

Contemporary Art to Wear at Racine Art Museum



Contemporary Art to Wear at RAM

“Art to wear”—wearable clothing that is produced in unique or limited editions—is primarily handmade and reflects a particular style. The genesis of art to wear in the 1960s and 1970s and its trajectory to the present day reflects the dynamics of contemporary society and culture, personal choices of the makers (and patrons), and complex notions regarding aesthetics, the production of works for wear, and the body as form.

Artists associated with this type of work have come from a variety of backgrounds including painting, sculpture, fiber, and even, chemistry. This is telling as it reflects the diverse approaches they bring to making garments and accessories including dyeing, painting, appliqué, embroidery, weaving, and knitting. Many speak about a love for the materials they use, incorporating explorations of media and technique into their process.

Since 2005, Racine Art Museum has strengthened its holdings in this category—adding examples of jackets, vests, shawls, and other wearable pieces by well-known makers such as **Karren Brito**, **Jean Williams Cacicedo**, **Deborah Cross**, **Randall Darwall**, **Tim Harding**, **Ana Lisa Hedstrom**, **Julia Hill**, **Sally Jones**, **Kiss of the Wolf (Lori and Marshall Bacigalupi)**, **Linda Mendelson**, and **Carol Motty**. RAM is committed to collecting this type of work that is not given much attention by other institutions despite its significance within the field of contemporary craft.

While art to wear, as discussed here, is most directly linked to garments and accessories produced in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the impetus to “activate” art through wearables has not been limited to time or place.

For example, working in Western Europe in the early twentieth century, **Sonja Delaunay (1885-1979)** combined an aesthetic of colorful and geometric abstraction with paintings, interior design, stage set design, theatrical costumes, and clothing. While she approached fashion houses about producing clothing for them, she primarily made it for friends and private clients. While similar to those who came later in her desire to work through an aesthetic vision across dimensions, including clothing, Delaunay was not involved in the same kind of marketplace as those making later in the twentieth century.



Others have been compelled to incorporate the style and symbolic significance of dress into their agenda. Several socially-driven art endeavors—such as the Arts and Crafts movement in England in the late 1800s, the Constructivists in Russia in the early 1900s, and the Futurists in Italy in the 1920s—pushed clothing design as part of their socialist vision.

Clothing was a part of the social reform package and a necessary component of articulating ideals about the current and future direction of both art and society.

In the 1960s and 1970s as social, political, and economic upheaval shaped U.S. culture, many sought a way of life that was not tied to the same perceived restraints as earlier generations. Artists made garments and accessories as street wear, for use in performances, or for display in exhibitions. Interested in blending art and life, many of the artists involved saw dress as a direct and incredibly creative connection between the body and the self and the individual and the world at large. Paralleling the pursuits of artists working in other media, many of those associated with art to wear in these years used fiber techniques that were identified as “women’s work.” Responding to the cultural climate, they regarded their use of these processes—combined with their personal vision—as subversive and a challenge to expectations. By combining marginalized or “low” art forms—weaving, quilting, knitting, etc.—with “high” art forms such as painting, they could subvert perceived values. The art to wear “movement” was shaped in part by the desire for personal freedom and expression, an anti-establishment ethos, and the influence of non-Western cultures.



Barbara Brandel
Sampler (Jacket), 1995
 Dyed cotton, silk, and wool
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Carol and Allen Naille

One direct example of this is the prevalence of the kimono as design inspiration. Japanese in origin, the kimono has a rich traditional and contemporary history. T-shaped and floor-length, the garment can appear voluminous when worn but structured if it is hung flat on a wall. The use of a kimono reflects a connection to a global sense of fashion and aesthetic appreciation as well as a non-conformist approach to dress. When hung, the shape offers a large “canvas” suitable for

exploring artistic concerns yet when worn the fabric can drape and sway in a way that could flatter many body types. Additionally, when considered in the context of garment construction, a kimono is relatively easy to make and it does not have to be customized or tailored in the way that other types of garments do. For those interested in communicating with—and selling to—a broad audience and for those coming to the idea of wearables without having backgrounds in clothing construction, the kimono has been a smart and flexible choice. While not the only garment form employed by those creating art to wear historically or presently—there is an abundance of shawls, coats, and scarves—the kimono represents key facets of interest for many art to wear practitioners, not the least of which is that it is both an aesthetic and functional object.



