



yucca indigo willow

NICOLE DEXTRAS

chronos



all images: www.nicoledextras.com

Chronos, a new character in development for my *A Dressing the Future* trilogy wears an eco-garment based on desert plants such as Yucca and Agave. These photos reflect learning to process Yucca fibres, dyeing with Indigo, setting up a loom, weaving and twining, plus using a drop spindle. Chronos was animated by Igor Santizo who engaged the public about natural fibres in the the Ocean Cement space on Granville Island during 'The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global', The Textile Society of America's 16th Biennial Symposium in Vancouver September 2018.

column 1: Igor Santizo as *Chronos* in a garment made from yucca, abaca (a species of banana), silk and dyed willow bark. He holds a sheaf of stripped yucca leaves. He is armed against the sun with expanding screens protecting the head and spine, sheathed leaf sleeves that shade and let breeze through. Bottom image, attaching the sleeves to a willow armature

column 2: a wheelbarrow of uprooted yuccas from a construction site. 25 yucca leaves yielded 40 feet of twined fibre ready for dyeing and then weaving. Indigo dyed fibres. Background is abaca fabric with a fan of processed yucca leaves. Cotton string balls and yucca cordage. Yucca leaf fibre processed and dyed compared to same fibre spun into cordage. Cordage was easier and faster to dye and rinse (15 min.) compared to the leaf (1.5 hours).

column 3: loom made from a folding clothes horse strung to make the checkerboard pattern woven with yucca fibre and abaca/silk fabric. The 3D squares were designed as ventilation for a desert traveller. The top half is woven willow bark dyed with Indigo.

My focus as an artist is to create environmental art and ephemeral installations based on the principles of a socially engaged art practice. Addressing issues of sustainability, consumerism and the fashion industry, the *Botanical Wearables* segment of my current body of work began with the *Weedrobes* series – dresses made from fresh flowers and leaves.

The concept is based on a future world where the desire for goods remains despite the lack of means to produce them. This world is not the oapocalypse but one where the slow erosion of natural resources plus the crippling effect of economic breakdowns have caused the fashion industry to collapse beneath the weight of its own greed. Here the elite, still craving status, turn to artists to fabricate garments from the rapid reclamation of the natural world.

This series began as humble desire to combine live plant materials with my personal experience with fashion, which includes growing up in a store and working in a garment factory. Beginning in 2005, each summer I experimented with techniques to create a completely compostable wearable garment. I adapted basket-weaving methods and through trial and error learned much about the local plants at my disposal.

As I mastered the technical aspects of the *Weedrobes* I began to stage street interventions with the garments such as *Laurel Suffragette* on Robson Street in 2011, in order to discuss issues of fast fashion. These were well received but ironically the garments themselves were so seductive that they also elicited a misplaced desire to consume. The series evolved into the *Little Green Dress Projekt* where I made twenty-one dresses over a period of two months on site for the Earth Art exhibition at Van Dusen Botanical in 2012. Here the decay of the garments was demonstrated to the public for the first time and the concept of accepting the passage of time was more apparent. The project raised questions about the sustainability of the fashion industry and a served as an introduction to slow fashion.

In 2011 during the Occupy movement, I began the *Urban Foragers {house of eco drifters}* series, which took on broader social issues such as self-sustainable living within a nomadic lifestyle. I created garments that converted into portable shelters while also housing one's food supply. They are inspired by my long-standing interest in portable shelters and my research into low-tech fabrication techniques that minimise the use of plastics and metals. The premise for *Urban Foragers* is that the dresses are prototypes that could be multiplied and personalised to create a highly mobile and healthy itinerant community. A video, shot in California, explores the concept of sharing food resources as each dress contributes to a communal meal and that the spaces between them allow for flexible common area sites.

In 2013 the *StoreFront*, *objects of desire* series

the culture of materials

NICOLE DEXTRAS

wearable botanicals

was developed during an art residency at the Lansdowne Shopping Centre in Richmond BC. It is a faux-retail installation consisting of ephemeral fashion items such as clothing, handbags and shoes set up as a trope for consumer culture. The line between desire and ownership is further blurred with standard marketing strategies such as branding and interior design.

As I did not have access to the interior of the store, I instigated interventions within the public spaces of the mall. The *Extra D'extras MakeOvers* performance, where I adorned the hair of shoppers with plants (as a spoof of the ubiquitous labcoat-clad department store clerk dispensing beauty samples) was a great success. I also worked with local performers to animate the displayed clothing in the mall. The *Mobile Garden Dress*, worn by Nita Bowerman made a salad from the vegetables in her skirt, which she then shared with shoppers. *Sir William the Explorer*, played by Billy Marchenski, wore a grass and leaf long coat and roamed the mall looking for plunder in exchange for magic beans.

StoreFront is an ongoing project with new pieces created every year with the aim of installing a more comprehensive exhibition in the future.

In 2015 I began a new series, *A Dressing the Future*, a trilogy of tableaux photographs portraying creative survivors set in dystopian scenarios. The first in this series, *Persephone's Reflection* depicts a roughly furnished fruit warehouse, where invasive plants are threatening to engulf the living space. The agricultural economy has collapsed due to rampant forest fires and a young woman uses her ingenuity and skills to combat the isolation and instability of her situation. In this re-telling of the ancient Greek myth, Persephone eats the pomegranate not as banishment from the living world but because it's healing properties will nourish and sustain her. Furthermore she fashions her stylish clothing from pomegranate peels, dates and fruit leather to preserve her self-esteem and dignity. She copes with her seclusion by building terrariums with figurines of herself recounting her happy childhood in the ancestral orchard.

