

Carla Binotto and Carla van Lunn

Silk Purse, Sows Ear: transforming second-hand clothing into luxury fashion through craft practice

There is more apparel being created than ever before in history. The unsustainable production of materials and the clothing and textile waste that contributes annually to landfill, an estimated 500 000 tonnes of clothing per year in the UK (Gray, 2012) are significant issues inspiring the practice of Australian fashion designers, Carla van Lunn and Carla Binotto. While the contemporary fashion industry is built upon a production and consumption model that is younger than the industrial revolution, the traditions of costume, craft, and bodily adornment are ancient practices. Binotto and van Lunn believe that the potential for sustainable fashion practice lies outside the current industrial manufacturing model. This case study will discuss their fashion label, Maison Briz Vegas, and examine how recycling and traditional craft practices can be used to address the problem of clothing waste and offer an alternative idea of value in fashion and materials, addressing the indicative conference theme, *Craft as Sustainability Activism in Practice*.

“Maison Briz Vegas”, a play on the notion of French luxury and the designers’ new world and sub-tropical home town, Brisbane, is an experimental and craft-based fashion label that uses second-hand cotton T-shirts and wool sweaters as primary materials to create designer fashion. The first collection, titled “The Wasteland”, was conceived and created in Paris in 2011, where designer Carla van Lunn had been living and working for several years. The collection was inspired by the precariousness of the global economy and concerns about climate change. The mountains of discarded clothing found at flea markets provided a textile resource from which van Lunn created a recycled hand-crafted fashion collection with an activist message and was shown to buyers and press during Paris Fashion Week. The label has since become a collaboration with fellow Australian designer Carla Binotto.

The craft processes employed in Maison Briz Vegas’ up-cycled fashion collections include original hand block-printing, hand embroidery, quilting and patchwork. Taking an artisanal and slow approach, the designers work to create a hand touched imperfect style in a fashion market flooded with digital printing and fast mass-produced garments. The recycling extends to garment fastenings and embellishments, with discarded jar lids and bottle tops being used as buttons and within embroidery. This process transforms the material and aesthetic value of cheap and generic second-hand clothing and household waste.

Maison Briz Vegas demonstrates the potential for craft and design to be an interface for environmental activism within the world of fashion. Presenting garments that are both high-design and thoughtfully recycled in a significant fashion context, such as Paris Fashion Week, Maison Briz Vegas has been able to engage a high-profile luxury fashion audience which has not traditionally considered sustainable or eco practices as relevant or desirable in themselves. The designers are studying how to apply their production model on a greater scale in order to fill commercial orders and reach a wider audience whilst maintaining the element of bespoke, limited edition, and slow hand-craft within their work.

<http://maisonbrizvegas.tumblr.com/>