

ORDINARY

Gràinne O'Connell

All these old things have a moral value

Charles Baudelaire



Figure 1. Gràinne O'Connell, *Hoisery Dress and Hot Water Bottle Bag*. Model: Lola Morten. Photograph: Gràinne O'Connell.

INTRODUCTION

Ordinary is a conceptual collection which draws its content from everyday aesthetics and found materials in my environment, and explores what we place value on and what we overlook. For me, collecting, op-shopping, re-making, is entropic work, a ritual that respects the ordinary. I have implemented this in my practice to show that from the ordinary it is possible to design and make things of beauty, purpose and value.

The word 'ordinary' originates from the Latin *ordinarius*, meaning customary or orderly; ordinary work can be understood as work that is in harmony with the natural environment. In this context, the term 'entropic' refers to a ritual or ordinary task in daily life.¹ However, in the industrialised capitalist world, entropic work is given a low status and is therefore devalued in this consumer-orientated world.

I drew on the concept of *kaitiakitanga* in my process as a means of establishing my position on sustainability and the values we assign to what is made, based on who makes it or how it is made. This decision developed subconsciously and grew from my childhood values of respect, curation and a deep loathing of waste that was instilled in me. *Kaitiakitanga* is a Māori value that translates loosely as guardianship and conservation.² In order to describe how this concept fits with my process, it must be understood that it exists beyond just sustainability; it is interwoven with spiritual, cultural and social life. It is about only taking what is needed from the environment and respecting the natural world. It also applies to our interpersonal relations as we come to understand that the environment we live in directly impacts our quality of life.

My decision to study fashion followed from my experience of the make and design process, which I saw as a beautiful skill through which I could curate my own individual world and reject the current fashion system's frivolity, destruction and growing waste. This way of thinking has become increasingly relevant as we are being forced to operate in a world of diminishing resources in which the orthodox mantras of endless growth are being questioned. Adding more stuff to the world is no longer a justifiable way of working.

In recognising this, I made the decision to work only with the materials and found objects which then informed my work. This led me to looking in op-shops, rubbish bins and anywhere possible to source discarded materials, analysing how best they can be utilised in ways that reflect the "redesign, rethink and recycle" mantra. By exploring my materials in this way, I was able to explore fashion and sustainability through unique pieces, giving them a new dimension of life when seen through a previously neglected perspective.

The fashion industry has often been guilty of capturing an ideological construct such as recycling and turning it into just another commodity, another item to consume. Where once op-shopping and trading used items were simply necessary to meet one's needs, they are now vehicles used to repackage another product. Although this commodification of recycling, known as 'upcycling,' tries to minimise waste and repurpose, it has given rise to a new market force. As a designer, I want to challenge what is perceived to be 'sustainable' practice, but that is usually only a tack-on or a marketing ploy rather than an ethically researched, robust practice and tool for change. Too often, 'sustainable' also means 'high cost,' and can end up exploiting young emerging designers who are genuine in their pursuit of environmental and structural change. Sustainability is still premised on making more. I would like to challenge the cycle based on what is 'in vogue,' and instead focus on the quality and longevity of pieces and multi-use garments. Mass production and profit at all costs is destroying our planet, and the fashion and clothing industries are major perpetrators.

I see possibilities for revaluing skills in making clothing (and its makers) and in finding innovative, yet simple and polished ways of re-purposing and ending waste, moving away from the present reality where nothing has value and everything is for sale.³ We need to take pride in having fewer clothes and knowing their provenance, not simply discarding the 'old' in a never-ending cycle – a cycle that operates off "the very nature of the commodity guarantees that the more we acquire the less satisfied we are."⁴

With these considerations in mind, my process was mindful and meticulous, appreciating both the physical and conceptual processes that contribute to fashion as an art form, establishing new values along the way. This raised some important questions. What is waste? Why is it not wearable? How can we create new meaning from old?

