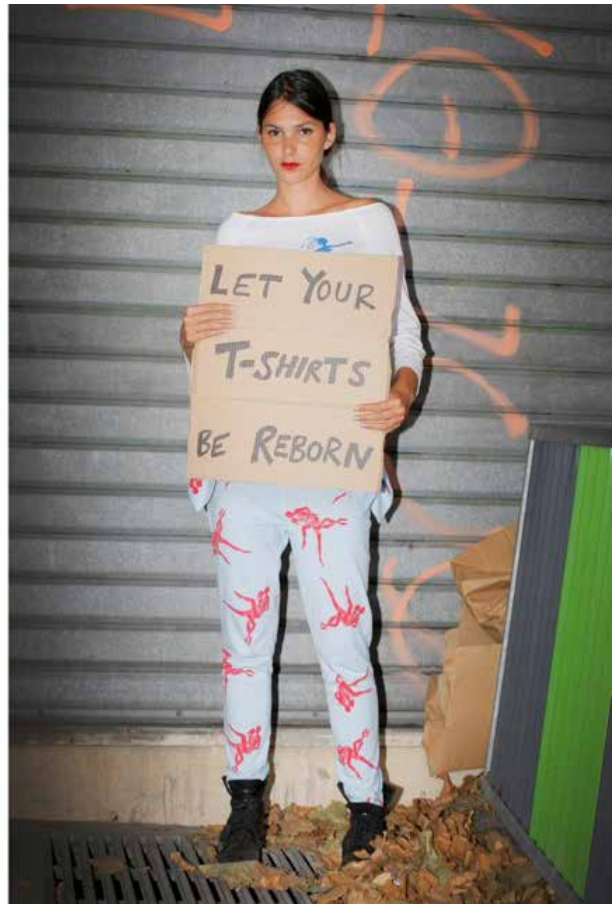


Carla Binotto and Carla van Lunn

Silk Purse, Sow's Ear: Transforming Second-Hand Clothing into Luxury Fashion through Craft Practice

Introduction

At the Porte de Montreuil in Paris, you can follow the trail of debris and walk along a footpath crowded with itinerant sellers, each with a meagre assortment of old or stolen items, and some peddling fake Dior perfume and Rolexes from their jackets; you can cross over the great ring road that encircles the city and enter the lanes of the flea market. Here you can find a large second-hand clothing market consisting of stall after stall of mountains of old clothing where garments are sold for a few euros a piece. There are some rare vintage pieces on display but most of the market is dedicated to very ordinary clothing such as jeans, shirts, jackets and T-shirts. It is a world away from the chic and moneyed centre of Paris and the home of the luxury fashion brands. This market is an unlikely cradle for a designer collection but it was exactly this abundance of banal clothing and urban rubbish that motivated the recycling and creation of the designer fashion label discussed in this paper.



Top left: Porte de Montreuil flea market, Paris; bottom left: second-hand clothing store in Montmartre, Paris.

Photos: © Carla van Lunn, 2011.

Right: shirt and pants from 'The Wasteland' collection. Photo: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2012.

'Maison Briz Vegas' is the experimental fashion label of Australian designers Carla van Lunn and Carla Binotto. Clothing and textile waste and the unsustainable production of raw materials and fabric that feeds the contemporary fashion industry are significant issues inspiring their design practice. Their work transforms the fabric of second-hand cotton T-shirts into desirable designer clothing. Maison Briz Vegas was first conceived and created in Paris in 2011 and their collections have been presented to international buyers and press in an exclusive showroom during Paris Fashion Week. Thoughtful recycling of rubbish materials and traditional craft practice such as patchwork, embroidery and hand-block printing are used to address the issue of clothing waste and the excess of modern consumer culture. The two Carlas' artisanal recycling practice offers an alternative idea of value in design and materials, and they believe that the potential for sustainable fashion practice lies outside the current industrial manufacturing model.

