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Re-use

Re-cycle

Re-make

Re-style

Re-invent

Re-dress yourself

Re-dress the balance

Re-dress the impact

## **A Pattern for living.**

Before starting the MA I was a painter and quite adamant that I would remain one, concentrating on paintings validity within contemporary art practice. Painting was the only way that had I worked since completing my BA and I had not thought about questioning this.

Over the last two years my practice has developed along many different tangents, however the emotions that I experience through my response to colour and physicality of media have been a consistent driving force. This essay is my attempt to explain how my work has developed and progressed from the origin of painting into the medium of textiles and social interaction through workshops and dialogue with others.

### **A change in practice.**

When viewing my work I expected my audience to be transported in the way that I was, to that moment where everything else ceases to exist and you temporarily experience extreme happiness and a sense of freedom. A question posed by Dr Daro Montag early into the course made me realise for the first time that my paintings were not achieving

this and so my practice changed. It has evolved over the last two years through trying to find a way to bring about this result.

I started by investigating work that had affected me in this emotional way and found installation to be the most inspirational. Work such as James Turrell's *'Light Installations'* at the Yorkshire sculpture park was extremely meditative and they provided the immersive quality that I was interested in achieving. Those leaving the different rooms were directly affected and it was obvious through the conversations that I overheard that the audience had a very physical sensate reaction to the work. It was this reaction that I wanted to instigate within my own practice.

Another influential piece was Carsten Holler's *'Upside down Mushroom room'* 2000, where the room is filled with enormous red spotted fungi that make you feel extremely small. Also Gilchrist and Joelson's *'Naked Light: the eye is not the thing that sees'* from their *'Polaria'* project 2002 where the viewer sits inside a cube on a translucent chair and experiences a reconstruction of the light in North East Greenland. These works led me to the realisation that I wanted to put my audience 'inside my paintings' in order to



*'Upside Down Mushroom Room'*, 2000 exhibited at Fondazione Prada Milan

investigate their emotional response to colour and the media used. In turn I hoped that this would lead to them experiencing the emotions of creativity that I have previously mentioned.



'Accidental Beauty', 2005

I therefore experimented by creating several installations: *'Accidental Beauty'*, 2005: a piece for an exhibition at Falmouth Arts centre where the viewer sat with their head encased in an old fashioned camera cover that blocked out all light. Headphones played the sound of the rain and abstract photographs of colour appeared to float into the black space in front of them. Many remained within for some time and reported that they became 'lost' and had 'drifted off to somewhere else'. That it was a very meditative experience, which was exactly the reaction that I had been hoping for.



Detail showing camera hood



An example of photographs shown

In my next installation '*Blue*' I transformed a room by painting it blue, hung the ceiling with cloth and projected photographs of the sky. As in '*Accidental Beauty*' I wanted to work with peoples different 'senses' so I added the sound of the sea and the smell of seaweed to reflect the shoreline where many of the photos were taken. I wanted humour to play a part and so I also provided a blue dinner party. I realise with hindsight that I tried to do too much within a single piece, however this work was a new direction for my practice and had the desired effect of creating an immersive experience for my audience, (though I am not sure the experience of blue food was one that they would like repeated).



'Blue' 2006.



'Blue 2' 2006: under the stairs at Richard Wards' chapel in Illogan.

As part of a MA CVA group show for *'Cornwall Open Studios'*, June 2006, I created *'Blue 2'*. This occupied a small space under the stairs of Richard Wards' chapel in Illogan that was hung with blue material. On entering the viewer put their head into the camera hood that I had used for the *'Accidental Beauty'* piece, watched amazing photos of the sky and listened to the sound of the sea. The audience wrote how they felt before and after taking part: I could then compare the results, which indicated that on the whole the work made them feel calm and relaxed, very similar reactions to that of the other two pieces. This work again included immersion but in this instance on a very individual

basis. I also wanted the element of mystery and surprise due to the participants not knowing what they were going to see or what would happen. It was a new use for what was a small, secret, special space under the stairs, a room that when the door was closed was very private.