THE RAG-PICKER

From an historical perspective, I learned something of the role of the rag-picker or *chiffonier*. These workers made a living by rummaging through the refuse of the streets to collect material for salvage and then sell it as a way of earning a living.⁵ This entropic work, although seeming desperate, was actually respected within its own social context. Through “collating the annals of intemperance,”⁶ rag-pickers were a crucial part of the natural cycle that saw resources purposefully reused and waste minimised in towns. Each piece of urban debris embodies a cultural metanarrative based on consumption with no end in sight. Through analysing this work of the past, we can perhaps see how this strategic appreciation of trash suggests a path of recycling for the future.⁷

Working from within this ideological framework, my process developed both methodically and organically. I became the rag-picker. While I was aware of the deconstruction–reconstruction concept, this was secondary to the process I was developing. As processes, these methods were less about aesthetics and more about appreciating the great potential of fashion to redefine itself.⁸ I was also committed (born of sheer need) not to spend money to solve this design project. Exploring the concept of no waste also meant not wasting money and it forced me to truly problem-solve.

BRICOLAGE

I chose to work with what I had and make changes that fitted with my resources. My process was as important as the final pieces. It became similar to the making of a collage, or the work of the *bricoleur*. The French term *bricolage* means to tinker – a kind of DIY. It is characterised by combining unfamiliar items to create something new, and was popular in the twentieth century at times when resources were scarce. In the creative sphere, bricolage is resourceful in its approach and allows the inquirer to draw from various aspects of their life experience and piece them together.⁹ Creating a body of work reflecting different perspectives and drawing on personal philosophies, the *bricoleur* “appropriates commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble,” subverting or erasing their original meaning.¹⁰

Drawing on this concept, I worked to recombine and assemble, using elements of sculpture, drape and collage, which often led me in surprising design directions. When things didn't work, I re-stitched, reconstructed, unpicked, re-evaluated and found new perspectives. As I developed the range of pieces in my collection, I was able to style the objects as they developed, changing layouts, with necklaces worn on the side, bags as necklaces – changing the look with each outfit, or on its own, allowing the wearer to become the *bricoleur* and following the op-shop aesthetic of reinvention and reclamation.

Collating my tools, materials, themes and experiences, my inspiration remained constantly changing. It was about being intuitive with what I had and borrowing from traditional silhouettes and re-appropriating and combining elements to create puzzling, yet workable arrangements. As I collected found items, I let the materials lead me, improvising, experimenting and taking risks. This process of designing with recycled and found materials became an exercise in improvisation and anti-strategy. It was serendipitous – letting the pieces lead me and working intuitively.