Fashion today is a system in perpetual motion and the industry has gathered so much speed that it is hard for designers and industry players to reflect upon and make significant changes to their operations. Within current fashion and sustainability discourse there is an overarching call to re-think conventional practices within the fashion industry and to consider alternative processes and possibilities in regard to how clothing is produced, consumed and valued (Black 2008; Fletcher and Grose 2012; Gwilt and Rissanen 2012). Binotto and van Lunn find it difficult to reconcile their deep appreciation of beautiful and creative clothing with the excesses and superficiality of the modern consumer fashion system. A conflict exists between the instinct for material craft and garment making and an awareness of the environmental and social impact of modern fashion production, consumption and disposal. Van Lunn and Binotto negotiate these tensions by working within the fashion system but at the same time in opposition to certain industry conventions, such as their choice to recycle and use 'unrefined' materials and slow production processes, which are of a bespoke and anti-industrial nature. There is an environmental activist message communicated through their garment designs and prints and also through their promotional photography and formal presentations to the industry.

The rise of ready-to-wear and 'fast fashion'

While 'fashion' is a modern Western concept, the traditions of costume, bodily adornment, textiles, craft and garment making have a long history spanning all races and cultures. 'Fashion', as a

recognisable system synonymous with change, emerged in the context of social and political upheavals brought about by the Industrial Revolution, a time when progress inspired a drive for change in all areas of life (Lipovetsky 1994). Prior to industrialisation, and also during the nineteenth century, many people relied on the second-hand clothing trade because new clothing was expensive. Old clothes were passed down from the wealthy to their servants; clothes and textiles were 'easily converted into cash or goods' (Lemire 2012: 148) and used as an 'alternative currency' amongst the working poor (Farrer 2011: 22). The repair of clothes was common practice. With mechanisation, the industrial production of cotton and other textiles and the introduction of the sewing machine, manufacturing processes in the clothing industry advanced and gained speed. As a result, 'the price, and standing, of textiles in society began to decline' (p. 23).

Two very different modes of clothing production developed in the nineteenth century: the bespoke hand-made and the industrially produced ready-made (Gwilt 2011; Wilson 2003). Tailors and couturiers hand-crafted exclusive and bespoke garments. The first fashion designer emerged in mid-nineteenth century Paris, notably as a couturier who did not work under the instruction of his clients but rather offered a collection of original styles that the client could choose from and have made to their measurements. This mode of design and production, known as *haute couture*, led sartorial style and was synonymous with wealth, luxury and quality craftsmanship (Gwilt 2011; Troy 2003; Wilson 2003). At the same time, the industrial manufacturing of clothing with standardized sizing systems, which had developed with the production of military uniforms, meant that ready-made casual garments became increasingly available and affordable for the middle class (Wilson 2003).

In the twentieth century, fashionable 'mass-produced, ready-to-wear clothing' became widely available and 'the standard wear for everyone' (p. 89). The factory production of clothing enabled widespread growth of a ready-to-wear industry for casual and designer garments. After the Second World War, notions of value shifted and the burgeoning consumer culture of the US and other Western nations embraced the new and relatively affordable mass-produced products (Claudio 2007). The second-hand or home-made was no longer valuable next to the new factory-made items, which were symbols of prosperity after the rationing of the war. As Wilson explains, 'for hundreds of years the secondhand clothing market

thrived, but with the advent of mass production it faded' (Wilson 2003: 250).

Affordable fashion that was available to buy off-the-rack also destabilised the haute couture of the elite fashion houses that had dominated style prior to the Second World War. To remain relevant, and also to tap into the profitability of the ready-to-wear market, couture designers began offering affordable styles for the consumer market alongside their exclusive bespoke designs for the elite (Troy 2003; Wilson 2003). Made-to-order fashion was increasingly replaced by the factory-produced fashion that satiated consumer hunger for the new. The industry has continued to follow this trajectory.