These early experiments with installation have been crucial to the development of my practice in several ways. I realised that I personally enjoy changing environments and immersing my audience within an experience. A visible reaction can be observed and it initiates dialogue both with those who are experiencing the work and also with myself. In terms of my central concern of wanting to recreate the moment where everything else ceases to exist and the audience temporarily experiences extreme happiness and a sense of freedom this was occurring to different degrees within those who engaged with my work, but I still felt it was the part of my practice that I had not yet managed to satisfy completely.

After working through these different installations I then became inspired to work with environmental issues, prompted by the RANE conference in July 2006, (Research in Art Nature and Environment, University College Falmouth) However as a result of this I became confused as to what my practice was becoming. It was through talking again to Neil McCloud that I realised that textiles were my real love. Earlier in study block one, through exhibiting *'Accidental Beauty'* as part of an exhibition with Mari Maurice who recycles clothes, I had started to take apart the garments that I no longer wore and reconstructed them into new unique outfits. I had realised that this offered exactly the same process as painting with the same personal emotions communicated. However as a result of deciding to choose textiles I was very conscious that I did not want to

concentrate upon myself, that I wanted to avoid embarking on a 'self-indulgent' form of dressmaking as this raised the same problems as I experienced with painting.

### **Ideas behind Wardrobe Surgery**

The way that I decided to tackle this was through creating a 'whole new shopping experience', called 'Wardrobe Surgery', one that was personalised and opposite to that of the high street.



Before surgery



After surgery



It was hoped that my 'Wardrobe Surgery' would make the owner feel good about themselves, in that they were shopping in a more environmentally friendly way.

The idea was for the client to collect together personal items of clothing that were special but not worn anymore. I then conducted a 'consultation' to discover what it was that people loved about their items of clothing and their own fashion tastes, as I realised that not everyone wanted to look like me! I wanted to create something new and fabulous that the client would want to wear again by giving the garment a completely new identity.

'Wardrobe surgery' has been an amazing experience. This change of direction and emphasis away from self in so far as I am now making for others has been personally very therapeutic, also possibly because no money changed hands, it felt as if I was giving people 'presents', a very 'self-less' procedure. In *'Essays On The Blurring Of Art And Life'* Kaprow talks about 'self-knowledge':

"Self-knowledge is where you start on the way to becoming "the whole"..  
it is the passage from that of the separate self to the egoless self. Lifelike art  
in which nothing is separate is a training in letting go of the separate self"<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the transformation from separate to 'egoless' self, this has been an important development both in my work but also within myself.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaprow, A. 1993. "The Blurring of Art and Life" University of California Press: Pg. 217

An interesting coincidence (or possibly result) of this has been many instances whereby people offered to do things for me, for example when discussing making a dress with Sarah Bunker from the MA CVA course she told me that she normally found herself wearing it whilst fixing cars. She then offered to fix my carboretta! There were many different examples of similar acts and they were very welcome occurrences.

## Workshops



People hard at work, July 2007.

In July 2007 I further expanded my ideas through the running of free community workshops. These were designed to teach people how to recycle their own cherished clothing in the same way that I had been conducting my 'Wardrobe Surgery'. I felt I was empowering the participants and helping them look at recycling in a new light, leading to an understanding of how to start to make a difference to the planet. I firmly believe that you need to concentrate on the 'micro' 'grass roots' level by doing small things so that you feel empowered. If you consider the larger 'macro' picture of environmental concerns of Global warming, it is so



Hands on teaching



Stef in Blue

depressing that you feel helpless, you become frozen by the enormity of the situation and so end up unable to do anything.

