

# FROM FORMALITY TO FLUIDITY: FRASER CROWE, “ART AS FASHION, FASHION AS ART,” TWENTY YEARS ON

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Figure 1. Image courtesy of Fraser Crowe. Photography: Caryline Boreham. Models: Daphne Simons and Awhimai Fraser. Post production: Deborah Crowe.

In 1998 an article on the fashion label Fraser Crowe appeared in *Art New Zealand*. The title of the article, "Art as Fashion, Fashion as Art: Deborah Crowe and Kim Fraser," spoke to the interchangeability, or fluidity, of the borders and boundaries between the two worlds.

The author, Mark Kirby, noted that Crowe and Fraser's collaborative designs were considered unusual because they were conceptually based and did not fit "any of the customary fixed fashion categories." The designs reflected the duo's backgrounds: Fraser has a background in fashion design, while Crowe has a background in fibre and sculpture. In 1997 Fraser Crowe won the Supreme Award at the Benson & Hedges Smokefree Fashion Design Awards (BHSFDA) for *Dual Outlook*, a garment made from a copper sheath with a woven visor. The design prophetically conceptualised the future – a future where we would need to cocoon ourselves from the onslaught of digital communication. Using Fraser Crowe as a case study, this paper explores how, 20 years on, the relationship between art and fashion is now more fluid than ever.

Twenty years ago, at the height of the international debate on the relationship between art and fashion, Mark Kirby published an article in *Art New Zealand* on Fraser Crowe, the Auckland-based fashion label of artist Deborah Crowe and fashion designer Kim Fraser. "Art as Fashion, Fashion as Art" was written shortly after Fraser Crowe had won the Avant-Garde Section and Supreme Award at the 1997 Smokefree Fashion Design Awards. The winning entry, *Dual Outlook* (Fig. 1), signalled a new creative direction for New Zealand fashion. A sculptural garment made from copper sheeting and with a woven visor, it conceptualised what life might be like in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

This paper revisits Kirby's article and the creative practice of Crowe and Fraser, who relaunched their label in 2018 after an eight-year hiatus. In the 1990s, breaking boundaries, border crossing and reducing fashion to art or craft categories was a significant part of the art-fashion debate. Two decades on, the boundaries are more fluid, the border easier to cross, and categorisation is less rigid. Today there is greater recognition within the fashion and art worlds of the potential for fashion design to be an expressive visual medium in its own right.

Kirby's article must be read within the broader context of debates on the interrelationship between art and fashion, which reached a crescendo in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Central to these discussions was the idea that fashion could be seen as closer to art when it formally looked like art. In their book *Fashion and Art*, Adam Gezcy and Vicki Karaminas describe the classic art-fashion nexus object as "sculptural": "Couture, which began in [the] 1850s with Charles Frederick Worth is a key place to start speculating on the art-fashion nexus. It is when garments start to assume the status of substantive, sculptural objects, which just happen to have the human support to activate them."<sup>2</sup>

Fashion writer Susannah Frankel used this formula to describe Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo's "Dress Becomes Body Becomes Dress" (spring-summer 1997) collection as being "just like art." Describing a white-padded dress with rear protrusions, Frankel states:

Viewed from the front, the model's slender, ankle-length dress – in pure white stretch organdy with fragile cape shoulders – looked like nothing so very out of the ordinary. From behind, however, two small kidney-shaped protuberances, positioned at the shoulder-blades, like angel's wings, suggested more radical things to come. Sure enough, as the show progressed, one model after another came out with increasingly stranger and larger swellings, all under long skinny, semi-sheer dresses – either red, white or blue, or in winsome gingham and gentle, fondant-coloured prints.

There were lopsided bustles, misshapen padded hips and collar bones, fat snakes coiling round waists and rib cages, and even – there is no other word for them – humps.<sup>3</sup>

The 'weirdness' of the collection prompted Frankel to write: "those that did understand, however, were in raptures – this was art, living sculpture, Kawakubo's most powerful collection for years."<sup>4</sup> In emphasising the formal properties of Kawakubo's design, Frankel overlooks deeper narratives on the relationship between the body and the fashion garment, and the representation of the body in the fashion image.



Figure 2. Image courtesy of Smokefree Fashion Awards.  
Photography: Lance Lawson. Model: Amanda Dorcil.