My intent is to offer an alternative to the reductive post-apocalyptic fictions depicted in Hollywood films, which exploit the drama of natural catastrophes to manipulate our current fears about environmental degradation. Further pieces made in 2016-17 include *Desert Queens*, and *Forest Warrior* and *Chronos*.

The *Weedrobes* philosophy is based on being a free thinker, creating one's own sense of style while also raising awareness about the impact of

industry on our eco-system. Our most effective tool for change is for consumers to demand more equitable products. It may be impractical to wear clothing made with leaves but our future depends on the creation of garments made from sustainable resources.



all images: www.nicoledextras.com

The *Mobile Garden Dress* is based on a hoop skirt that supports over forty potted edible plants. A wide variety of plants are incorporated dependent on the season and the locale but usually include lettuces, cabbages, tomatoes, peppers and herbs. The *Mobile Garden Dress* seen here in a shopping mall interacting with shoppers. The skirt acts as a summer shelter, where one can camp temporarily in urban areas. Like a true nomad, her camp can be quickly transformed; her hoop skirt collapses into a lightweight framework, her organic cotton tent fabric becomes an elegant dress and all her belongings fit into her wheeled structure.



Forest Warrior is a wearable sculpture shaped as a large androgynous cloak on wheels, which holds native plants and seedlings. The ethos of this piece is a botanical conservation anti-superhero wandering the landscape protecting native plants – a champion tree-planter cape fit for the legacy of Joseph Beuys' *Seven Thousand Oaks* project. It also points to the lack of green space in modernist urban design. The sculpture can act as a stand-alone piece in an exhibition and or be animated by a performer. In a gallery opening or event setting *Forest Warrior* can engage with the public by handing out tree saplings or it can activate an outdoor guerilla style intervention by attempting to plant tree saplings into the cracks of pavement as a gesture of reclaiming the built environment. *Forest Warrior* adapts to the local environment it is exhibited in by incorporating native tree plants of the region into the cape.

The principle design element in this piece is based on a folding honeycomb cellular structure. The integral flexibility and the pragmatic compact portability of this structure will help reduce the overall carbon footprint of the piece. I have adapted paper folding and origami techniques to both the cape armature and the inner components. The armature's base is a half elliptical shape constructed out of wood with vertical ribs gathering at the neckline. It is supported by casters and it breaks down into lightweight components for travel. The cape's three-dimensional skin is fabricated out of recycled tent cloth and oilskin fabric, cut and sewn into folding and expanding diamond shaped cones. These various sized compartments hold native plants and seedlings forming a bushy, lacy silhouette primarily around the head and shoulders. This composition alludes to the lavish neck ruffs of sixteenth century male dress, which ironically grew to such outlandish proportions that they were banned in Spain under Philip IV because they were seen to diminish the manly vigor of the wearer. For this reason my focus is on a gender-neutral wearable project that explores the garment more as a sculpture than traditional clothing.

The foundation for this new piece is rooted in my *Urban Foragers {house of eco drifters}* series, which consists of three large dresses that transform into portable shelters and gardens. Their aim is to support a sustainable lifestyle for the new urban nomad by growing one's own food supply and building community through public engagement. During the production of the *Urban Foragers* series from 2011 and 2013, I developed many key concepts to my art practice such as supporting communal food resources and fabricating collapsible structures from sustainable materials. I bring all of these notions and expertise to bear in the creation of *Forest Warrior*, which also converts into a shelter by means of additional folding panels made from lightweight recycled fabric. These enclose the front of the cape and create a full elliptical tent shape.

leaves willow lichen
NICOLE DEXTRAS
forest warrior

When I initially began making garments from plant materials in 2006, I looked at historical European fashion as my point of departure in order not to reference or appropriate the designs of ancient cultures that have adorned themselves with plants throughout history. Even though my work was successful in many ways it led to a predominance of female clothing which sometimes detracted from my objective to create a link between the body and the environment. The *Forest Warrior* cape can be worn by men and women and has many associations with ritual, disguise and daring. Contemporary artists such as Nick Cave, Lucy McRae, Guerra de la Paz whose artworks often refer to the garment have greatly inspired me. My objective is to add to this collection of voices one that also presents issues of environmental conservation to the discourse.



all images: www.nicoledextras.com

above: *Forest Warrior*, worn by Hunter Long, wanders in a dystopian landscape searching for suitable soil to plant his trees — photographed at WWU Western Gallery
column, right: *Forest Warrior* is a prince among thieves: he rescues abandoned lots for trees and then distributes them to the public to plant in their gardens.
facing page, left column: The wooden structure is based on a folding diamond grid for easy assemblage, storage and travel. Pockets are fabricated from a recycled canvas tent and the tree-planting seedling belt is made from oil cloth.
middle column: Details of willow bark weaving for the vest. The inside and outside of bark gives different hues of brown. The neck ruffle is made with tree lichen, *Lobaria pulmonaria*, dried leaves and knitted Kibiso silk.
column at far right: *Forest Warrior's* cape is filled with native plants such as the Blue Spruce seedling in top photo. Others seedlings include ferns, vines, grasses and shrubs.



all images: www.nicoledextras.com