This approach was shared by the recent RANE, conference 'Responding to Climate Change' that I took part in on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The idea was to offer people practical ways that they can start to make a difference to the planet and I had a stall aimed at raising awareness of my work. A short interview I gave can be heard on the RANE website, click on the Climate Aware movie.<sup>2</sup>



Responding to climate change, May 2007

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<sup>2</sup> RANE 2007 *Responding to climate change* [online] (11<sup>th</sup> May 2007)

Available from: [http://rane.falmouth.ac.uk/movies/climate\\_aware.html](http://rane.falmouth.ac.uk/movies/climate_aware.html)  
[cited 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007]

There is also a longer interview about the Community Workshops and my practice on the BBC Planet Cornwall website<sup>3</sup>

I have a strong desire for my work to offer practical attainable solutions and Bourriaud sums this up as:

*"learning to inhabit the world in a better way'.....the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist"*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> BBC Cornwall 2007 Planet Cornwall: *Re-Dress to Impress* [online] (26<sup>th</sup> June 2007)

Available from:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/cornwall/content/articles/2007/06/26/planetcornwall\\_clothes\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cornwall/content/articles/2007/06/26/planetcornwall_clothes_feature.shtml)

[cited 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007]

<sup>4</sup> Bourriaud, N. 2002 " Relational Aesthetics" Les Presses du reel: Pg. 13.

My Workshops and Wardrobe Surgery service are very much situated outside of the gallery context and offers people actual 'real-life' solutions. As well as the overall environmental aim the workshops also provided a vehicle within which it was possible for those participating to experience moments of an immersion within the experience of creativity and also the related feelings of extreme happiness that I had been aiming for. I was the initial catalyst in terms of setting up the situation and sharing my skills and knowledge, and the individuals, although working within a group, controlled how their own work progressed. This is similar to artist Jeremy Deller's relationship with those that participate in his work "He was interested and thought about what I said to him, but really let me go with the flow," says Ed Hall, who made the banner commemorating the Windrush for Deller" <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Branigan, T. Guardian Unlimited 2004 The Guardian profile: *Jeremy Deller* [online]

(3<sup>rd</sup> December 2007)

Available from: <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/turnerprize2004/story/0,,1365685,00.html>

[cited 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007]

Diagram of my working practice:



## **Textiles: a life changing experience**

My clothes and the way that I present myself to the world, i.e. that I tend to look different from other people, has always been a source of interest and initiates conversations with others. This has now developed further and forms part of my practice: wearing my artwork results in the opening of dialogue and creates discussion about what I do: that I am a 'Wardrobe Surgeon' who performs 'Wardrobe Surgery'. Through the initial conversations there can be a number of different outcomes: a new way of thinking about garments and the environmental implications of shopping and often lifestyle, the possibility of commissioning a new piece of clothing or actually deciding to take part in one of my workshops that are designed to empower people to start recycling their own clothes.

I have always aimed at making my work, and the message that I am trying to convey, positive and so for this reason I feel it relevant to look at the words of Susan Sontag who recounts that it is a 'fine balance' when she points out that

"There is another problem with the consumer-based approach. 'We are living in the "Age of Shopping" and any movement that makes people feel guilty about going to the mall is a backlash waiting to happen"<sup>6</sup>

People need to feel that they still have the freedom to make their own decisions without others telling them how to feel or what to buy. That they can have the power to direct

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<sup>6</sup> Sontag, S. 2000. *"Beyond the Brand"* In Klein, N. *"No Logo"*. Harpercollins. Pg. 429.

themselves and control their own lives. Another reason why empowerment is such an important part of my own 'business model.

As was recounted in the feedback from a couple of the workshop participants "Its unique to me and I like that, not being one of the sheep" and "the freedom to do whatever" <sup>7</sup> this highlights how the workshops succeeded in creating a platform for a sense of freedom through creativity to occur, the same freedom that I have discovered and that I value so highly from my practice. What is excellent is that this was achieved through peoples' own work

### **Art: not just sewing**

During all of the different 'models' of my practice I was very much aware that I was creating 'art' as opposed to simply making garments or teaching people to sew. As a result I paid a lot more attention to how I was feeling and by keeping a journal '*The Daily Diary Confessions of a Vegan Wardrobe Surgeon*' it made the whole process very different than just dressmaking. Kaprow discusses the way things change once you acknowledge them as art practice or performance, that if you start to consciously realise your actions the context changes. If we accept his later suggestion, that "art is a weaving of meaning-making activity with any or all parts of our lives"<sup>8</sup> it is this conscious intent that distinguishes what I am doing as 'art'.