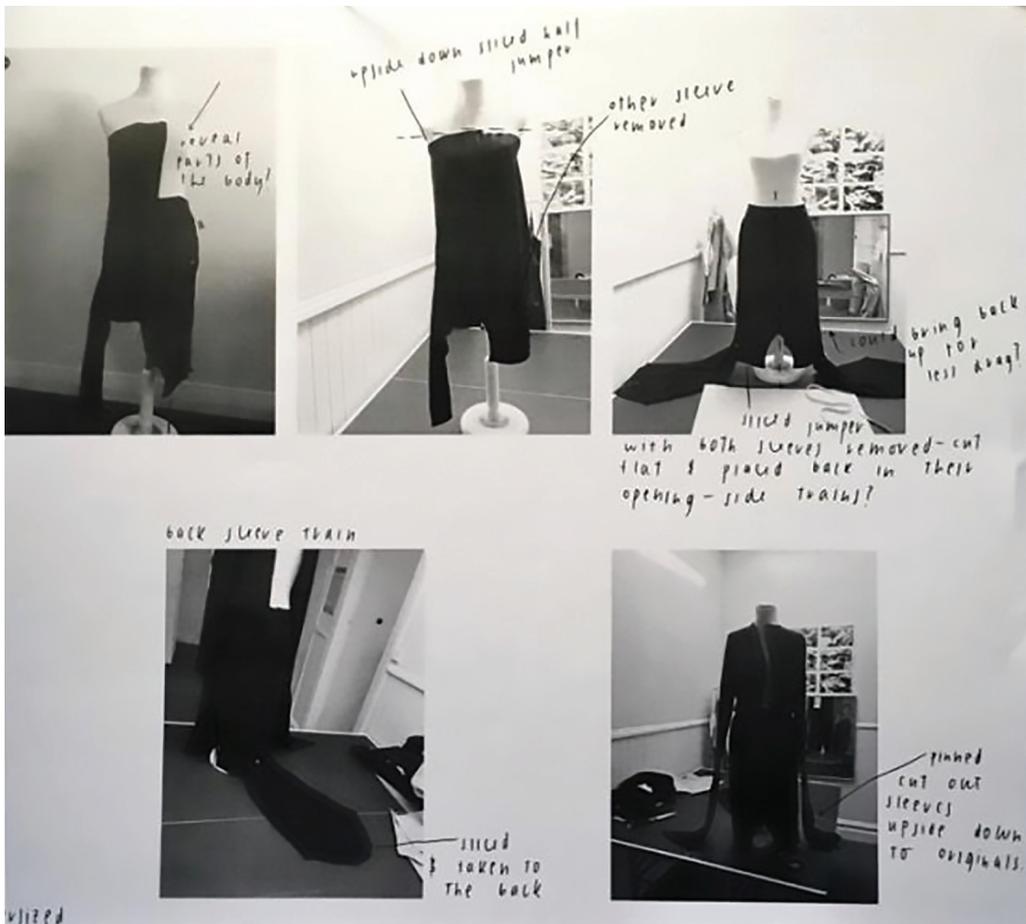


Figure 2. Gráinne O'Connell, workbook pages: 'slicing' technique.

PROCESS

My commitment not to waste materials and resources meant that all my work had only a single toile. This evolutionary approach to designing meant that I had to work thoughtfully and let go of any predetermined ideas I had about the end product. I found inspiration in Martin Margiela who, in the fashion and art world, is one of bricolage's most skilled exponents. He has made a shirt out of gloves, used broken crockery to make a waistcoat, and a sweater from army surplus socks, to name but a few of his pieces.¹¹ I was drawn to his work and his way of showing how objects can come together to create avant-garde but simultaneously wearable pieces, tricking the eye.

JUMPER MERINO KNIT DRESS

Two merino men's jumpers: St Andrews Street Opshop, \$4 each;
hiking backpack: The Hospice Shop, \$4.



Figure 3. Gràinne O'Connell, *Curtain Dress* and *Jumper Merino Knit Dress* (back view). Photograph: Gràinne O'Connell.

The jumper dress borrowed from and re-appropriated '90s design elements to compose a visual mix. I was particularly interested in Helmut Lang's sophisticated interpretation of utilitarian wear: Utilising soft, clean detailing that was unassuming but functional in its own right, Lang was a pioneer of minimalism and deconstructivist fashion.¹²

The process of making the dress involved slicing in half and re-instating. By slicing the garment in this manner I was able to utilise it as a whole, with no added waste and without compromising the original. I began on the dress form with my unpicked whole pattern pieces, making iterations. The side slits were created by removing and re-establishing in the right sleeve, allowing for movement in the legs. Where the upside of the jumper met the top, I left the fabric to drop naturally, creating a soft curve. The hiking bag straps were detached and turned over to show the padded detailing of the underside, originally intended to support the wearer's back. Where holes were made, I darned over in the same cotton. Drawing attention to what might conventionally be deemed unfixable, or 'removing from' the materials I used, now became a design feature of the garment.

CURTAIN DRESS

Curtains: St Andrews Street Opshop, 2 for \$4.

Green rope and spray paint: Found in family shed

Side filling: Fabric waste from garments

Curtain end: \$2

Ski gloves: \$4

Inspecting the shape, stitches, faded sun marks, hem and curtain tape of the original, I visualised the curtain as a sculpture. Once halved, the ridges of the pleating became encased in a balloon shape, tapering inwards. The velvet upholstery, heavy but malleable, was once suited for keeping out the cold. Stitching the sides together, I then cut through only one layer, utilising the curtain as a whole, allowing the weight to guide its shape. The rest came somewhat serendipitously. Because of the uneven weight distribution, the front billowed down, creating folds and textures, while the back then revealed the top, but upside down.

