By Clara Parkes

Is it possible to improve upon perfection? Is it even appropriate to try? Of course this depends on how you define "perfect." But a certain portion of the knitting population—myself included—would use three words to define perfection: Rowan Kidsilk Haze.

This ethereal yarn is rather specific in nature, a fine stream of super kid mohair plied with 30 percent silk and then brushed so that the mohair hovers like morning mist over the silk. When designers use Kidsilk Haze, they try to create garments that embody these same shimmery, diaphanous qualities.

For those who don't see Kidsilk Haze as the answer to all life's problems, swapping a different yarn in a Kidsilk Haze pattern isn't all that straightforward. The results will be decidedly different, and whether they're better or more beautiful lies in the eye of the beholder. It's a challenge.

To see if it's possible to improve upon the perfection, I chose Rosemary Hill's Lalou to swatch. It's a showstopper, a shimmering symphony of feather and fan adorned with carefully placed beads and topped by a wide, frothy cowl. A more perfect use for Kidsilk Haze I cannot imagine.

Phoca PDF

My first swatch was a cheater. I chose Tilli Tomas Symphony Lace, a regal and decadent three-stranded concoction containing a superfine strand of brushed mohair (sorry, Kidsilk Haze is a hard habit to break) loosely plied with a strand of shiny gold thread.

The mohair and gold (which is actually an even finer thread wrapped in a gold material) are then stranded along what looks like a two-ply thread of silk onto which seed beads have been strung at irregular intervals ranging from 12 to 24 inches or more. Sometimes instead of one bead you'll find two or even three. While Rosemary was very specific about bead placement in the pattern, this yarn makes the beads less frequent and far more random.

The silk has a much stronger presence than in Kidsilk Haze, flowing uninterruptedly across the faces of the stitches, punctuated by the occasional random bead. The shiny gold gives a brightness to the finished fabric and is especially striking in sunlight. While knitting, I could feel a hint of scratch from the shiny gold thread, but once I washed and blocked the swatch, the halo obscured most irritation. To knit the size for a 39-inch chest, you'd need four skeins, costing $156.

To move us away from the Kidsilk Haze-style halo aesthetic completely, I next chose Alchemy Silken Straw. It's an elegant and unusual presentation of pure silk in ten extremely fine, two-ply strands of fiber. There is no twist or ply to hold the strands together, but they have been processed in such a way that they naturally adhere to one another. The yarn has the telltale dry fineness and "scrunch" of quality silk. It really does seem like silken straw.

Silk can be fairly dense at 100 percent, so I decided to forgo the beads and let the fibers provide all the shine. The swatch blocked beautifully. This particular instance of feather and fan does not make use of a purl ridge, making the fabric even smoother and more fluid. Here you'd also benefit from the Alchemy color palette playing itself out over a large fabric surface area. The 39-inch-chest size requires six skeins, bringing the bill to $168.

Finally, I moved from fluidity and elegant functionality to a yarn that would compete solely on its merits as a showstopper: 1/20 Silk Stainless Steel from Habu Textiles. The finest of the yarns I tried, it is made from three plies of lustrous silk around which is loosely plied a thin stream of stainless steel—the proportions are 69% silk and 31% stainless steel. You feel only the silk but your fabric can be gently pulled and nudged into different shapes.

The stainless steel is excellent for holding open the YOs and accentuating the SSKs and K2togs, but unless you're a knitting machine, it will accentuate any and all irregularity in your tension and stitches. I chose to see these irregularities as personal touches, like the pen-and-ink scribblings of Picasso. You'd need five cones for that 39-inch-chest sweater, keeping the tab at an economical $65.

But if I were to swatch this one again, I'd probably pair 1/20 Silk Stainless Steel with an equally fine strand of something softer and fuzzier, like…brushed mohair? As I said, Kidsilk Haze is a hard habit to break.