

A sewist finds hope in the climate crisis

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My sewing machine whirs as the needle stitches up the sides of a forest green cotton dress. The sound nearly drowns out the voice of Joni Mitchell playing from the speakers in the craft room. I slowly work the fabric through the machine with both hands so that the front and back of the dress are bound together with thread. I finish the seam, snip the loose fibers, and shake out the garment onto my lap. The fabric is three layers of cotton gauze, blanketing me in warmth. On that summer morning as I slowly work on my dress, I occasionally stop to spy on the crows perched in the branches of my neighbors maple tree.

When we first moved into our second story apartment, we converted what was once a shoe closet for the past tenants into a multi purpose craft room. The small space includes: an eclectic mix of colorful cotton, linen, and wool fabrics stacked onto shelves, a large desk that is the permanent resting spot for my old Singer sewing machine, artwork and thank you notes covered in painted birds, flowers, and horses taped onto the wall, and bins of zippers, elastic, needles, paint, brushes, and more stacked haphazardly on the floor. As the pandemic forced the world into isolation, I replaced my social calendar of Zumba classes and coffee dates with a queue of sewing projects. I spent more and more time in the craft room, squirreling away fibers for creative ideas, dreaming up patterns for naturally dyed patchwork quilts and dresses, and working with my hands. The hobby that I learned from my mother and grandmother several years before, turned into a refuge in a world of uncertainty.

The garment I am working on is a simple sleeveless green dress the color of a juniper bush. Its lofty texture reminds me of resting on a mossy log on the sun dappled forest floor. I pull my eyes away from the craft room window and begin placing pins along the neckline to attach a piece of fabric - bias tape - to the dress so that the hem looks neat and finished. As the machine moves the fabric along, I carefully pull out each pin as I sew. I count 1 pin, 2 pins, 3 pins - there ends up being 12 pins total. With the removal of each pin I consider how a dress found in a department store may be created. I consider the sewists mass producing this dress in a factory - working long days in a factory line making 100, 200, 300, up to 1,200 garments a day. Fashion has a very serious sustainability problem. The fashion industry is responsible for a growing percentage of carbon emissions that are contributing to continued anthropogenic climate change. When I go into a department store I cannot help but think of the ripple effects of my purchase: will buying this dress support a system of unjust treatment of garment workers, harmful pollution of waterways, and exported secondhand textiles that disrupt communities. In short - will buying this dress contribute to the peril of people, the planet, and myself?

Sewing is a way to regenerate my relationship to my closet and the planet. I can't make clothing as fast as I can go through the checkout line at the store. I have to slow down. In doing so I reconsider the time, energy, and money that goes into what I wear. The choices I make about what I wear, and the privilege I have to make those choices, allow me to make a statement. The clothes that I wear represent the future I want for this planet.

I am nearly done with my dress. I place it on the ironing board and start folding up the bottom to hem. It's a tedious process of measuring, folding, ironing, measuring, folding, ironing. The repetition allows my mind to wander. Sequined dresses. Striped sweaters. 'Cottagecore' tops. Linen jumpsuits. I consider the unsustainable pace of the current fashion industry in generating trends. Rather than nature's four seasons, fast fashion delivers new clothing to store shelves using a calendar of fifty seasons. In the process, the planet continues to warm, and marginalized communities and garment workers pay the price. However, in a world of consumerism where I feel like I have lost control and hope, where nearly every purchase carries ripple effects, sewing has become a radical practice. In quitting the fifty seasons fast fashion calendar, I uphold nature's four seasons. Spring is a time for new beginnings - I plant indigo, marigold, and coreopsis flower seedlings that I later use to dye fibers with to sew. Summer is a generative time for making and creating. In fall, I forage for oak galls and leaves for creating naturally printed fabrics. In winter, I embrace the quiet, choosing to slowly plan, sketch, and mend. Therefore, I make my own clothes not just as an expression of creativity but also as an act of care - for others, the planet, and myself.

In my craft room, I hold my green cotton sleeveless dress up to the window and then down onto my lap again. The last step is stitching on small wooden buttons by hand. My needle comes up through the fabric, through the buttonhole and back down again - this repetitive motion ultimately results in a secure button. Like the threads I sew, each stitch represents a binding that further secures me to the planet. This mending is a step towards reconnecting with the earth, such that sewing is a small act of hope in the climate crisis. Transforming a pile of fabric scraps into a wearable dress often feels like magic. With my sewing needle as the wand and the instructions as the spell, I give new life to textiles with my craft. While doing so, I cast my hopes for our collective futures.