The debates of the late 1990s and early 2000s also pointed to the rise of fashion exhibitions, and the use of the runway show for performance, as indicators of a growing closeness between the fields.<sup>5</sup> Nathalie Khan coined the phrase “radical catwalk” to refer to runway shows that presented narratives and concepts, thus subverting the traditional trade show function of the catwalk as a viewing platform for buyers.<sup>6</sup> Ginger Gregg Duggan extended Khan’s analysis to develop a typology categorising the runway show into five areas of performance: the “spectacle;” the “substance” show; the “scientific”-orientated performance; the show in which “structure” is foregrounded; and the “statement” event.<sup>7</sup>

Fiona Anderson’s seminal essay “Museums as Fashion Media” (2000) explored the art–fashion debate through the rise of fashion exhibitions in museums and galleries. These exhibitions had attracted criticism for privileging entertainment over education. Anderson argued that the rise of fashion exhibitions could be traced to changes in museum funding in the 1980s and 1990s which required cultural institutions to develop new marketing strategies and public programmes to bring in a more diverse audience. She surmised that fashion exhibitions can fulfil the dual role of bringing in new audiences and being educative, especially when fashion is framed and contextualised within audiences’ own experiences of it.<sup>8</sup>

Formally and conceptually, *Dual Outlook* fulfilled the criteria for exploring the art–fashion nexus, enabling the debate to reach the pages of *Art New Zealand*. Introducing Fraser Crowe, Kirby stated:

Their success is unusual because their designs are conceptually based and, as such, do not fit within any of the customary fixed fashion categories. They are clearly unsuited to the usual forms of commercial mainstreaming of fashion design, and are almost too utilitarian to be considered Wearable Art. This positioning between the useful and the expressive represents a philosophical attitude that argues for dress as an expressive visual media in its own right, in addition to its usual function as a social and personal signifier.<sup>9</sup>

The garment was designed to a brief to “imagine what life would be like in the year 2005.”<sup>10</sup> Fraser Crowe prophetically imagined a world in which we would be struggling to juggle new technologies. At the time, both designers were working at MIT (Manukau Institute of Technology) and felt pressured to check the answerphone and intranet before getting to lectures:

We anticipated that by the year 2005, the complexity of advancements and demands on our time would be phenomenal. Our ‘take’ was from the viewpoint, or outlook, whereby technology was playing a dual role; that of implying simplicity and apparently creating ease; yet simultaneously creating complexity. This inspired our notion to create a holistic garment form that provided a sculptural ‘safe space’ away from the demanding needs of technology.<sup>11</sup>

*Dual Outlook* is simultaneously a cocoon to shield the wearer from external threats and a space or perspective from which to observe rapid changes in technology and their impact on our lives.<sup>12</sup> The garment can also be viewed as an early example of upcycling – a process that gives value to old or used products – as opposed to recycling, which often reduces the value of a product.<sup>13</sup> The skirt of the garment is made from a polyester fabric coated with copper; used as electrical shielding tape in the computer industry, while the visor draws on Crowe’s skills as an art weaver and is handmade from unusual items including fine elastic and copper wire. Fraser, of Ngati Hako descent, and Crowe, of Scottish descent, describe *Dual Outlook* as reflecting their Celtic/Māori heritages.<sup>14</sup>

Then, as now, Fraser Crowe dismissed categorisation. In 1998 they stated:

... we feel that our work is as valuable as any other art form. We are very cautious as to how we argue for it in terms of the clichéd art-versus-craft debate – we see ourselves more as visual artists, than fine, applied or craft artists. In a sense we don’t give a hoot how we are categorised, we have no control over this anyway, and tend to consider such pigeonholing as hopelessly redundant.<sup>15</sup>

For Fraser Crowe, it is the ideas embedded in their work, and the potential of fashion to comment on the contemporary moment, that is important. *Dual Outlook* not only conceptualised the future, but it addressed broader themes of identity and the relationship between the wearer, the garment and the space they occupy. This potential to use fashion to comment on the contemporary moment versus yet the devaluing of the conceptual vision of fashion design, due to its location within popular culture, is a tension British designer Vivienne Westwood has struggled with. In her book *Vivienne Westwood: An Unfashionable Life* (1999), Jane Mulvagh notes Westwood's frustration with the lack of recognition of the ideas invested in her work, and how these ideas have effected social and cultural change. Westwood believed that she failed to receive early recognition for her work because fashion is perceived as popular culture.<sup>16</sup> Yet for Westwood, fashion is her chosen artistic medium: "I use fashion as an excuse to talk about things in broader cultural terms, because that's where my interests lie."<sup>17</sup>

Beyond formalities, *Dual Outlook* represented the potential for fluid collaboration between the worlds of art and fashion. Crowe studied in the Embroidered and Woven Textiles Department at the Glasgow School of Art and creates woven textile objects. Fraser is a self-taught fashion designer who started creating leather clothing in Queenstown in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s she returned to Auckland and launched her label KimSkins. The pair met when they shared an office at MIT.<sup>18</sup> *Dual Outlook* marked the beginning of Fraser Crowe, a creative partnership making high-fashion womenswear which ran from 1997 to 2000. Fraser Crowe was sold in WORLD, Plume in Dunedin and also in Sydney, and is now represented in public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa The Museum of New Zealand and the Dowse Art Museum.<sup>19</sup> In 2018 the pair relaunched their label as an online brand.