Jeannette Kastenber
The Abstract (Jacket), 1992
 Silk chiffon, synthetic fiber, sequins, caviar beads, and bugle beads
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Barbara Tober

(far left)
Carole Waller
Priory (Coat and Scarf), 1997
 Screenprinted and handpainted silk
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Drs. Judith and Martin Bloomfield



(above)
Randall Darwall
Float Weave Kimono, 1979
 Natural and dyed silk
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Pat Garrett

(below)
Karren Brito
Opera Shawl, ca. 2005
 Dyed silk
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Laurie Waters



Recognizing that individual artists offer varying approaches and perspectives, it seems fair to say that those who have created art to wear relish material exploration—expressing a keen desire to play with pattern, color, texture, movement, and shape as well as technique. A non-exhaustive list of techniques employed include dyeing, weaving, piecing, appliqué, felting, knitting, needlepoint, crochet, embroidery, quilting, and sewing. Some, such as **Janet Kaneko**, would recycle cast-off kimonos, disassembling a garment and then fashioning a new piece with the segmented panels. Regarding the studio as a lab for working out ideas, **Ana Lisa Hedstrom** has utilized patterning, piercing, Shibori dyeing,

overdyeing, airbrushing, and painting to create vibrant silk coats. **Tim Harding** plays with surface and structure—and creating the illusion of depth and dimension—by employing a technique of reverse appliqué that he developed. Because this is, in essence, art that is portable, there has been a long-standing need for venues that could and would sell art to wear garments. Early on, galleries such as **Julie: Artisan's Gallery** in New York City—which closed in 2013 after 30 years in business—provided an outlet as well as a gathering point for artists, collectors, and the broader public. In recent decades as the art to wear-focused galleries have closed, large craft shows such as those organized by the American Craft Council, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, museum stores, specialty galleries such as **Bellagio** in Asheville, North Carolina, and, now, the internet have become the primary modes of disseminating this type of work.

As a subset of contemporary craft, it is worthwhile to consider how art to wear connects to other dimensions of the broader craft field. The most obvious comparison would be with art jewelry. Theoretically both areas keep the body in mind as a construct. Art to wear is not body-conscious in the same way as adornment—note the above statements about loose shape and an interest in non-tailored fits—but it is still addressing the shape and form of the body. While for different reasons, some art jewelers and some art to wear garment makers consider their work off the body as well—what does it say or mean in a resting state? Can the piece say something different when it is not being worn?

While RAM is one of the few institutions to carry this work in depth—holdings in 2016 number over 100 pieces—art to wear can be found in other museum collections including Fuller Craft Museum, Massachusetts; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Art and Design, NYC; and Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

The following quotes from artists in RAM's collection—some who were major figures early on—reflect their artistic interests and reveal the ways in which their investigations have expanded:

Deborah Cross

I am drawn to the interplay of fabric and the body. I question ideas about where beauty and comfort are found...The force behind my clothing collection is the manipulation of color and texture. Inspired by this unique dynamic of texture and color, each collection is one element of an extended process of examining and rethinking my previous design decisions. I strive for an architectural feminine, modern feel that transcends seasonal trends and has universal appeal.¹

Randall Darwall

I am a studio clothmaker, trying to weave the best fabric I can for the marketplace, working with methods and dye



techniques not possible in commercial production. I particularly like the unpredictable potential that only the handweaver is free to explore in process. I design as I work, struggling to keep up my own end of the conversation with color, fiber, structure, and the constantly chiding voice of function. I use many different kinds of silk yarns in order to make the color glow, to create depth, and to record the motion of weaving. I may strike out in one direction, but the intuitive surge to vary, to respond to color with more color, takes over and the piece evolves...²