Today there is more apparel being created than ever before. With 'fast fashion' and globalisation, clothing production has continued to increase while prices at the consumer end have continued to drop (Allwood et al. 2006). As a result, consumer purchases and disposal of clothing have dramatically increased (Claudio 2007). The 'fast fashion' system in particular encourages people to buy more and to buy more often. 'Fast-fashion' is the sector of the fashion industry that rapidly produces and sells cheap copies of designer styles and basic garments. Items are designed to be worn for a season and then discarded for the next look. The time it takes for a fast-fashion product to be 'designed' (or copied from a designer collection), manufactured and available for purchase in-store can be as little as two weeks (Greenblat and Munro 2013). Zara has been noted as the pioneer retailer of the fast-fashion model, which took off in the late 1990s and has been accelerating rapidly since the early 2000s, along with other brands such as H&M, Top Shop and Primark (Tokatli 2008). This increased speed in production, consumption and disposal has essentially redefined what is valued in fashion and clothing production today. It would seem that 'value' in mass-market fashion equates to price, quantity and newness. Arguably the success of fast-fashion has led to a devaluing of design, materials, resources, quality, time taken to make clothes and the people who make them (Fletcher 2007).

Clothing waste as textile resource

In the West, clothes are disposed of when they are no longer considered useful, desirable or valuable. In today's 'fast fashion' climate, the amplified pattern of production, consumption and disposal has created an excess of clothing, which in turn has led to a problem of clothing waste. As Lewis explains, 'one of the most fundamental environmental issues associated with

the clothing industry is its focus (and dependence) on ever-changing fashion. Most clothes are not worn-out; they simply get replaced by the latest designs and colours' (Lewis and Gertsakis 2001: 141). Today an enormous amount of clothing and textile waste contributes to landfill. In the US alone this exceeds 12 million tonnes annually; however, nearly 100 per cent of this is recyclable (Hawley 2011: 144).

The charity store is the most common path for unwanted clothing. Of the clothing collected by these organisations, around 25 per cent is sold back to consumers through their own stores while the rest is either exported in bales to developing countries, sold on to the manufacturing industry for recycling and rags, or sent to landfill. One study revealed that of the combined textile and clothing waste in the UK only 13 per cent is recovered and reused, while 73 per cent ends up in landfill (Allwood et al. 2006).

Acknowledging the potential in the raw material of garments, as well as the energy and labour already expended through their production, a growing number of contemporary fashion designers are basing their practice around reuse, recycling and refashioning (Fletcher and Grose 2012). Examples of these designers/labels include Reclaim to Wear, From Somewhere, Christopher Raeburn, Greg Lauren, Junky Styling and Goodone. Although not a new practice, this approach is discussed as one which makes better use of resources and can play a part in redefining notions of value and attitudes to waste (Fletcher and Grose 2012). The process of refashioning is described by Farrer as one

that intercepts discarded clothing (post-consumer textile waste), reclaims, re-cuts and refashions, returning the item to the clothing stream, effectively creating a new loop, postponing its grave ending, thus reducing both textile waste and the demand on raw materials required in the manufacture of new textiles. (Farrer 2011: 27)

Maison Briz Vegas operates within this context, refashioning, or *upcycling*, to create valuable fashion products from clothing waste, specifically T-shirts.



Discarded clothing being delivered to a second-hand store in Paris Photo: © Carla van Lunn, 2011.

Within the realm of second-hand clothing, basic items such as T-shirts are barely valued, especially when a new mass-produced T-shirt can be bought for close to the same price as a used one. T-shirts are not a luxury fashion item; generally they are banal, ubiquitous and far from exclusive. However, if we are to reinstate value to the aspects of clothing production that fast-fashion has devalued, perhaps the status of second-hand and mass-produced T-shirts should be reconsidered.

