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# Nicole Dextras

## The Strength & Power of Nature’s Fragility

Words & Photography by Nicole Dextras

Nicole Dextras is a graduate of the Emily Carr University of Art in Vancouver, Canada. Her art practice is based in social interventions and environmental installation, rooting nature to our everyday urban experience. It was a privilege to talk with this eloquent and quietly provocative artist.



Can you explain to our readers the essence of your artwork, its alliance with nature and our ecosystems?

The act of wearing a garment made from leaves and flowers emphasises that we too need clean air and water to survive. As an artist, I am committed to using only natural materials to create these wearable sculptures because it underlines our biological ties to the ecosystem of this planet. My hope is that by reconnecting with our fundamental place in nature’s cycles we will find the humility, empathy and the will needed to change our destructive environmental habits.

Art and culture have long been our tools for raising consciousness and putting forward progressive ideas and I view my artwork as a small cog in this great wheel of change. Some may argue that we are at a crisis point and slow approaches like this are not effective but I maintain that much social change gains momentum through grassroots movements.

We are in a great moment of transition from our narcissistic and profit-driven values to one that acknowledges that as living, breathing entities we need our home – our ecosystem – to function well for us to endure as a species. We are not lacking in solutions, we are lacking in will to let go of outmoded mindsets that extol progress at all costs.

**We hear these terms bandied around: consumerism; throw away; and environmental impact. What do they mean to you personally?**

Consumerism is in many ways the largest problem we face environmentally because it is at the root of our values and our economy. For instance, even though we have been presented with clear facts regarding the environmental impacts of unregulated profit-driven industry we still have people who want to turn back the clock to make “America Great Again”. It seems to defy logic but it demonstrates the level of fear inherent in trying to change such an entrenched paradigm.

*“...my aim is to disrupt  
the constant desire  
to consume by  
making objects that  
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Yucca Prom Dress 2005



Yucca Prom Dress detail 2005



Mobile Garden Dress 2011

What we need is more sustainable consumerism, which relies less on large corporate monopolies and more on diverse and local markets. We have a long bumpy road ahead of us but every step forward counts. Personally, I try to only purchase things that are built to last and that I absolutely love because that insures that I will take care of them.

#### What is the importance of the messages conveyed in your work in reference to the cosmetic and fashion industry?

My artwork refers to the cycles of rejuvenation and decay found in nature and stands as a counterpoint to the disposable ethos of fast fashion. Western culture's fascination with the preservation of youth has helped establish the trillion dollar industries of fashion and cosmetics, which are some of the worst polluters and the lowest in human and animal rights. By imitating luxury goods with ephemeral materials my aim is to disrupt the constant desire to consume by making objects that one cannot truly possess.

My personal interest in the fashion industry stems from growing up in my mother's ladies clothing store where I learned how to discern quality manufacturing and the importance of shopping local. In my teens, I witnessed the poor working conditions in garment factories and the effects of chemicals used in treating fabrics, while working in a non-union sweatshop. Years later, as a costume designer, I was fascinated by the notion of psychological transference into clothing and this informed much of my early artworks.

#### Can you tell us about your *Weedrobes* project, how it involved appreciating nature and women within an urban environment and why it is important for you to engage within the public arena?

The *Weedrobes* series began in 2005 as an experiment in making garments from leaves and flowers I foraged in my neighbourhood. I intentionally placed my garments in urban landscapes because their story was about reclaiming nature in contemporary life. This developed into a body of work with many offshoots such as the *StoreFront*, objects of desire project, which places the *Weedrobes* in a faux retail installation. It also includes the wearable shelters and self-sustaining food sources found in the *Urban Foragers* series and the outdoor installation of the *Little Green Dress Projekt*, where botanical garments were left to decay over two months.

Being able to work outdoors and engage with people directly while I created was very liberating for me. I found that my encounters with the public were much more genuine than those in the conventional gallery system and so I began to develop each piece as a character with a background story. My most recent piece is *Forest Warrior*, a botanical conservation anti superhero wandering the landscape protecting native plants. He ambles through the city attempting to plant tree saplings into the cracks of pavement as a gesture of reclaiming the built environment while also gifting small trees to people who must commit to taking care of them.





Lace Leaf Collar 2009  
Thorn detail 2011

Red Tomato Button 2011  
Lace Leaf Collar detail 2009



Pink Medusa 2014



Consume 2010

Garments are vital to your artwork; can you tell our readers a little bit more about how you construct them?

It took many years of research and testing before I was able to create a garment that could withstand the weight of the plant material and be completely organic. I have no formal training in textiles or fashion, but my 10 years of working as a freelance costume designer laid the groundwork for my crash course in innovative garment construction. The *Weedrobes* challenge was to work without a glue gun.

My first successful wearable piece came from my research into pannier dresses, where I discovered that supple branches were once used before the advent of whaleboning. This led me to investigate basket-weaving materials and techniques to eventually fabricate a sturdy armature. I also adopted methods used by early environmental artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, whose use of thorns to pin leaves together suited my fashion aesthetic.

**In Australia, we always seem to have access to living botanical species, even during our winters. Living in Canada, how do you continue to create through your harsh winters?**

My art practice in the winter months consists of working with ice as a material to create text-based sculptures or freezing garments into life-size blocks. Although I love the rich ephemeral qualities of ice, ironically I have not continued with this work for a few years because as the climate warms up, even in the far north, it is more difficult to execute.

***“We are not lacking in solutions, we are lacking in will to let go of outmoded mindsets...”***

**Tell us about *Persephone* and *Waiting for Spring* and the inspiration behind it.**

*Persephone's Reflection* is set in a dystopian future where climate change has exacerbated forest fires and a young woman named Persephone uses her ingenuity to survive in an abandoned pomegranate orchard. In this projected future scenario, fast fashion has imploded on itself and textile artists have moved to the forefront with new alternative organic materials. Despite the economic collapse, the advances made in sustainable textiles have influenced a generation, who, as ecological survivors, are fully able to apply their DIY creative problem-solving toward a viable subsistence. Unlike the fully armed sexy-vixen garb predicted in Hollywood post-apocalyptic films, my heroine clads herself in a jacket made from pomegranate peels, a skirt woven with dates, boots fashioned from fruit leather and a protective respirator mask filled with healing herbs.

We have just seen the first part of the trilogy; can you let your audience know what is to come?

The second instalment of the trilogy will depict Chronos, a Father Time figure, living in an environment that has eroded into a desert. He has adapted to his harsh climate by creating a water-harvesting structure based on catching condensation in the atmosphere. He lives in a sand-filled house tinkering with time-based analogue instruments and wears a jacket woven from willow bark, which I grow and harvest myself. The third character will revolve around flooding and will feature plants such as rice and wheat grass in her survival.

Nicole Dextras has exhibited her work in Canada, the USA and in Asia. Recent solo exhibitions include the Method Gallery in Seattle in 2017, the Truth and Beauty Gallery in Vancouver in 2016 and Lycoming Gallery in Pennsylvania in 2015. Recent publications include: *Sustainability* by Monica Herreras, for Cronica Ambiental, Mexico City, MX, in 2017, *Artists and the Garden* by Sam Phillips for the Royal Academy of Arts Magazine, London, UK, in 2015 and *Art and Ecology Now* by Andrew Brown, Thames & Hudson, London, UK, in 2014.

*Waiting for Spring* has also been chosen to feature in the Vancouver International Women in Film Festival in March of this year.





Pomegranate Jacket Back 2015



Persephone Torso 2015









Persephone Profile 2015



Waiting for Spring video still 2016