Originally a pale blue, I decided I wanted to change the colour to match the rest of my pieces. I used fabric dye to try and achieve a deeper blue, but when this proved unsuitable, I spray-painted it black, working as the bricoleur to alter its original function. It can be worn both front and back and displaced to transform the silhouette even further. Following this aesthetic of accretion,¹³ the eyelets allow the wearer to hitch the garment up and it can be tied in any way desired. The side filling, a cushioning element, was made from remaining fabric waste and mimicked a sort of sculpture – an upholstery form.



Figure 4 and 5. Gràinne O'Connell, *Curtain Dress* transformations.
Photograph: Gràinne O'Connell.



Figure 6. Gráinne O'Connell, *Curtain Dress*.
Photograph: Gráinne O'Connell.



Figure 7. Gràinne O'Connell, workbook pages: *Hosiery Dress* (details) and *Lace Curtain Bonnet*. Model: Lola Morten. Photograph: Gràinne O'Connell.

HOISERY DRESS

Lace curtain: Found in family home

My own socks and tights

Shoelaces: 'Borrowed' from my boyfriend

Hot water bottle bag: The Salvation Army, \$3

Bag chain (dog collar): Found in family home

The process for the hosiery dress followed the same principle as the jumper dress. Slicing the tights in half and reconnecting them, the fit followed how the tights were originally worn, almost skin-tight, moulded to the body. The dress was worn with a lace curtain bonnet borrowed from a 1910 milkmaid design, a disorientating juxtaposition. As the silhouette continues, the curved lines of the sides, middle and back were sculpted and shaped as the stretched hosiery allowed. The stitched lines revealed in the lower layer when the fabric is stretched by the wearer showed the outline of a cross shape. The top section was then lined with another layer of the pantyhose to give added stability, and visually differentiate the top from the bottom. The shoelaces used to tie the top of the dress is a design element that furthers this aesthetic founded on manipulation and recreation.



Figure 8. Gràinne O'Connell, various designs for the *Ordinary* collection.
Group shot. Models, left to right: Lola Morten, Albert Aitken, Emma McRobie. Photograph: Gràinne O'Connell.

CONCLUSION

My journey through this project began with childhood memories of dressing up, op-shopping, green living, making-do and experiencing how well we lived without spending. We took pleasure in ordinary skills. My sisters and I op-shopped and swapped and loved what we wore, relishing the old as new. I wanted to explore these values and processes, believing as a designer that I can replicate regenerated fashion and make it viable through offering a real alternative to the destructive, exploitative and mass-produced meaningless clothing of today. I know that I cannot function in fashion blind to the sustainability crisis we face globally, and passionately believe that there is an alternative. While the project tested me, I trusted the journey and it led me to produce my collection on an almost-zero budget, creating unique pieces with a newfound value.

I cannot escape the contribution that textile waste makes to polluting our planet. The Western 'rag trade' exploits artisan skills and then discards what is made. Reflecting on the important place of the historical rag-picker in their community, I am saddened and appalled to know that the rag-pickers of today in India, Brazil and a myriad of Third World countries pick through the filth and flotsam created by First World consumers merely to survive.¹⁴ They have no value. The waste they sift through is created by our worship of mass production and the profit-driven mentality that continues to dominate the fashion trade, regardless of the broader social and environmental costs. The future of fashion must be different.

Gràinne O’Connell says: “Working mainly with upcycled clothing and materials, my nostalgic approach to design is honest and meticulous. Utilising content drawn from everyday aesthetics and found materials in my environment, I am interested in what we place value on and what we can overlook.”

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- 7 Lozinski-Veach, “Decompositions,” 768.
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- 11 Alison Gill, “Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes,” *Fashion Theory*, 2:1 (1998), 25-49.
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