Kirby's article provided a national angle on the international artworld debate on "art as fashion, fashion as art." Within the New Zealand fashion world, *Dual Outlook* played a seminal role in changing perceptions of what fashion could be and look like. Nationally, Fraser Crowe's win signalled the social, political and economic changes occurring in New Zealand fashion.

The Benson & Hedges/Smokefree Fashion Design Awards (1964-1998) were New Zealand's premiere fashion event, televised nationally; they were a launchpad for up-and-coming designers. Until 1995 the awards were underwritten by tobacco sponsorship. In 1996 the Health Sponsorship Council entered into an agreement with event organiser Maysie Bestall-Cohen Promotions to ensure the continuation of the event until another sponsor was found. The awards folded in 1998 due to an inability to secure ongoing sponsorship.

Under the umbrella of Benson & Hedges, the awards deferred to French discourses of fashion as a fine art; this approach replicated the social and cultural tastes of Bestall-Cohen, who took over the running of the awards in 1982.<sup>20</sup> Over time, Bestall-Cohen was forced to make the awards relevant to New Zealand's image – an image perceived to be more in tune with the often elusive concept of 'No. 8 wire' inventiveness and also with youth. There was also a strong desire to see the awards acknowledge our location in the Pacific. In 1993 the Avant Garde Section was launched in response to the creative success of the New Zealand Wearable Art Awards – which had a stronger sense of national identity. In 1995 an Oceania Section was launched, in response to the rise of Style Pasifika.

The Health Sponsorship Council (HSC) recognised that the New Zealand fashion industry was changing. The demise of tobacco sponsorship collided with trade liberalisation, which flooded the market with cheap apparel imports, forcing designers to innovate in order to survive. Creative agency Colenso was engaged to assist with the development of a new vision.

Focus groups were held with New Zealand women to discuss their perceptions of New Zealand fashion, and the emotive connections they held with Benson & Hedges. Participants associated Benson & Hedges with perceptions that included: "moneyed," "good taste, leaning towards the classical and prestigious," "Narcissism," "Exclusivity and Privileged" – ideas linked with European high style and conspicuous consumption.<sup>21</sup> They also thought that the New Zealand fashion scene was behind the times and were excited by the influence of urban Pacifica themes emerging in the work of young designers, and what they saw as the "confluence of 'designer' and 'street' fashions."<sup>22</sup>





Figure 3. Image Deborah Crowe and Kim Fraser's 1997 award-winning garment and the award's new symbol, a pounamu pinhead. Photograph: courtesy of Natalie Smith.

Pacific Island fashion activism was driven by Rosanna Raymond who in 1993 started the first Pasifika festival, lobbying for a change in the Pacific Island urban look.<sup>23</sup> Some focus group participants felt the change of sponsorship was an opportunity to harness what was happening at grassroots level in New Zealand fashion. They also felt that a change in sponsor was a chance to foster an image more in tune with New Zealand culture.<sup>24</sup>

"Taking the Ash out of Fashion" became the HSC motto, implying an industry that had burnt itself out and was in need of rejuvenation.<sup>25</sup> An advertisement featuring a model wearing *Dual Outlook* lying on concrete, surrounded by hazard tape and accompanied by the text "Dressed to Kill" implied the changing direction of New Zealand fashion (Fig. 2). In this moment, *Dual Outlook* came to represent not only the idea that fashion could be art, but the idea that New Zealand fashion moved fluidly between the two worlds. The piece was described by Smokefree as having a "strong art beat" and by judge Konstantina Moutos as "international" in standard.<sup>26</sup>

Last year I interviewed Crowe and Fraser, revisiting key themes from the Kirby interview. *Dual Outlook* remains central to their design philosophy, premised as it was in what the future would be like; it represents their position that it is the "job of the artist to question what is going on around us."<sup>27</sup> In Kirby's interview, they referred to *Dual Outlook* as being "emblematic of [their] concerns as designers and artists." These same concerns prevail in their practice today.<sup>28</sup>

