



# Ready to Tear

A RECYCLER PAR EXCELLENCE.

BY HEIDI JULAVITS

Photographs by Jessica Haye and Clark Hsiao

Fashion Conundrum 2008: What does the responsibly minded clotheshorse wear for the End of the World as We Know It? The markets have tanked. The planet's on a high simmer. The fashion industry has responded to international belt- and guilt-tightening with two solutions: spend green or showcase a black sense of humor while you keep on shopping like it's 2004.

The work of the Los Angeles artist Bettina Hubby offers a third option that combines both greenness and a personalized high-fashion/high-art approach to soup-kitchen thrift. Hubby produces (sculptures may be the better word) new clothing from existing pieces. Specifically, she takes vintage garments by the likes of Issey Miyake and gives them second lives as one-of-a-kind objects. "The canvas is already stretched," she says of using old designer clothes. "I love recreating things from what they already are."

In high-heeled boots and a sleek mini-shift, Hubby vibes a youthful blend of retro and futuristic; she's like a bubblier, sexier Judy Jetson. Her designs are an intriguing combination of the exquisitely handmade and the intensely chic, and they hang like artworks on the walls of her Hollywood Boulevard studio. "I like to reveal parts of the body that are usually untended," she says of an embroidered rosette resembling a Gothic windowpane placed in a plain black Gaultier dress so the side of the stomach is stealthily exposed.

A graduate of the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, Hubby began her career working with soft sculptures. Then she started sewing them together and integrating them into her outfits. Soon her friends were asking for custom orders. One brought her an Issey Miyake shirt. "She asked me, 'Can you look at me and look at it and do something so I'll wear it?'"

In 1999, Hubby moved to L.A., a city she found, even by New York standards, designer-obsessed: "I'm saddened by how many people look to what others are buying for a sense of self-worth and don't choose to trust their own instincts." She responded by assembling a dress made entirely from labels snipped out of her own clothing, towels and pillows. "People were always asking me, 'Who are you wearing?' Now I could say, 'This is who I'm wearing.'"

Also displayed on her studio walls are pieces inspired by the artist Ed Ruscha, a friend she considers a muse. These dresses and jackets feature words from Ruscha's artwork ("the western boss," "engineer of faith") cut from T-shirts found on eBay. Hubby finds inspiration in artists as varied as Francis Bacon, Balthus and Louise Bourgeois. Her fashion idol is Martin Margiela. "He/they are a great example of how to be creative within the medium, how to control the image and the verbiage of the line and to do what inspires beyond mass production."

I brought her a charcoal plaid Piazza Sempione blazer to Hubbyize. I loved the wool fabric, but the cut was too equestrian-stodgy. Being scrutinized for a Hubby redesign is a bit like having your fortune told; she says she considers the client's persona and his or her style-humor-daring level. (Her prices range from \$300 to \$2,000.) If she can't meet her clients, she asks that they send her an image they love, like an abstract painting or an image of themselves (at any age) that pleases them. "You stand out without screaming," she told me. "You wear surprises that don't announce themselves with a bullhorn."

My eventual redesign was appropriately subtle. Hubby flashed up the stodge with gold topstitching around the collar, lapels and cuffs; she also accentuated the blazer's outline with silver and pewter ribbon from her own wedding dress. The clever effect is that of a blazer that looks like a 2-D drawing of a blazer. The real surprise, however, is the back: Hubby cut a round hole, then patched it with the very swatch of fabric she'd removed and gold-topstitched. Attached with some charcoal ribbon, it resembles a balloon, or a strange flower, or a blank head. And this only partially describes what she's done. Like an abstract painting, her work, in all its elegant obsessiveness, reveals more and more layers the longer you stare at it. Hubby recently completed a line of dresses featuring her silk-screened and embroidered photographs of fire hydrants. (Ruscha, asked by Vogue Hommes International to name the most erotic image he could think of, selected one of Hubby's hydrant photos.) "They always had personalities," she says of her hydrants. "They were doing drug deals; they were lovers." Still, she sees the line more as a series of limited editions. "I don't want to feel like I'm manufacturing," she says. Indeed, she compares her fashion approach to a nice, slow little train. "But it's working for me." ■

*Go to [hubbyco.com](http://hubbyco.com).*



THE LOS ANGELES ARTIST BETTINA HUBBY IN HER STUDIO.



HER SIGNATURE HYBRID.



LABEL DRESS.



CAPE STITCHED FROM LINGERIE.