(above)
Randall Darwall and Brian Murphy
Jacket, 2002
Dyed silk and plastic buttons
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of the Estate of Leslie Gould

(left)
Ana Lisa Hedstrom
Coat, ca. 2000
Dyed silk
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Laurie Waters



Tim Harding

I use a unique, self-developed physical technique (a complex, free-reverse applique) which makes use of the intrinsic properties of my materials while creating an interesting interplay of surface and structure. In the pursuit of creating the illusion of three-dimensional space on the picture plane, I employ painterly techniques such as light/shadow, figure/ground, and perspective. The pixel-like quality in my work, a result of physical manipulation, is very conducive to the coloration technique of simultaneous contrast, the use of multiple solid colors in tight proximity to create a vibrant richness, most often associated with the Impressionists and especially the Pointilists... The historical references and cultural references for my work are many and widespread, including: traditional oriental kimono forms, Monet's impressions of light on water, Rauschenberg's Jammers and Hoarfrost series, Pattern Painting, the water imagery of Hockney, Fischl and Bartlett, the color portraits of Chuck Close, and the Color Field painting of Rothko and Olitski.³

Ana Lisa Hedstrom

I really want to understand the process [Shibori—a fabric dyeing technique developed in Japan] and then run with it. I'm not interested in replicating traditional approaches, yet because I teach, I feel I want to understand it well enough to educate a new generation... The original artisans worked with what they had around them, so if I use something contemporary, I feel that it is totally within the spirit... The Shibori tradition was always inventive, adaptable, and exploratory. I think that characterizes my work. I'm very inquisitive. To me that's the nature of Shibori, the true nature.⁴

Linda Mendelson

Many Modern Art "isms" have influenced the content of the pieces – Constructivism, Tonalism, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and the list goes on. Color progression and incorporation of words into these garments are hallmarks of my work. I live as an artist. My living room, with knitting machines, pressing equipment, hundreds of cones of yarn, thousands of buttons (I love buttons), is the "studio." The kitchen, with measuring equipment and sewing machines is the "cutting and sewing room." The bedroom with a computer, printer, and photo equipment is the "office." Books, as inspiration, are everywhere. The entire apartment is "World Headquarters."⁵

Lena Vigna

Curator of Exhibitions



(above left)
Tim Harding and Kathleen Harding
 Jacket, ca. 2000
 Dyed dupioni silk
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson

(right)
Kiss of the Wolf
(Lori and Marshall Bacigalupi)
 Three-Quarter Length Vest, ca. 1990
 Hand-dyed silk
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Drs. Judith and Martin Bloomfield

(above right)
Deborah Cross
 Jacket, ca. 1990
 Dyed silk and plastic buttons
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Lucy G. Feller

(far right)
Jean Williams Cacicedo
 California Dreaming (Coat), ca. 1980
 Dyed wool, mohair, cotton, and beads
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of the Estate of Leslie Gould

Endnotes

1.
<http://www.deborahcross.com/profile.html>
(accessed 21 June 2016).
2.
<http://www.randalldarwall.com/artists%20statement.htm>
(accessed 21 June 2016).
3.
<http://www.timharding.com/th/about.html>
(accessed 21 June 2016).
4.
"Ana Lisa Hedstrom, Interviewed by
Lyssa C. Stapleton, December 18, 2014"
in *The Box Project: Works from the Lloyd Cotsen
Collection*. Los Angeles: The Cotsen Occasional Press,
Los Angeles, 2016, p.68-69.
5.
<http://www.tafalist.com/profile/linda-j-mendelson/>
(accessed 21 June 2016).



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(front cover)

Tim Harding

Oaks Greatcoat
from the *Landscape Series*, 1988
Dyed cotton
Racine Art Museum,
Promised Gift of Sara and David Lieberman

Racine Art Museum

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