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<sup>7</sup> Verran, P. Chi. 9<sup>th</sup> June 2007. 'Community Workshop feedback sheets'.

<sup>8</sup> Kaprow, A. 1993. "The Blurring of Art and Life" University of California Press: Pg. 216

I personally think of my work as 'lifelike art' as my move into textiles has actually resulted in becoming self-employed and registering my business 'Re-dress' in July 2007, [www.re-dress.org.uk](http://www.re-dress.org.uk)

The change in my practice has also led to a change in lifestyle, I no longer fill up my time with shopping whereby previously I was bombarded with advertising whilst being surrounded by shops or watching television, elements that I have come to realise, did not add any quality to my life. Although I am now financially poor due to no longer teaching full-time, I am 'lifestyle rich', a much healthier balance. I am more productive, less stressed and spend my time being creative and interacting with people. As the artist Grayson Perry recounts in his biography

"that summer taught me that art wasn't a nine-to-five job. I had been thinking art was an activity that you *did*, not something you *were*... Somebody once said, 'You cook your sculpture and you eat your paintings'. Everything was constantly evaluated and played with. Everything was an opportunity to be imaginative"<sup>9</sup>

This is something that has become increasingly true over the last few months. Whereas before I had trouble answering what I did, now I have no hesitation in being able to explain my work. I have been able to find a way of working that dissolves the distinction between what I make and what I am.

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, W. 2007. "Grayson Perry, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl" Vintage. Pg. 145

## My MA Show.

My clothes are a vehicle for 'making a difference' and therefore I wanted the final MA show to do the same. The way that I have chosen to do this is through the creation of the '*Clean Conscience Clinic*'. This consists of a Waiting, Reception and Consulting rooms and an Operating Theatre. I am '*Dr Eco-Stitch*' who will be leading workshops each day for up to four people to learn how to recycle their own clothes and create unique new garments. This is again designed at empowering those who take part in the workshops and I also hope will have some effect on those who observe.

I also wanted to find another way of 'talking' to those who do not participate in the workshops and the way that I have done this is through a magazine entitled '*Stitched Up: environmentally, culturally, mentally*'. Within waiting rooms you always get magazines. I wanted '*Stitched Up*' to be a way of informing people of what is happening in the world around them, locally and also on a larger global scale from an environmental, ethical and cultural angle. I wanted something that would open minds to new knowledge and also offer practical ways of acting upon what was read, even if it was just one email sent or one web site looked at. It is a source of information that people can take away with them, (although I will be encouraging people to leave their contact details with the receptionist so that they can be emailed a PDF file of the magazine rather than a black and white copy, therefore having a visually more interesting version and also saving paper).

*'Stitched Up'* is a collaboration that has brought together articles from local people as well as larger organisations within Cornwall, the UK and internationally. It is interesting that in the same edition there is writing from people such as George Monbiot, (the Guardian) and Rob: a local Falmouth café owner, (Sheltons). As I was printing the magazine myself there were no financial restraints and the result was a freedom to include a wide variety of information and content.

Through putting together the magazine the most immediate and rewarding collaboration has been between Matt Pontin a local photographer / artist and myself. We discussed ideas from the beginning of the project: he gave me inspiration, a lot of new sources of information and was heavily influential in terms of the final aesthetic format. The collaboration was extremely enjoyable and I feel that we learnt a lot from each other. An added benefit is that Matt will be able to use the finished product for a 'carbon neutral' project that he is working on with *'The Ridgeway School'* in Plymouth. We also intend to collaborate in future by putting on 'one day' magazine workshops.

