



Decomposing Couture

N i c o l e D e x t r a s
by Leesa Hubbell

You're strolling through the Public Market on Granville Island—a tourist destination in the middle of Vancouver, British Columbia—when a young woman in a pointy bustier made of twigs and a skirt made of vines approaches to ask if you know where your clothes come from.

She wants to check your labels for fiber content, test your knowledge about global sourcing, and take your temperature on sustainable production. She's provocatively attired but very engaging and gives you the gift of a leaf as she rustles away. You've just walked into an activist intervention by environmental artist Nicole Dextras, who works outside the fashion system. Literally outside.

Made of wild rose and Japanese knotwood among other *Invasive Species* (as this wearable work was named), it is part of a series called *Weedrobes*—the latest manifestation of Dextras's life-long engagement with fashion, performance and photography. Conceived with street theater in mind, the piece was later placed on a dress form to become an "ephemeral installation" in Dextras's Canadian garden and completed its life cycle reclaimed by ivy, one of the invasive species from which it was made.

Dextras states, "The intention of the *Weedrobes* series is to engage the public on several levels: through street interventions, garden settings, and gallery exhibitions. Each new piece begins as a wearable sculpture constructed from local and renewable plant materials. It is then photographed with a model in a landscaped urban setting, emphasizing the impact of humans on the natural environment. The third stage consists of a public intervention in a shopping area where the garment wearer engages with passersby regarding issues of disposable consumer goods. The garment/sculpture is later installed in a garden or park setting and left to decompose over time."

Weedrobes are just one of many ideas growing out of a fertile mind, and Dextras is both

dextrous—and prolific—in multiple media.

From small-town Ontario, she grew up in an atmosphere of unfettered creativity, free to improvise clothing, sculpture, and theatrical productions using tissue paper and boxes cast off from her mother's retail fashion store. Working minimum wage jobs after high school, she decided that if she was going to be poor anyway, she might as well be a poor artist doing work she loved. Torn between art and theater programs, she studied painting at Emily Carr University in Vancouver but shifted to interdisciplinary performance art after realizing she needed to do more physical and sculptural work.

Post-grad, she worked in the theater world for ten years, starting with props that led to costumes and set design. Next she explored papermaking, reinventing herself as a paper caster and expert at molding, carving, and calibrating dyes for paper masks that fed the brisk market for Native American art. Wide-ranging independent study has made her a font of information about alternative approaches to process.

Dextras now considers herself a sculptor/photographer who, like Andy Goldsworthy, documents time-sensitive work made predominantly with the materials nature provides—and destroys. But she has been very mindful of making work that is nothing like Goldsworthy's in order to express her own aesthetic concerns. She is a founding member of the Art is Land Network, a Vancouver-based group working within the genre of environmental art.

"I make work with ice in winter and with foliage in summer," she explains in a short video. Driven by an ongoing urge to merge sculpture with photography, she realized—during an unusually cold Vancouver winter—that the beauty of swirling fabric and color in a dye bath could be held still by freezing it. Thus began her series of ephemeral and enigmatic *Iceshifts*, conceived to capture the multilayered aspects of the self.

Once summer came, a pile of laurel

NICOLE DEXTRAS
Invasive Species

Garment made from: wild rose, willow, English ivy, knotweed, camellia flowers, fabric, 2009. Reproduced from an archival inkjet print by the artist, 18.5" x 32".

LEFT: Lace Leaf Collar Magnolia leaves, raffia, thorns, 2009. Reproduced from an archival inkjet print by the artist, 14" x 9.5".





NICOLE DEXTRAS *Maple Flapper Jumper* Garment made from red maple tree seeds, lupines, dragon tongue leaves, smoke bush, rush and cattail leaves, 2011. Reproduced from an archival inkjet print by the artist, 18.5" x 32".

RIGHT: *Laurel Suffragette Street Intervention* Laurel leaves, hala leaves, hydrangea flowers, corn husks, caning, magnolia petals, baby's breath, tomatoes, Russian olive tree thorns, 2011.

leaves in an alley sparked an experiment to create a wearable garment out of leaves—without sewing—that has evolved into a major body of botanical activism—held together by thorns.

Weedrobes interventions in 2011 have included *Lilac Swing Coat*, a "manteau parfumé" and commentary on the manufactured need for artificial scents created by the perfume industry. *Maple Flapper Jumper* represented the enterprising 1920s immigrant, newly arrived in Canada and destined for work in the garment industry. *Laurel Suffragette*, made of hydrangea flowers, baby's breath, and laurel leaves with a lacey corn husk jabot and green tomato button, was a show-stopper on Robson Street—the main drag of Vancouver retail fashion. Laurel is on a mission to rally awareness and



NICOLE DEXTRAS *Lilac Swing Coat* Garment made from lilac flowers, ligularia leaves, rush, and cattail, 2011. Reproduced from an archival inkjet print by the artist, 18.5" x 32".

support for workers' rights in garment factories—both past and present.

Mobile Garden Dress—100% compostable—was commissioned for the 2011 International Vancouver Children's Festival. It's "a self-sustaining garden and shelter for the new urban nomad, complete with pots of edible plants and a hoop skirt which converts into a tent at night." With that as focal point of fun, Dextras held workshops for kids who created an Eco-Wardrobe clothesline installation of tiny "garments" made from flowers and greenery about to be thrown out by local florists.

Underpinning these transient works are some enduring challenges to the status quo. Dextras writes: "My current art practice is rooted in the environmental art movement. It is based on the theories of seminal artists such as Joseph Beuys's notion of 'infiltration' which integrates art and social change, as well as Robert Smithson's 'nonsite' theory, which challenged the parameters of the conventional gallery setting. The *Weedrobes* project can be positioned as a hybrid of environmental art within a socially engaged practice because of its relation to ecology, culture, and eco-feminism. Taking these sculptures to the streets is a form of reclaiming the body as a public site. In this respect, *Weedrobes* draws on works such as Jana Sterbak's *Flesh Dress*

and Beverly Semmes's sculptural garments that focus on the garment as an extension of the body."

Dextras's stunning website (nicole-dextras.com), which took a year to create, rewards the viewer with witty writing and outstanding visual documentation of her many, and far-flung, projects. Don't miss her work using felt, under "Public Installations," for the *1st Land Art Biennial* in Mongolia (2010). Her *Iceshifts* and *Ice Typography* series are a must-see.

Late to recognize her creative gifts, Dextras describes herself as the last person to realize she should be studying art. Her favorite quote: "The greatest asset to an artist is not talent, it's courage." Creatives and culture-vultures everywhere can only hope that much more will be dared by this adroit social critic—and fashion outsider.

Work by Nicole Dextras will be included in *Fashionality: Dress and Identity in Contemporary Canadian Art* curated by Julia Pine at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario (May 5-September 2, 2012).

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