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As told to Carolyn Bernucca, 2133 words.

Tags: Design, Art, Inspiration, Creative anxiety, Process, Beginnings, Business, Identity.

# On detaching from the permanence of your work

**Designer and artist Nicole McLaughlin discusses collecting skills, rapid prototyping, and pushing materials to their limits. How did you begin doing this work?**

I was a graphic designer at Reebok, and my day to day was so computer-based. I always wanted to take the product out of the screen and touch it. I wanted more physical, tangible design skills—I wanted to sew and create, to try to make these things myself. Reebok always had leftover samples and swatches that I would take home and try to stitch or hot glue together. I would also take packaging or trash in my house and try to rework that into something.

The work didn't feel worthy of public viewing at the time, but now I think that the things I did then look so cool. I was making these things for a while before I decided to show anybody, but at some point I did, online, and it took off. I quit my job right before COVID, and I've been doing this full-time ever since.

I think I got the upcycling thing from my parents—my dad was a carpenter when I was growing up, and my mom is an interior designer for commercial spaces. She would pick up furniture and stuff off the side of the road for my dad to fix and restore. Upcycling wasn't really a term, but that was the way we lived. With the work I do today, that lifestyle has come full circle.



**What about these materials—primarily clothing and footwear—speaks to you?**

Before working at Reebok, I hadn't realized that footwear was a whole world in itself. I got really interested in functionality, especially as it pertained to the outdoors. I naturally gravitated toward those types of materials—rubbers, waterproof materials. I felt like shoes hadn't actually been pushed that far. I wanted to see something crazier, so I started doing things like making shoes out of tennis balls and putting pockets on shoes.

When I first started collecting and thrifting materials, outdoorsy-type clothing also gave me more bang for my buck. A jacket would get me at least three zippers, probably a hood, and maybe waterproof and/or reflective material. Back when I was still learning to sew, it was a lot easier to work with something that already had seams and a shape, rather than starting with virgin material. I don't aim to make things unrecognizable from their original form, and clothes and shoes lend themselves so well to that because they're so malleable. They already have natural curves and shapes and folds – the tweaks I make to them are actually very subtle. That's important to me, because it makes the work more relatable and more accessible, and expands people's ideas of what it means to upcycle and how they might be able to do it, too.



**Where do you do your work? What do you need to get it done?**

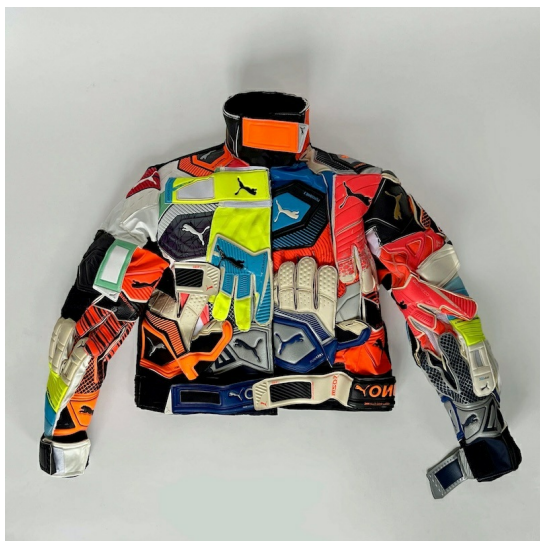
I have a studio in Brooklyn where I work part-time, but I live and mostly work in Colorado. My studio here

is a warehouse, a very industrial space that is my perfect ideal world, with pegboards full of every single tool that I would ever need. It feels like a dream, because early on, with every project I'd realize I needed pliers or something, and have to run out and buy them. Over the years, I've collected all of these tools, along with the materials I store in my upstairs graveyard of projects, so now I can create almost anything from start to finish using the things I already have. The pegboards are key for storage, along with weird shelving units and vintage airline refreshment carts that I've found on eBay. I'm also very much a silent worker—I don't really need anything playing in the background—and I have a rock climbing wall in my studio, which keeps me inspired.

#### **How do you start a project?**

It depends. I usually have a material that I found or that someone gave to me, and I sit down and just look at it. I put it on my body, put it on a chair, put it on something else, and watch for it to start looking like what it's supposed to be. Usually the color or the shape dictates the piece. Other times, I'm rummaging in a friend's garage or a thrift store to find material that makes sense for me to use. It's all very material-driven.

I'm impatient, though. When I have an idea, I have to just make it immediately. I almost get frustrated if I think of an idea too late at night. [laughs] I like to create things quickly and not stay too long on any one project, for better or for worse. A lot of the time, I make it, and I'm like, "Ooh, this wasn't it." But that rapid prototyping means I get the idea out there, I see what it looks like, and if I need to, I sit on it for a while and come back to it. Or, the process will help inspire something else entirely.