Most T-shirts are made from 100 per cent cotton. The Environmental Justice Foundation estimates that it takes 'around 2,720 litres of water to produce one cotton T-shirt, equivalent to what an average person might drink over three years' (<http://ejfoundation.org/cotton/cotton-and-water>). Social and environmental concerns surround cotton production because of the impact on natural resources such as land and water, use of chemicals, and in some cases, poor labour practices (Grose 2013). Cotton is a natural and desirable fibre to work with and to wear. Its material properties make it ideal for dyeing and printing and the generic shape of a T-shirt provides

a useful amount of base fabric. The recycling and design work of Maison Briz Vegas demonstrates the material potential of the post-consumer waste of second-hand T-shirts.



Left: jackets and shorts made from recycled second-hand T-shirts, 'The Wasteland' collection; Photo: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2012.

Right: second-hand T-shirts from the flea markets. Photos: © Carla van Lunn, 2011.

Maison Briz Vegas uses the seduction and novelty of fashion to question notions of value in the luxury designer market and draw attention to problems of textile and clothing waste, household waste and unsustainable industry practice. Van Lunn and Binotto work in reaction to the contemporary fashion system, but position their work within it as a way of raising awareness from the inside and challenging the conventions of the industry.

A constant motivation for Binotto and van Lunn is using humble and valueless materials to create something beautiful and desirable. The intention is to work with items of clothing that are ostensibly the least valuable – discarded, second-hand, worn-out – and transform them into garments that register as highly valuable in the context of contemporary fashion, while also presenting a critique of the fashion system and the industry's effect on the environment.

Birth of Maison Briz Vegas

In 2011, Carla van Lunn had been living in Paris and working in the high-end designer fashion industry for several years. Post-2009 and the global financial crisis, van Lunn experienced the downturn in the designer fashion world. Working in design studios and presenting creative designer collections to international buyers during Paris Fashion Week, it became an ever more painful struggle to continue business as usual. Designers, retailers and famous fashion houses were often begging financial favours or even closing their doors. The designer fashion market felt very burdensome and, at the time, irrelevant to van Lunn. Maintaining appearances of a more prosperous era and ignoring the competition of fast-fashion did not make sense but, like many in the designer fashion industry, she remained drawn to fashion's potential for poetry.

Van Lunn had taken a trip to India around this time and witnessed the craft of hand-block printing. For her, there was something transformative about this ancient and 'primitive' method of textile printing. The printing process was slow and skilled and there was evidence of the human hand in the finished fabric. In an age dominated by mass production, there seemed to van Lunn a kind of liberation and power in such artisanal 'low-fi' printing, a freedom from the system of mass production and industrial processes. The block-printed textiles were textually rich and full of character compared to slick digitally printed fabric that was flooding the fashion market at the time.

Back in Paris, van Lunn wished to design a fashion collection but she wanted it to be relevant to the economic climate and to make an honest statement in the high-end fashion market. Having limited personal funds and wanting to design the collection on her own terms, she decided to make garments from poor materials: old T-shirts and household rubbish. For her it was also a statement about the overabundance of consumer products and the environmental damage caused by garment production and disposal. She imagined a more couture treatment of cheap, used, discarded garments, or 'landfill fashion'.

Van Lunn's first recycled collection was titled 'The Wasteland' and her label name, 'Maison Briz Vegas', is a reference to the designer's home city, Brisbane, in Australia. 'Briz Vegas' is a sub-tropical, new-world suburbia, with limited sartorial culture. 'Maison' was meant as an irreverent reference to the idea of French tradition and luxury. 'The Wasteland' was motivated by an environmental activist spirit, and influenced by the gloom of the global economic climate and the increasing poverty in the streets of Paris.



Left: block-printing; centre: reverse appliqué and print detail; right: dress from 'The Wasteland' collection. Photos: © Carla van Lunn, 2012.