## Humour as part of my practice.

In June I once again immersed my audience in an installation during *'Cornwall Open Studios'* (where my *'Re-dress'* studio is housed). This included humorous wig wearing and watching a painted wooden television set showing slides of my clothes in a room themed around the 70's, (this was when people still used their sewing machines to adapt and make clothes and I grew up wearing clothes made by my mother). It was this that made me realise humour was the element that had been missing from my work.



Amy and Luke looking groovy



Cornwall Open Studios, The Old Grammar School, Redruth.

I feel that my MA show includes the humour and performative element and it is these two things that had been absent since February. In previous work they have taken the form of a 'scientifically accurate!' portrayal of the eclipse using an overhead projector and templates made of paper which was one of my personal highlights of 'Blue', then there was Falmouth Flashmob that occurred in December 2006, whereby I anonymously initiated a pillow fight within the centre of Falmouth and over fifty people hit each other with pillows. Finally it is worth remembering 'Banana 1' a whole evening themed around bananas that included banana curry, banana cocktails, a banana raffle and the projection of the banana art work: most of the CVA course posing creatively with a six foot banana. Along with humour my work is very much about bringing people together to experience an event.



David and Becky getting creative with Bananas

Humour and performance also play a part in my clothing as what I wear is often met with smiles and laughter. I tend to always see these reactions as positive as mentioned previously, it initiates conversation and discussion although my petition to 10 Downing Street to ask the Prime Minister 'to give financial reward to those who wear brightly coloured clothes (not just at festivals) in order to make the world a happier place', was rejected on the grounds that it was 'intended to be humorous and has no point about government policy'.

### **An underlying serious message.**

I feel that humour and performance is important in that it is a way of getting a very serious message across. I may look very unusual at my MA show dressed as 'Dr Eco-stitch' in the 'Clean Conscience Clinic' but anyone reading the magazine and looking at the accompanying material in the reception / waiting room will, it is hoped, be under no illusions as to what I am trying to achieve through my work. It is for this reason that I admire the work of the 'Spacehijackers', who tell us that they set up

"alternative realities for space, we confuse the meaning and language of that space, therefore reducing the authority of the people that own it .... We oppose the blanding out and destruction of local culture in the name of global economic progress. Newer and bigger is not always better, it is usually both impersonal and imposing"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Spacehijackers [online] (unknown date) Available from:

<http://spacehijackers.org/html/manifesto.html> [cited 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007]

They communicate a message of diminishing public freedom and personal liberty that is being eroded by advertising and privatisation. They present their arguments through humorous exchanges and events in such a way as to invite new thinking and they 'open minds' to what has previously not been questioned by most people. Examples of their work can be found in 'Stitched up' along with that of other like-minded groups and individuals such as C.I.R.C.A, (the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army), The Vacuum Cleaner and Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination.

Through the way that my practice has developed and the paths that my research has taken me on I have become increasingly concerned about this loss of free space through the 'multi nationals' control of the spaces that we have left.

As we also learn from Naomi Klein

"as more companies seek to be the one overarching brand under which we consume, make art, even build our homes, the entire concept of public space is being redefined. And within these real and virtual branded edifices, options for unbranded alternatives, for open debate, criticism and uncensored art – for real choice – are facing new and ominous restrictions".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Klein, N. 2000. "No Logo". Harpercollins. Pg. 131.

She highlights how protestors are regularly thrown out of areas for exercising the right to freedom of speech and action, when private companies own a space they also control what goes on there.

Large multi-nationals are allowed to move in to areas where previously smaller independent retailers resided, often forcing local business to go under. A recent example of this being events square in Falmouth which now has a multinational Pizza restaurant. As the owner from 'Sheltons' an independent Falmouth café explained, making a loss for the large chains is not a problem, other more profitable outlets in other towns will keep them afloat, something that the small independents are not able to do. A reason as to why I included the independent cafes and coffee shops in 'Stitched Up'. As my business is one of these 'small independents' it is something that I need to be aware of and this loss of freedom is something that we all need to be aware of whether through the blanding of our high streets that leads to a loss of culture or the continued erosion of our civil liberties.