#### **What is the purpose of assembling, disassembling, and reassembling these projects?**

My work primarily lives on Instagram, which I enjoy because I can continue to tweak a project and then share the most up to date version of it. For a while, I would archive posts with older versions of certain projects that I felt weren't as "good," because I didn't want people to know that I didn't know what I was doing. But everyone has to start somewhere, and I'm proud of the fact that I had those ideas and just went for them. It's easy to feel like we don't have the right skills, or the right environment, or we need the stars to align properly in order to make something. But I'm like, "Fuck it, just make it and see what happens." When it comes to the final product, I have the picture, I have the video, and if I really want to remake something, I also have the skill set to do so.

I teach, and my students get very attached to their work. I understand: you invest all this time and energy creating something, so you want it to live forever. I don't think everybody should take apart the stuff that they make. But with my work, the whole point is to upcycle—to take a shoe apart and turn it into a hat, then a bra, then a glove, then back into a hat. These materials, which so often get thrown away when they no longer serve their original purpose, can be pushed way further than we think. I'm excited about problem solving, so for me, it's a fun challenge to figure out how to upcycle something in six different ways. Plus, these materials are thrifted, or I receive them from brands. They were never really "mine" to begin with, so I don't feel precious about them.



**Is it more important to you to be original in your work, or to be good at what you do?**

For me, this work will always come back to trying to learn and be a better designer, and I'm always going to have a different perspective from somebody else, even if we are using the same materials or inspired by each other's work. There are more people in this space now, which feels cool, but does make originality really important to me - continuing in my own lane, developing and refining it. But I don't want to gatekeep. I just designed a shoe with a four-in-one gaiter system, where the gaiter can detach and be used and worn in a few different ways. I want others—including consumers—to be able to play with things and customize them the way that I do.

**How do you feed your curiosity?**

I'll go to the thrift store for inspiration, but I don't necessarily need to buy anything—I just need a change of scenery. Then I'll come back to the studio, to the things I already have, and go from there. Getting away from the work helps. I also like to channel my curiosity through mediums that aren't necessarily related to the project I'm working on. I learned how to crochet for one project, thinking I'd never do it again after that. But now, it's something I can do while I'm a little bit bored and just let my mind wander, explore my own imagination. Painting, photography—things that work the muscle of creativity without attempting to force myself through a creative lull, or into an idea.

I also am so stoked anytime I can get outside. I try to get out for a walk every day, and I'm a big climber and hiker. Living in Colorado for the past two years has helped me realize how inspired I am by nature, and how good it is for my brain. I loved living in New York—I'm an East Coaster through and through—and it's still very much a place I go to get inspired. But living in Colorado has put things into perspective for me; it feels good to know that I can still be in a creative industry and excel in my career without being in the epicenter of it all.



**What wears you down creatively? How do you move through that?**

My phone is my ultimate demise, and it's hard to keep it at bay because it's part of my job. It's such a time suck, and it's time spent consuming rather than creating. It blocks me from my own thoughts, my own space. This is not a revolutionary thought, but the more I get off the phone and let myself just sit there, often in complete silence, the more good ideas I have. When you're consuming things on your phone all the time, those are the things that sit in your brain, and then potentially encroach on your originality, or influence you to make something because you feel like you have to, or make you more interested in your self-image than in the work.

Related to that is comparison—not even to other people, but comparing myself to myself. Looking at my own work and saying, “Am I getting better? Is this as good as it used to be?” That is something I've always dealt with, and I work through it by trying to stay present and trust that what I'm making is good, that having ideas and trusting them and seeing them through is good, no matter what.

**What have been some of the rewards of doing this work? What has it taught you about yourself?**

I've had so many people ask why I don't just go to factories and have them make these things for me. But again, this has always just been about me learning. This started out as a hobby, and came from a desire to teach myself how to make stuff. Early on, I had all of these ideas, and I couldn't bring them to fruition without learning new skills. So if I take that away—the making, the learning—I'm taking away the fun part. Each project has taught me something new, and I've accumulated these skills, tools, and machines, that I can then share with other people who are interested in the same things, whether that's design or upcycling or both or something else.

I always struggled in school, and I didn't know if I was going to be able to do anything with my life, or what I even wanted to do. But I've learned that I'm a hard worker. This work has helped me find my place, something I'm excited about doing. That has given me a confidence that I really needed. It's also taught me the importance of maintaining my passion—even though it's a business now, I can't ever let that part of it disappear. Without that emotional investment, this won't be successful. I still need to have projects that are just for me, that are one of one and not for sale. You don't have to do what I did, quit your job and make your creative outlet your entire thing. But we do give a lot of ourselves away, and it's important to have things for ourselves that center us and our creativity.

**Nicole McLaughlin recommends:**

2000s/2010s digital point & shoot cameras (+ customizing them with stickers and keychains)

Driscoll's Sweetest Batch blueberries

L'eau rouge Heirloom perfume by Henrik Vibskov

The Snoopy Museum Tokyo

Textile General Store hats

Name

Nicole McLaughlin

Vocation

designer, artist

Fact

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