

Trash fashion: Nancy Judd's sustainable styles bring message of recycling to cities' runways

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By LaMont Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Courtesy of Sandrine Hahn

One of Nancy Judd's designs, "Junk Mail Fan Dress "

Nancy Judd insists she's not a folk artist, an outside artist, a fine artist or a fashion designer.

Yet, the clothing she creates from recycled materials often seems to combine elements of each.

Ms. Judd's "Recycle Runway" project includes a collection of dresses made of throw-aways ranging from broken glass to junk mail, and she displays in airports across the country as part of a program she conceived to educate people about the importance of recycling and sustainable living.

She recently brought her message to Pittsburgh, staging interactive presentations with 250 children at four Boys & Girls Clubs. A selection of her sartorially sustainable styles will remain on display at Pittsburgh International Airport through the end of the year.

After that, it moves to Atlanta's Hartsfield, the busiest airport in the world.

"I like being in the airports because nobody asks me to define myself," said Ms. Judd, 39.

Although she isn't easily pigeonholed as an artist, you can file her creations under "couture with a conscience."

It all began during Ms. Judd's childhood in Portland, Ore., where bike riding and bottle recycling were the norm. The daughter of an art college director, she also learned at a very young age how to sew, although she never received formal training in fashion or design.

Recycling and fashion came together for her when she took a break from studying sociology and art as an undergraduate at Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., to attend the Art Institute of Southern California for a year. One day in 1989 while she was at the Laguna Beach school, a can-filled garbage receptacle near a soda vending machine caught her eye.

She got permission to place a recycling bin nearby. Then she began thinking about how the cans should be disposed of, which led to creating an independent study on recycling when she returned to Claremont.

For the past 15 years, Ms. Judd has worked as an administrator in recycling for the city of Santa Fe, N.M. Because the community is arts-oriented, she thought a weekend-long recycled art market might be fun. So she planned one in 2000, kicking it off with a "trash fashion" contest in which the public could participate.

"Recycle Runway" was born.

And it has grown. As executive director of the New Mexico Recycling Coalition, she thought the fashion show would be hip entertainment at the group's annual conference.

It was a big hit, she said, and representatives of the National Recycling Coalition who saw it asked her to do it on a national scale.

Related groups began to commission her to design apparel from recyclables for their events, and she's participated in 30 shows across the nation in the past eight years.

The movement took on such a life of its own that she decided last year to make it her main career -- with a few changes.

"I really wanted to get back to what, for me, was the heart of what it was all about -- public education on recycling and environmental issues," she said. "I felt there was not much of an impact from past events. It was sort of like preaching to the choir."

Ms. Judd wanted a different audience, one that was much larger and not environmentally savvy. Then, one day when she was in O'Hare Airport in Chicago, she had a "eureka!" moment -- airports have legions of people every day.

So she devised a program and began identifying the 35 busiest U.S. airports to schedule displays. And when she visits an airport to set up the display, she visits groups of children to educate them about the importance of recycling.

Although Pittsburgh can't claim one of the nation's busiest airports, she was mindful that the National Recycling Coalition had planned a conference here next month.

The exhibit features a bulk mail fan skirt and a rusty nail dress in display cases in concourses C and D in the airside terminal.

"They're really charming pieces," said JoAnn Jenny, the airport's director of communications. "They are really attractive and very pleasing, and I see people stopping and looking at them. I'm really delighted that she approached us about it. It's very timely, and I think it's an important issue to increase awareness of."

Ms. Judd's workshop was well received by more than 70 kids ages 5 to 13 at the Duquesne-West Mifflin Boys & Girls Club, said Pat Bluett, the club's assistant executive director.

"She was fantastic," said Ms. Bluett. "The kids couldn't believe it. They were interested in how she did it and what made her decide to do it. She kept their interest by involving them. It was unbelievable to see what she could do with things we just normally throw away."

As she meets with groups of youngsters, she collects scraps of used office paper on which they have written a specific commitment about how they can help preserve the environment by recycling. She plans to turn the scraps into a huge "Scarlett O'Hara" dress like that worn by the "Gone With the Wind" protagonist by the start of the Atlanta exhibit.

When "Recycle Runway" is in the international concourse at Atlanta's airport from July 9, 2009, through June 2010, 35,000 people a day in that concourse will have a chance to see it.

That makes Ms. Judd a happy woman.

But she has another recycle-related dream she'd like to realize.

"I would love to have one of my dresses on the red carpet."

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