Bringing rubbish to the fashion world felt like an appropriate statement. Van Lunn used craft techniques, including hand-block printing, to transform old cotton T-shirts into interesting designer garments. Sourcing bagfuls of old white cotton T-shirts from the flea markets at the Porte de Montreuil, she washed, dyed, unpicked and printed the cotton. Van Lunn painstakingly cut and patched together the T-shirt fabric into new styles. The patchwork joins were made along deliberate design lines and the new garments were not obviously recycled in appearance.

The collection was designed to look raw and free and van Lunn's printing was bold and naïve. 'The Wasteland' had a DIY punk spirit, designed as a provocation in a luxury fashion context. Old jar lids were used as buttons and the logos from the original T-shirts were features in some of the final designs,

to communicate the provenance of the fabric. Garments were hand-finished and some edges left raw. The collection was designed to feel simple and fresh in spirit.



Left: sketches of 'The Wasteland' collection; right: buttons made from old jar lids.

Photos: © Carla van Lunn, 2011.



Block-printing process, 'The Wasteland' collection. Photos: © Carla van Lunn, 2011.

Van Lunn printed the garments using blocks that she carved herself from old linoleum. Her original print designs were vivid and whimsical in style but contained environmental symbolism within them. 'The Wasteland' was a much smaller collection than van Lunn had anticipated because the recycling process had taken far longer than making ordinary garments using virgin fabric.

Van Lunn has a long working relationship with a high-profile fashion agent in Paris and had been promised a space in the agent's showroom during Fashion Week to present her small collection. Upon seeing the products, however, this agent was rather

horrified by the use of T-shirt fabric and relegated the collection to a small space of floor next to a staircase. Van Lunn created a small installation to portray the recycling concept, presenting her new designs on a rail above a pile of dirty T-shirts from the flea markets. Despite the agent's best efforts to avert the gaze of buyers and press, the recycled pieces and the display drew significant attention and commercial interest. Alongside luxurious collections made from silks and wools, the recycled collection was seen as interesting and desirable in its own right in this high-end context. Buyers and press were impressed by the concept, designs and print work, and wanted to see more pieces the following season.



'The Wasteland' collection, Paris showroom, 2011. Photo: Photos: © Carla van Lunn 2011.

Van Lunn had originally imagined she would wholesale the collection but, after making the first prototypes and finding the recycling process prohibitively slow compared to traditional fashion production, she understood that a new sales and production model would perhaps be necessary. The first collection was presented as a limited edition and bespoke, with a high price point.

Post-wasteland

Following this initial positive reception, Maison Briz Vegas became a collaborative project with fellow Brisbane designer, Carla Binotto. Binotto came to Paris the following season to help grow the collection and further develop the recycling concept.

The second collection, a winter collection titled 'The Glam and The Gloom' was created from second-hand T-shirts and jumpers. From the gloom of mountains of discarded clothes piled high at the flea markets, Binotto and van Lunn worked to create new and precious clothes with a touch of glam, or magic. Old woollen jumpers were abundant at the flea markets during those winter months and, like cotton T-shirts, provided a valuable textile resource. As in the first collection, the used garments were washed, dyed and unpicked. Jumpers were patched together or quilted between T-shirt jersey to create new fabric. Some features of the original jumpers, such as pockets, buttons, or ribbing were incorporated into the new garment designs.



Left: Paris flea market; right: quilted jacket and pants from 'The Glam and The Gloom' collection. Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2012.



Left: old jumpers; centre: cape, dress, tights, and gloves from 'The Glam and the Gloom' collection. Right: gloves made from jumper fabric, hand printed. Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas 2012.

The designers developed original prints and printed the fabrics using linoleum blocks and stencils they had cut themselves. Old bottle tops and champagne caps were embellished with beads and used as buttons. Hand-stitching and embroidery were used throughout to finely finish or decorate the garments. Metallic embroidery thread was used to add a touch of luxe to the recycled textiles (see Figure 10). These sorts of artisanal craft techniques demonstrated the great potential for upcycling of old poor materials. Quilting multiple layers of old materials together created warmth and structure in the new garments.



