

On committing to a mission



Clothing designer Janelle Abbott discusses finding liberation in limitations, reworking found materials, and self-funding her New York Fashion Week debut.

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As told to Sara Radin, 1301 words.

Tags: [Fashion](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Inspiration](#), [Promotion](#).

You've been working with clothes for a long time. How has your process evolved from when you were a child whose parents owned a clothing manufacturing company?

Using reclaimed materials has always been an important aspect of my process. When I was really young, it was about [using] scraps at the warehouse from production. Then it became about reworking vintage and found clothing—in part because of financial necessity, but also, living in Seattle, the availability of interesting textiles just wasn't there in the same way that it is in other major cities like Los Angeles, New York. When I got into school, focusing on using reclaimed materials felt like an environmental necessity. So much material exists in the world.. There never seemed to be a need or a reason to find newly manufactured materials.

Also by that time, I had learned about the issue of modern-day slavery—especially how it connects to the fashion industry. When I was in high school and in college, I was really committed to trying to evade supporting slave labor. The fact that the supply chain in fashion is so opaque, I couldn't buy newly manufactured fabric and trust that it was made under ethical conditions in the same way that I couldn't buy newly manufactured clothing and trust that it was made under ethical conditions. I committed to only buying secondhand because of that reason, in addition to the financial advantage and the environmental advantage.

How have secondhand materials and the concept of zero waste become part of your process?

It was in college that I learned about the zero-waste design methodology from [Timo Rissanen](#), my professor. That, coupled with using reclaimed materials, have been the two major cornerstones of my practice today. I had noticed how much waste I was creating, and it was a great source of anxiety for me. Committing to zero waste was a way to evade my own anxiety around the secondary impacts of what I was creating. It also became this really creatively liberating space where I had such strict parameters as to how I could make it. It allowed me to come up with ideas that I would never have previously conceived of.

I'm not the kind of designer who has a vision in my mind that I must enact in real life. It's in pieces and it's very much in context... A lot of my ideas ultimately come from the materials that I'm working with. I see the potential within them and I want to push them towards the edge of their capacity of what they could be. I think focusing on being zero-waste really helps with that, because every little corner, edge, and last scrap of a garment that I am reworking or utilizing can become something more, something else, something greater than its original form.

Tell me more about your project [3T](#).

3T came about a couple of years ago, when I was helping my aunt purge her massive clothing collection. Initially we were donating some of the pieces that didn't have a lot of value for resale—she had a ton of vintage that was

definitely worth rehoming properly, but there was also just random stuff. I realized in that process, 'Oh, this is actually not the sustainable thing to do: to send these clothes to a store where they're going to end up on the shores of some developing nation eventually.' I ended up with hundreds of t-shirts from her, and 3T was a way to resolve that material issue. It's become this staple of my practice, where I previously didn't have "basics." This is my solution to basics: three t-shirts deconstructed, stacked, vertically sewn. The top two shirts are sliced in between the stitches, and then it's reassembled either as a t-shirt, or I turn t-shirts into pants, shorts, and these crop top and skirt sets. There's some other variations, but it's ultimately a take on the chenille technique, even though I feel like it ends up looking kind of lenticular, where if you look at it from different angles, you can see different elements of the shirts underneath and the shirt on top.

What else have you been working on?

The latest collection is a culmination of a lot of different concepts and methods that I've been working on in the past couple of years, presented as one holistic idea centered around the lived experience of staying home sick from school as a kid with '90s daytime television. There was a lot of *The Price Is Right* inspiration in there. I got into watching vintage [episodes of] *The Price Is Right* on YouTube last year. It was very entertaining and also shocking to see the prices of things from the '70s, '80s, and '90s. It was really fascinating to see the styles that people were wearing, and just to see humans from all these different decades.

I wanted to have a New York Fashion Week moment and do a catwalk fashion show. I've done a couple events in the past and they've been a little more obscure or experimental. This is the first time I'm stepping out and showing my work in a more traditional manner. I'm hoping it's a rhythm I can build upon, of showing my work at New York Fashion Week every season, because it's what you're "supposed to do," but I also think it's something I've always wanted to do. But I never had the opportunity or the right funding—not that I'm getting any outside funding. I had a gig last year that actually paid me really well. So I'm like, 'Oh, finally I can fund myself to do something that might not pay off financially.' I'm really excited about the work I've been doing, and I'm really excited about all the ideas that have spawned [from] creating this collection. It's just a moment to step forward and be like, 'Hey, this is the work I do. I hope you like it.'

What would you say is your creative mission?

To the best of my ability, I'm trying to reduce textile waste. I'm trying to clean up the mess that fast fashion has created, and I'm a one-woman show. The impact that I'm going to make as an individual is not that big, in light of the millions of tons of textiles that end up in landfills every year. But I am a public demonstration of what is possible. And I hear from a lot of people that what I do inspires them to behave differently—how they engage commercially, how much they shop at fast fashion brands. Or recommitting to the things they already own, reconsidering the way they recycle or rehome the things that they own. That is my mission as an artist: to demonstrate what it looks like to live a life radically committed to an impossible mission.

I am trying to make as much as possible in tandem with that mission. If I can make more pieces, then I'm reworking more material—and I'm preventing that much more from ending up in landfills, or from the thrift cycle, or from getting shipped off to developing nations. I'm personally on a mission to outdo myself creatively. Every collection—every time I create a garment—I want it to be more creatively potent than the last. Even though I am often working with similar ideas, similar methods, similar materials, I'm trying to push myself further and farther down the road of what I'm capable of.

Janelle Abbott recommends:

[The Anatomy of Peace](#) by The Arbinger Institute

[Diva](#) (1981), directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix

[The Life Pursuit](#) by Belle and Sebastian

[Nuraghe Arrubiu](#)

[Dr. Frasier Crane](#)

Name

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Vocation

clothing designer

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