## **Role of Art**

'Wardrobe Surgery' enables a space for dialogue and human connectivity, the 'Community Workshops' bring people together who have never met before who interact, work together, form relationships yet at the same time create their own work and feel empowered. They give people a real space in their otherwise busy lives within which to be creative, a space that is not dictated to by commerce or profit.

## As we learn from Bourriaud

“these days, communications are plunging human contacts into monitored areas that divide the social bond up into (quite) different products. Artistic activity, for its part, strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another”.<sup>12</sup> (18)

Claire Bishop also discusses this creation of non-commercial spaces with regards to collaboration, participatory practice and relational aesthetics

“For these and other supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes – or at least de-alienates – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”<sup>13</sup>

I am conscious that in the future the ‘art’ element of my practice may be challenged. If we consider the work of artist Raivo Puusemp, (elected as town mayor and helped improve Rosendale Village, but did not tell his voters that he was an artist and that his term in office was an art project).

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<sup>12</sup> Bourriaud, N. 2002 “ Relational Aesthetics” Les Presses du reel: Pg. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop, C. 2006 (Artforum: February) “The Social Turn: Collaboration And Its Discontents”

He now works as a marketer of ski resorts and travel tours, he tells us “that he hardly ever thinks of art anymore but that the Rosendale project was significant for every-thing he did subsequently”<sup>14</sup>

This may become true of my own practice, however at present I feel strongly that art will continue to have a central role to play in what I do. An effect of returning to installation and performance for the MA show as opposed to settling with a more business orientated approach, (that would have also fitted my work to some extent), has been to remind me that it is working within the realm of ‘artist’ that instils within me a sense of excitement and freedom. That as an artist I have the licence to do whatever I want. It also feels as if I am taking back some control, as ‘Wardrobe Surgery’ and the ‘Community Workshops’ are very much a process whereby I am working to others rules.

It is the role of art to challenge and provide non-commercial alternatives to our western society, that is in many cases dictated to by profit, consumerism, advertising and multi-national globalization. I admire the work and rationale of John Jordan, an ‘art activist’ who is part of the ‘Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination’.

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<sup>14</sup> Kaprow, A. 1993. “The Blurring of Art and Life” University of California Press: Pg. 210

This group describes itself as “a network of socially engaged artists and activists whose work falls in between resistance and creativity, culture and politics, art and life”; they are people who believe

“that playful forms of cultural intervention in everyday life and the development of convivial spaces that enable participants to cultivate full confidence in their own creative capacity are fundamental tools for social change”<sup>15</sup>

This is how I would like to see my practice developing in the future so that it continues to challenge and question. This is why I feel it is so important to remind myself that my work sits within the art realm as well as the business world. My company ‘*Re-dress*’ has been set up and is a fully functional business but I also see my work challenging people in terms of offering alternatives to the way that they think and the way that they behave. I am excited by the prospect that this business will, in turn, help to fund further creativity and challenges in the future.

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<sup>15</sup> Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination [online] (2005)

Available from: <http://www.labofii.net/home>

[cited 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007]

## Conclusion

As I have explained over the last two years I have continuously tried to find a way of immersing my audience in an experience, of wanting to recreate the moment where everything else ceases to exist and the participant temporarily experiences extreme happiness and a sense of freedom through creativity, those same feelings that I experienced when originally painting.

I now believe I have managed to achieve a platform for my audience to discover these feelings through their own creativity.

Initially I tried to immerse my viewers in my paintings by creating installations where I changed the environment, however I now realise that I have done this through clothing. That I have immersed my audience in my 'paintings' by wrapping them in the 'canvas' of new unique garments, clothes that are now cherished and special, that are made with the same decisions and emotions as paintings but now envelop them providing them with a new 'environment' to take with them wherever they go instead of sitting passively on a wall.

I walk around in my own 'paintings' and now there are others who do the same, some of which are now not painted by me but by the people that are wearing them. Who, more importantly, are now thinking differently about the state of the world around them, feeling that they can start to make a difference and also inspiring and encouraging others that they meet and talk to, to start to do the same.

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