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— Kathryn Towers



Kathryn Towers and Holly Stalder's seaplane enterprise has put Portland on the map as a dark-horse fashion haven.

Jennifer Brinkman

Fashion, refashioned

BY APRIL STREETER

It's a long way from the white-walled, light-filled interior of the seaplane clothing boutique on Portland's swanky Northwest 23rd Avenue to the by-the-pound resale bins at Goodwill Industries on the edge of town.

At seaplane, one-of-a-kind gossamer fashions and trendy accessories are individually displayed for maximum visual effect, and owners Holly Stalder and Kathryn Towers are constantly rearranging the wares.

At Goodwill on Southeast Ochoco Street, patrons must rummage through rows of blue

RECYCLED MARKETS

seaplane

bins where a cloying smell of antiseptic prevails and a sign warns that sharp objects could be hidden in deeply buried items.

But there's a solid chord connecting tiny seaplane and Goodwill, one of the nation's largest recycling operations.

Stalder, 31, and Towers, 28, formed the design aesthetic for their fashions on the reuse of existing objects and fabrics, and said one of their



biggest sources for both inspiration and raw materials is the Goodwill bins.

“The bins happen to be one of the great things about Portland,” said Towers. “It’s pretty dirty there but you can really find some treasures. And when you are poor artists, you use what you find.”

At first peek into seaplane’s storefront there are few clues that recycling and reuse are part of the style of Stalder, Towers, and many of the other artists that make up their design collective — there’s not a pounded bottle top or piece of tire rubber in sight.

Instead, a short gauzy yellow slip dress with reclaimed beads decorating the décolletage hangs above a display of dangly earrings fashioned from little bars of wood. In fact, Towers readily admits that at seaplane they don’t require the use of recycled materials as criteria for whether to carry a specific designer’s clothes or jewelry.

What they do require is that the frocks or accessories are locally or handmade by serious independent designers.

“I think most things in here do have something recycled on them, but not everything,” Towers said, and Stalder immediately added, “It’s more the ideas — independent, local and never mass-produced. It has to have some sort of integrity; it can’t totally fail at all those levels.”

What Stalder and Towers are trying to do is raise a reuse aesthetic to the realm of art. Ever larger, packed fashion events and the steady stream of hipsters to their store attest that Stalder and Towers have succeeded thus far.

The concept of local designers offering local goods isn’t new, said Seattle’s Sustainable Style Foundation co-founder Rebecca Luke.

“There was a similar design store in Seattle 20 years ago,” Luke said. “What’s really exciting though is that we in the Northwest were a fashion central for the ‘casual’ look 20 years ago. Now the concept of personal individual style is coming to the fore. seaplane is both unique and offers that individualism.”

Stalder and Towers met when they both waited tables at the Pied Cow, a Southeast Portland coffee house. Art- and design-school graduates, they clicked on a number of levels, and started designing bags and bracelets together.

Eventually, they began to work at a vintage store just up the street from the Pied Cow called Princess Kitty Boutique. It wasn’t long before Stalder and Towers had taken over Princess Kitty and rechristened it seaplane.

In the early days, Towers said seaplane featured a good amount of vintage clothing. But she and Stalder were also busy daily at their sewing machines, remaking bits and pieces of clothing and other materials they picked up at the bins into wearable art.

One of Stalder’s early designs was a skirt f

ashioned entirely of old photos and clear plastic.

An early Towers dress shows the bones of an old slip but is layered with row upon row of recycled chiffon patches.

“We’re both into taking clothes and jewelry that are already out in the world, and renewing it. We like raw-edged stuff,” Towers said.

Of course, even if seaplane and competitor fashion-as-art boutiques in the area did nothing but remake old stuff into great couture all year long, it would cull only a miniscule fraction of the clothing waste stream. But efforts like Stalder’s and Tower’s can keep the reuse concept cool, even if some of their patrons have no idea that seaplane’s fashions may actually be “refashioned.”

“I sometimes worry that if people really knew where some of the stuff actually comes from ...” Stalder commented, in reference to her and Towers’ habit of Goodwill bin-diving for fabric, vintage slips and old rhinestones, among other materials.

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Goodwill was one of the first charitable organizations to take one person’s trash and sell it to someone else as treasure. Begun in 1902 by Rev. Edgar Helms in Boston’s South End, the first Goodwill trained and hired workers to take wealthy neighborhoods’ cast-offs and repair them for resale.

Goodwill’s current main source of revenue is its sales both of used clothes and other household items. Portland’s Ochoco Street location is somewhat unique in its “by-the-pound” bin store, and a dedicated following has sprung up. Most mornings a crowd waits at 8 a.m. for the doors to open. Professional “pickers” elbow their way through the bin aisles, flinging selections into their carts.

Between 40-75 percent of the clothes that a clothing recycler like Goodwill receives won’t find new local owners, however. They are instead fumigated, baled and sold through a network of middlemen, often ending up in remote African villages to be sold at market stalls.

Second-hand clothing is a global, multimillion dollar market that deals in more than a billion tons of used goods annually. While it is a good way to make a brand-name T-shirt get a number of lives, it has also reduced some African nations’ capacity for producing their own textiles and clothing.

In Portland and other Northwest cities, second-hand shopping is part of a different type of cultural landscape.

Instead of purchasing mass-produced clothes that may be priced artificially low because they are made in any of a number of nations where wages are lower than in the United States, a segment of shoppers prefer to forage for goods that have a history rather than a brand.

Towers said that in 2000, when she and Stalder firsts opened seaplane, the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement among designers and artists was just beginning to gel into a trend, along with a boom in clothing resale.

“Everybody was making something then; it was trendy,” she said. “Some people just did it for a couple of weeks and disappeared.”

The fluid nature of these artists’ lives means Towers and Stalder are working hard not only at refashioning their own one-of-a-kind designs, and running the store, but also continuously reviewing artists’ work to sell at seaplane on consignment.

“It’s the worst part of this job,” Towers said. “Some people walk in and plunk stuff down and expect us to take it. It’s hard to tell them it may be handmade but it’s just not our thing.”

In that way, she said, the arrival of more competitor vintage-design-type stores has been a relief, for now there are more places for newcomers to try and sell their wares.

“Not that many people really understand what we do,” Stalder added. “They ask us if we’re worried about the competition. Well I shop, too. I’m glad there are other places out there.”

Neither one of seaplane’s two owners had any business experience when they began — in fact Stalder’s parents warned her not to open a clothing shop.

But both women seem to have developed on-the-job skills in the five years they’ve been in business, including keen salesmanship and self-promotion. Seaplane’s fashions have been featured in *Elle* and *W*, and each of their fashion show/events draws a bigger crowd.

Towers and Stalder both said they are now too busy to visit the Goodwill bins with the frequency they once did. Instead, they have a friend who’s a frequent picker who knows their taste and sometimes buys for them or trades her finds for bartering credit at the store.

Occasionally, however, the designers do make an early morning trip, to renew the spirit of reinvention that runs through their clothes.

“You kind of have to make the time,” Towers said. “For inspiration, to come up with new ideas. Sometimes I’ll even spend more to buy something great at another vintage store. Some people might be offended to think of me cutting into a great vintage item, but...I might also find beauty and be able to use something someone else couldn’t.” ●