Embroidery detail on cape, 'The Glam and The Gloom' collection.
Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas 2012.

'The Glam and The Gloom' collection was presented once again in the same showroom in Paris and this time the designers created a tableau of a flea market to display their new designs. Their installation was put together using garments, bric-a-brac and rubbish collected from the real markets. Even the weathered pieces of cardboard and string used to fashion the price signs were authentic. Bringing dirty old items and junk from the fringes of Paris into a clean, slick designer showroom in the heart of the city was an effective act of activism within the fashion system. It amused buyers and press while giving them an insight into the inspiration for the collection and the source of the original garments used to create it. This prompted interest into how the clothes were actually made, an aspect commonly overshadowed by the look, feel and fit of the end product. The designs and the concept were once again highly appreciated but Binotto and van Lunn decided once again not to wholesale their work. They returned to Australia to continue their research and develop a business model.



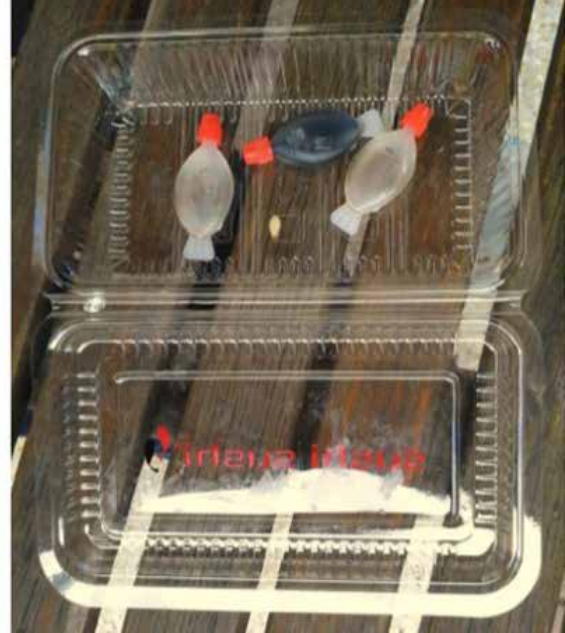
Presentation of 'The Glam and The Gloom' collection, Paris showroom 2012.
Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas 2012.

'Trashtopia' is their third collection, designed and created in Brisbane. Plastic pollution of the oceans and rising global temperatures were the starting points for this resort collection. All the garments were made using second-hand T-shirt fabric, and plastic rubbish was used to create decoration and fastenings on the garments. The designs have a nostalgic mid-20th century style to them and 'Trashtopia' links the golden era of American-style manufacturing and consumerism with today's climate and resource crises. Leisure, convenience products and disposable plastic items of our 'throwaway society' and their impact on the environment are themes of this collection. 'Trashtopia' is a dystopia, a summer holiday on an over-heated planet where the world's oceans are polluted with enormous amounts of plastic, killing marine and bird life.



'Trashtopia' postcards. Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2013.

Van Lunn and Binotto attempt to address environmental issues through humour and symbolism. Trashtopia prints have a retro Hawaiian-shirt style with a darker narrative, such as turtles swimming among plastic rings from milk bottles. Garments in this collection feature embroidery and fringing using thread made from plastic shopping bags. Fish-shaped plastic soy sauce containers and lids from plastic bottles were used as buttons.



Left: cuff detail with fish-shaped soy sauce container button, 'Trashtopia' collection.

Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2013.



Left: beach cape, 'Trashtopia' collection; top right: beach cape print detail; bottom right: plastic bag fringe detail. Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas, 2013.

Designer recycling

Working with reclaimed second-hand clothing and experimenting with artisanal craft techniques make the design and production processes of Maison Briz Vegas garments very complex, labour intensive and time-consuming.

