

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace

AT STYLE 2011, 'WEARABLE ART' CAN TAKE THE FORM OF CHAIN-MAIL DRESSES AND CLOTHING MADE FROM RECYCLED MATERIAL



Below: A chain-mail tank top designed by Elaine Unzicker. Right: Jill Pillot designed this shirt from recycled clothing.



Left: Unzicker's dramatic "Shimmering Free" gown.

BEYOND THE BASICS



Above: A workout top provides the top for this dress by Pillot.



Above: A child's dress by Pillot, made from recycled clothing and fabrics. Right: One of Unzicker's chain-mail skirts.





Jill Pillot poses in her shop in San Mateo with a mannequin wearing one of her designs.

Veronica Weber

by Karla Kane

A favorite garment, once outgrown or damaged, usually ends up on the give-away pile or in the trash. But in the hands of Jill Pillot, cast-off clothes become new works of fashionable art.

Pillot is one of many clothing and jewelry designers whose work will be featured at the Palo Alto Art Center Foundation's annual wearable art show and sale that benefits education programs at the center. Style 2011 will be held Saturday, April 30, at the Lucie Stern Community Center.

Pillot, who owns Richochet Wearable Art, a clothing boutique in San Mateo, designs whimsical pieces made from rescued material. Describing her designs as "classic with a primitive edge," she said she buys from Goodwill and other thrift shops to score discarded fabric. She also makes custom pieces from garments customers bring in, especially those that have sentimental meaning, such as something that belonged to a beloved grandmother or a piece of clothing outgrown by a child.

"People bring in clothes they are fond of, that have a history behind them, then we recreate it," she said.

One customer, whose grown daughter was suffering from depression, brought in a collection of her daughter's baby clothes. "She wanted to give her something special that would comfort her," Pillot said.

Pillot shredded the fabrics, then wove them back together, creating a snugly and unusual scarf.

Some clients have specific ideas for how they want the piece to be done. Others leave it up to Pillot's artistic vision. "Usually they allow me to create what I feel is right for the garment," she said.

Pillot, who's originally from Belgium, said she's been making new clothes from rescued material for close to 20 years. She's made clothes for most of her life but also took classes at Cañada College to improve her technical skills and study costume design. She has also won awards at the de Young Museum's Discarded to Divine recycled-fashion show in San Francisco.

"I don't use patterns and I never produce a piece again," she said.

At Palo Alto's Style 2011, Pillot said she may focus on presenting her line of children's clothes, which can include swirly, formal dresses; casual tops and skirts made with unusual textures and fringe; and full matching outfits with coordinating, funky hats.

"It's popular because it's quite different and stands out from the mainstream," she said of her look, adding that her styles have a European and even global flair.

Though Pillot focuses on women's and girls' clothes, the mother of two teen sons plans to someday expand to men's and boys' fashion. And she hopes more people will embrace the "rescued" clothing idea, not only for the sake of her business but for the planet as well.

"I really want the community to get involved. It's about a lot more than just fashion; it's about environmental awareness," she said.

Elaine Unzicker, another Style 2011 artist, also cre-

ates clothing that could be described as European — medieval European, that is. Chain mail, metal mesh made of delicate, interlocking ring patterns made famous by knights in armor, is her fabric of choice.

Unzicker said that while the material, perhaps known more for protectiveness and strength than style, may seem like an odd choice for a clothing and jewelry designer, it actually works well as a flexible, even lovely fabric.

"People look at it and think these are really heavy; then they're surprised," she said of her pieces, which include slinky scarves, vests and even entire dresses made of chain mail.

"There's lots of flexibility; they're pretty comfortable because the weight gets distributed evenly. It's like the leather-jacket concept," she said. "People put it on and feel good. There's a grounding quality a lot of people really like."

The Southern California-based Unzicker began her career as a jewelry designer, then studied sculpture, eventually taking a chain-mail workshop and falling in love with it. She soon began experimenting, moving from small jewelry pieces to bigger projects that utilized her sculpture background.

She buys her metal in sheets, painstakingly cuts it ring by ring, and creates a new pattern, reattaching the rings to create her designs. Smaller projects take weeks, while the more complex ones can take months.

She said she allows her inspiration to guide her, even if it leads to pieces she wasn't necessarily expecting.

One project started out as a top. However, "once I put it on I said, 'This was meant to be a dress,'" she said. The piece eventually evolved into the daring, full-length "Shimmering Free" gown.

Since chain mail has traditionally been used by men, Unzicker said she is especially pleased to see how women have responded to her designs, finding them empowering. Customers have told her, "Oh my gosh, now I can go to this meeting and handle it," she said.

"I think it's pretty wonderful," she added.

Unzicker will have several examples of her work to show at Style 2011 and is hurriedly working to prepare. Her ego was given a boost recently when she had a successful show in Dallas, she said.

"I was totally shocked. I sold more than ever, so now I'm working like crazy. That's a good problem to have!" ■

What: Style 2011, the Palo Alto Art Center Foundation's annual wearable-art show and sale

Where: Lucie Stern Community Center, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

When: April 30, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: \$10 for the general public, and free for foundation members

Info: Go to paaaf.org/style or call 650-329-2366. For more information on Pillot and Unzicker, go to richochetwearableart.net and unzickerdesign.com.

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