defined the camel's pose, anatomical proportions, and intended surface texture. Visual research included photographs and silhouette studies to ensure cultural accuracy and anatomical believability.

**Step 2: Maquette Creation:** This simply means a prototype of a bigger work of art. The word maquette (often misspelt as "Marquette") refers to a small-scale model or rough draft of a sculpture or architectural work, used by artists and designers to visualise and test concepts before creating the final, full-scale piece. It is typically made from inexpensive or pliable materials like clay, wax, cardboard or plaster. Maquettes help in planning proportions, composition, structure and technical details. However, a maquette is needed most often if the final work is going to be a big one. The maquette itself is also an artwork which can be used independently too for exhibition, presentation and other usages.



**Figs. 9, 10 & 11: Materials- Waste fabrics, foam and adhesive**

**Photograph courtesy:** Authors, 2025

Figures 12 to 14 are examples of a Maquette.



For the Camel sculpture, a small-scale fabric sculpture maquette was produced to explore form, posture and balance. This step also helped in determining the most effective layering strategy for fabric application.



**Figs. 12, 13 & 14:** Several views of a maquette of Fabric Sculpture by Akinbohun Elizabeth.

**Photograph courtesy:** Hassan Idowu, FPI, 2024

**Step 3: Armature Construction:** The internal skeleton was constructed using flexible wire for the limbs and neck, supplemented with light wooden strips for the torso frame. Chicken mesh was wrapped around the structure to provide a form-holding surface for fabric layering.

**Step 4: Fabric Preparation:** Fabrics were cut into strips of varying widths. Cotton was used for soft padding, while burlap provided the coarse outer surface texture.

**Step 5: Wrapping and Layering:** Fabric strips were soaked in a diluted PVA glue solution and wrapped tightly around the armature from the legs upward. Layering was done progressively, allowing partial drying between applications to maintain form integrity.



**Fig. 15:** Armature

fabrics

(Skeletal framework)



**Fig. 16:** Padding with foam



**Fig. 17:** Application of

**Photographs courtesy:** Akinbohun Elizabeth, 2025

**Step 6: Detailing:** - Smaller strips were tufted, pleated and coiled to create folds in the camel's neck, muscle joints and facial features. Elements such as nostrils, eyelids and ears were built from tightly rolled fabric bundles stiffened with glue.

**Step 8: Surface Treatment:** Natural pigments were dry-brushed to enhance depth and texture, with darker tones applied to folds and lighter tones on raised surfaces. A matte eco-varnish sealed the surface while retaining the fabric's natural look.

**Step 9: Installation and Spatial Testing:** - Completed sculpture was tested within simulated interior and exterior spaces to assess its visual impact, adaptability, and interaction with light, airflow, and human scale.

### Phase 3: Evaluation

The camel sculpture was assessed according to:

**Aesthetic coherence** – Proportions, anatomical detail, and textural realism.

**Material integrity** – Structural stability and resistance to handling.

**Environmental value** – Textile waste diverted from landfill (approx. 5.2 kg).

**Display adaptability** – Suitability for indoor gallery placement and educational exhibitions.

Feedback from artists, lecturers, and environmentalists confirmed the sculpture's dual success in meeting artistic and ecological goals.



**Figs. 18, 19 & 20:** Laying of waste fabrics on the camel sculpture

**Photographs courtesy:** Elizabeth Akinbohun, 2025

### Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that textile waste possesses significant sculptural potential, offering diverse textures, colours and structural possibilities that rival conventional materials. Three key outcomes emerged:

- i) **Material Versatility and Expressive Potential:** The tactile nature of fabric enabled complex textural compositions and organic forms. Techniques such as twisting, braiding, and draping allowed for expressive freedom, particularly in abstract and figurative representations. Cotton and denim were found to offer the most structural integrity, while silk and polyester excelled in aesthetic fluidity.
- ii) **Environmental Impact and Awareness:** Approximately 30 kilograms of textile waste were repurposed during the study, illustrating the potential of small-scale art practices to

- contribute meaningfully to waste reduction. Participants reported increased awareness of sustainability issues and a shift in perception regarding the artistic value of waste materials
- iii) **Pedagogical Implications:** The project demonstrated the viability of incorporating fabric-based sculpture into art education. Students engaged deeply with both the conceptual and technical aspects, resulting in works that communicated environmental messages while meeting formal artistic standards. The integration of theory and practice through Ecocriticism and Material Culture Theory proved effective in guiding reflective, critical engagement.

These findings support the study's hypothesis that transforming textile waste into sculptural art enhances sustainable practices in art production and yields compelling, meaningful works. The research contributes to the development of a sustainable art pedagogy and offers a model that can be adapted by art institutions globally.

### Key Findings:

**Material Performance:** Cotton, burlap and canvas responded well to stiffeners, with canvas offering strong structural support.

**Relief Sculptures:** Fabric sculptures can also be produced in relief technique, such as folding and layering, creating textures in 2-dimensional surfaces over foam (or without it) and cardboard bases. Figures 1 - 5 are examples

**3D Sculptures:** Fabrics supported by wire or mesh armatures held form effectively when treated with glue mixtures.

**Sustainability Impact:** Textile waste sculpture promotes upcycling, reduces environmental impact, and expands artistic possibilities through soft, sustainable materials. Its cultural relevance, affordability, safety, and adaptability in education, architecture, and public art make it a creative medium that unites innovation with environmental advocacy.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Textile sculpture is a sustainable and innovative art form that merges creativity, environmental responsibility, and cultural expression. The study showed that a range of fabrics, from cotton to synthetics, can be repurposed into relief and 3D sculptures using eco-friendly methods and simple tools. This approach supports artistic innovation while promoting the upcycling of textile waste and environmental conservation.

It is recommended that education authorities should incorporate textile sculpture into art curricula at all levels to teach sustainable practices and alternative media. Artists should be encouraged to use textile waste in sculpture to reduce environmental impact and promote responsible consumption. In addition, governments and cultural bodies should support public art projects using textile sculpture, especially for murals and youth programs. Finally, exhibition and art workshops should be organized regularly to raise awareness, share techniques, and promote adoption within the art and craft community.

**Further Research:** More academic and studio-based research should be conducted on the durability, preservation, and hybrid use of fabric with other materials in sculpture, to expand the medium's scope and application.

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