

'Spirits In the Material World'

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter

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"Hooded Cape" by Nika Feldman. The artist's latest project, which comments on how the language of clothing reflects North American values, took her three years to complete.

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A culture's clothing has its own language.

What that language is, or how cultural identities and values are reflected in garments, is what drives Nika Feldman's work.

"Whether you look at traditional clothing of indigenous cultures or whether you look at the clothing we all wear today, value systems are reflected in it," she said. "It's just whether you look for them or not."



Nika Feldman's latest body of work is made of recycled T-shirts, pop tabs and embroidery. She describes the work as a comment on the language of clothing and how garments have traditionally reflected a culture's values. (Courtesy of Form & Concept)

The textile artist's latest project, which focuses on modern North America through garment-like pieces made of recycled T-shirts, aluminum pop tabs and embroidery, will be on display at form & concept starting this weekend until the end of March.

Feldman was born in Nova Scotia, grew up back and forth between New York and Massachusetts, and currently spends most of the year in Santa Fe. She is pursuing an indigenous liberal studies degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts and returns to Canada for summers.

Her latest project, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, took Feldman more than three years to complete. She spent about 2,000 hours to create seven works.

All of Feldman's bodies of work play with the intersection of clothing, culture and identity. She makes all of it from recycled goods and assembles her pieces by simply cutting and hand-stitching materials, a technique she sticks to partly to maintain a "universal language" intended to make the art more accessible to the audience.

Her projects differ, however, depending on where in the world she is living at a given point in time. That means the messages she's sending, as well as the type of recycled clothes she uses, will vary. Before working on her North America series, for example, she was living in Japan and made pieces out of recycled kimonos.

The message she's trying to send with the work that will show at Santa Fe's form & concept gallery, she said, has to do with modern North America's mass production systems.

"It's disposability, it's like how can we make life more convenient, and more convenient, and more convenient?" she said of the narratives that this continent's clothing conveys. "It comes at an unsustainable cost to the Earth."

Tees & tabs

When searching for materials to best symbolize her concept, Feldman settled on T-shirts. They have become the cheapest, most mass-produced and universal clothing item from Western culture, she said, and are still recognizable when cut apart.

She also wanted something to embellish the pieces, which led her to thinking about the historical use of cowry shells in Africa and India. The small white shells were used as currency centuries ago and eventually on garments as a way to symbolize wealth.

"It's like the contemporary cowry shell," she said of the aluminum pop-top tabs she's incorporated into her work. "It's this mass-produced, factory-made thing and the idea that they also represent currency"

The tabs are worth about 50 cents a pound when recycled, but go for higher prices these days as fodder for artists like Feldman.

Feldman is using "such an interesting and rich well to pull from," says form & concept director Jordan Eddy. He said he loves her latest series because it transforms commonplace materials and allows people to see them from a new viewpoint.

"That mental switch you make as you're looking at the clothes that eventually lands you right in your own culture really makes you see our entire universe differently," Eddy said.



"Tunic" by Nika Feldman.

Within the series is a hooded cape designed with rows of T-shirt squares featuring a reverse triple appliqué, a pinafore made solely from shirt collars and opened sleeves, a tunic created from more opened sleeves and hems, and a dress-like piece centered around a unique camouflage tee.

Aside from tees and tabs, Feldman also decorates with colorful embroidery floss. Using the shape of the can tabs, many of her works have tab-shaped embroidered designs.

Most of her material came from thrift stores like Goodwill and Salvation Army, where she says she often begged managers to set aside bags of shirts they could not sell. Another major stash was from a commercial sales rep friend she met in Massachusetts, who gave her a box of fresh tees that were going to be tossed because they weren't the business' newest samples.

She initially hand-picked tabs off cans at recycling centers before discovering they are sold by the thousands on eBay for just a few dollars. For just a little bit more, she could purchase color tabs, which is why her pinafore and camouflage dress are decorated with red ones from Budweiser cans.

Not being able to select her source material meant Feldman received random, often vibrantly colored, shirts to work with. She intentionally used everything given to her, saying it added to the concept that she's simply "representing the world" around her.

Culture and textiles connection

The pieces are intentionally made to be "garment-like" rather than actual clothing items, said Feldman, with the exception of an XXL black T-shirt she didn't want to cut apart, and instead decorated with tabs and fringe tassles made from other shirts.

"When it's artwork, people have to investigate, people have to go deeper into those narratives," she said. "If it's a wearable garment, it doesn't go any farther than that. People see it as fashion, they want to know if it comes in their size, they want to know how much it is."

She intentionally left the fashion industry to take her art in a new direction, graduating from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University with a textiles degree in 2002. Before that, she had studied fashion design at New York's Pratt Institute for a year, working for famous designer Betsey Johnson, and operated two boutiques in the East Village for several years.

"My whole life, I knew the connection was with clothing, so to me it made sense that that was the first step," she said of working in fashion. "But once I was there, I realized I had no interest in vanity, which really is what fashion comes down to."

She added that if she had continued to expand her businesses, she would have had to rely on more labor outsourcing, which she did not support.

The three main pillars of her college textile program were weaving, dyeing and printing. While none of those techniques truly spoke to her, she said she became enamored with her craft history courses.

"That's where everything started clicking for me, about understanding how cultural identity is in the textiles, is in the clothing, traditionally speaking, and how there's such a connection," she said. "Everything means something. There's a connection to place, there's a connection to history, identity, so much from value systems, it's just a whole language."

It wasn't until Feldman left school that she found a medium that did speak to her, which was recycled clothes. She grew up wearing secondhand garments and one of the reasons she left fashion was because of her aversion to mass production.

"At the same time, when you look at traditional clothing, it's made from the place," she said. "Whether it's bast fibers, whether it's flax that then makes linen, or hemp. And the dyes, the indigo, the cochineal, whatever it is, it's connected to place and what's abundant in that place. For me, in the contemporary world, the material source that's abundant is the recycled clothes. It's free, it's abundant, and because of that, it says everything I needed to say to be the foundation of my work."

With this project, Feldman says she hopes her message of clothing representing the larger society leads the viewers to further reflect on its implications.

“It’s an industry cycle that’s totally unsustainable and I wanted people to be more aware of, at what cost? What do things mean? And trying to find meaning in your material world,” she said. “If you find meaning within it, then you understand and hold on to something a lot longer or take care of it more and not just sort of follow the eye candy.”

If you go

Nika Feldman’s “Spirits in the Material World”

WHERE: form & concept, 435 S. Guadalupe

WHEN: Jan. 25-March 23. Opening reception is Friday from 5-7 p.m. Artist talk is Saturday from 2-3 p.m. An art workshop, ‘Tees and Tabs,’ will be held March 16 from 1-5 p.m.

Contact the writer.