Sourcing the second-hand T-shirts and other specific clothing items involves regularly visiting flea markets and second-hand stores and rummaging through piles and racks. This activity is the opposite to conventional industry practice where designers normally visit large international textile tradeshows to source from the next trends in colour and texture, or from the latest in textile technology.



Maison Briz Vegas stages of production. Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas 2013.

Once sourced, the second-hand T-shirts and other clothing items are washed and sorted according to fabric handle and size. Assessing the fabric handle according to weight, stretch and touch, for example, is necessary in order to determine which T-shirts would be best suited to particular garment designs. After sorting, the T-shirts are dyed and this may involve testing and mixing dyes to ensure the desired colour can be achieved.

The next stage involves unpicking hems and seams and removing threads. Extra fabric length is gained from the T-shirt hems. Evidence of the former folds

and stitch-lines remain in the fabric and these are often incorporated as details in the new 'up-cycled' garments as evidence of the transformation process, possibly only to be understood by the eye of another maker or designer.

Cutting the T-shirts into pieces for new designs is a fiddly and time-consuming step compared to the straightforward cut-and-lay process when using a new piece or roll of fabric. The placement and cutting of the pattern pieces is a creative process, negotiating the graphics and shapes of the original T-shirts. Logos and text may also feature in the new

garments as a reference to the previous life of the fabric. Corporate logos, printed text, events and locations can be interesting and humorous when taken out of context and re-constructed.

The T-shirt fabric is utilised according to the size of the pattern pieces from which the new garment will be constructed. Small pattern pieces may be arranged and cut from the fabric of individual T-shirts while larger pattern pieces may require the fabric of multiple T-shirts to be patched together. The fabric is patched by overlapping raw edges and sewing them together using a zigzag stitch, a decorative, elastic stitch that is more common in domestic sewing than industrial sportswear or high-end garments. These zig-zag joins have become part of the Maison Briz Vegas branding, a symbol of the slower and eccentric making process.



Logo featured in a jacket from 'The Wastelands' collection, Maison Briz Vegas, 2011.
Photos: © Maison Briz Vegas 2011.

Once cut, the pattern pieces are ready for printing. Van Lunn and Binotto create all their print designs themselves. Designs are researched and developed extensively on paper before being transferred to printing blocks or cut into stencils. The hand-printing is a slow process but allows for bespoke placement on each garment.

Other examples of surface decoration employed by Maison Briz Vegas include embroidery and appliqué. Garments are constructed with seams often left raw. Fastenings are simple ties or buttons – things that can be made from the same fabric or waste items. Finishing touches and embellishments are often created from rubbish, for example, thread made from plastic bags is used to embroider, bottle tops become buttons and sequins are cut from plastic bottles.



Bottle-top embellishment, 'The Glam and The Gloom' collection, Maison Briz Vegas, 2012.
Photo: © Maison Briz Vegas 2012.

Conclusion

While reuse and recycling can work to reduce waste levels and divert clothing from landfill, it is acknowledged that these strategies alone 'do not address the root cause of the waste problem in fashion or change the fundamentally inefficient industrial model' (Fletcher and Grose 2012: 64). However, these strategies and their engagement with issues of sustainability may have the potential to influence the fashion sector 'when fused with different ways of thinking and action'. The work of Orsola de Castro is an example of how operating in an alternative and activist manner within the system has the potential to influence consumers and other players within the industry. Her labels, Reclaim to Wear and From Somewhere, have collaborated with UK chains Top Shop and Tesco respectively, to introduce upcycled fashion collections made from the manufacturing waste of their own clothing production.

Maison Briz Vegas is, at this stage, an experimental fashion project and not a commercial business. However, by presenting garments that are both high-design and thoughtfully recycled in a significant fashion context, such as Paris Fashion Week, Maison Briz Vegas has been able to engage a high-profile luxury fashion audience. This high-end commercial recognition demonstrates that recycling and alternative, non-industrial models of fashion creation may have a valued place in the designer market.

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