In the intervening years, we have seen the rise of McFashion. As journalist Michele Lee argues, "In our 'I want it now' world, fashion has begun to resemble fast food: fast, disposable, easy, unthreatening, entertaining, and largely homogenous." Fashion brands like Gap are as ubiquitous as McDonalds.<sup>29</sup> In this climate, Fraser Crowe believe it is not only the designer who is critiquing fashion, but also the consumer who is seeking out responsible, lasting design imbued with a sustainable message, as well as designs that allow them some agency. Crowe recalled one woman who purchased a Fraser Crowe dress with a tie. This consumer took the tie attached to the dress and pulled it between her legs to create pantaloons, thus re-writing the idea that as consumers we purchase a look dictated to us by the fashion industry or social media influencer. In creating garments with multiple uses, Fraser Crowe state that they are giving "power, agency, authorship and curatorship to the wearer." "We don't dictate a look; the look comes from the wearer. The body builds a relationship."<sup>30</sup>

Growing options for fashion education in New Zealand have also helped change the image of fashion. Fraser, who now teaches at Auckland University of Technology, where she researches sustainable fashion, notes that today's students are more interested in aesthetics and sustainability. The development of community workshops to encourage the sharing of sewing skills is further empowering consumers to invest in fashion through mending and repairing. "Embellishing the Flaw," a recent workshop run by the duo, sought to pass on skills to a new generation.<sup>31</sup> Westwood's statement, "Buy Less. Choose Well. Make it Last,"<sup>32</sup> has become somewhat of a company mantra. Surface design, or elements in fashion which have a handcrafted element, are viewed as promoting sustainability and encouraging a "care of use" and "beauty in use" ethic and fostering an "emotional" relationship with the garment, resulting in a longer life span.<sup>33</sup> For Fraser Crowe, their hope is that their garments will become cherished heirloom items passed down from mother to daughter:

A publicity photograph printed with the text "Fraser Crowe 1998//2008," created for the re-launch of the brand, marks the shifts which have occurred in the art-fashion debate over the past 20 years (Fig. 3). On the left, a model stands gesturing upward, her face obscured by the sculptural solid-rock-like formation of *Featherweight Kimono* (2018), created from the "#lesslandfill" textile collection, printed on 100 percent silk satin georgette. Printed with references to the natural world, the sculptural styling of "#lesslandfill" belies its lightness and alludes to the earlier debates which had privileged formal looks over the recognition that, to paraphrase Westwood, "fashion is the medium of choice for some visual artists and a platform to effect change." To the right, a model wears an earlier iteration of Fraser Crowe, a woven bustier from 1998 with an ironically titled *It's All Academic* top from 2018 – perhaps a reference to the early academicising of fashion as art. The woven bustier provides a link between the past and the present; "#lesslandfill," like the bustier, is a weaving – a weaving of images.

Although the borders and boundaries have shifted, this publicity image states that the creative drivers that were at the core of Fraser Crowe's early practice remain the same. The duo continue to use fashion to express ideas on social issues, sustainability and the body's relationship with textiles.

The "#lesslandfill" textile series weaves together images of everyday urban detritus with Auckland's verdant natural landscape. This weaving of imagery draws attention to the layers of rubbish we find in the natural environment, as well as global concerns about the sustainability of textiles and a reminder that items discarded in household rubbish eventually end up in landfill.<sup>34</sup>

The wearer of this Fraser Crowe garment distances themselves to some extent from the urban jungle and consumerism, and cocoons themselves in a garment that drapes and occupies space in interesting ways, and which is ethically and sustainably made. Like the wearer of *Dual Outlook*, the body in this space is both cocooned by it and able to look out from it. *Featherweight Kimono* and the "#lesslandfill" series represent both deference to *Dual Outlook*, but also an evolution – a reminder of how far the art–fashion debate has come. Using Fraser Crowe as a case study, we can map how the art–fashion debate has unfolded, and the role that socially engaged practitioners have played in bringing these two worlds closer together.

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- 10 Kim Fraser and Deborah Crowe, "A Retrospective Response: Then and Now from a Collaborative Team," *Context: dress/fashion/textiles*, 30 (winter 2015), 15-29.
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- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Thilak Vadicherla, D Saravanan, M Muthu Ram and K Suganya, "Fashion Renovation via Upcycling," in *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability: Recycled and Upcycled Textiles and Fashion*, ed. Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 4.
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- 18 Katherine Findlay, "Fraser Crowe," *New Zealand Fashion Museum*, 2018/2019, <http://nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/fraser-crowe/>.
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