

#WHOMADEMYCLOTHES

Fiona Clements



Figure 1. Senorita AweSUMO stands with Robbie Burns upon completion of #whomademyclothes korowai for iD Dunedin Fashion Week and Fashion Revolution Day, 2015.

While researching the fashion industry, I became disheartened and disenchanted by the environmental unsustainability of fashion 'waste' that ends up in our landfills¹ as a by-product of 'fast fashion,' and also of the economic imperative which drives the fast fashion industry.² Fast fashion features short runs and large quantities of stock sold at low prices through discount clothing outlets. The result of these short runs, fast turnarounds and low costs is exploitation in the production chain,³ including low wages for impoverished workers and unsafe working conditions and work environments.

In 2012, I created my own label as a local solution to this global problem. Senorita AweSUMO is a zero-waste textile label dedicated to solving the problem of overconsumption in the fashion industry. In producing my clothing, I upcycle textile waste, reuse old garments and repurpose vintage fabrics to create high-quality garments. My label seeks to encourage conscious consumption by spreading awareness and giving wearers an environmental choice in clothing.

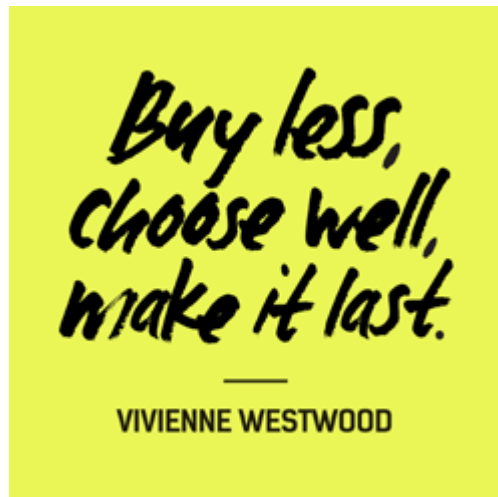
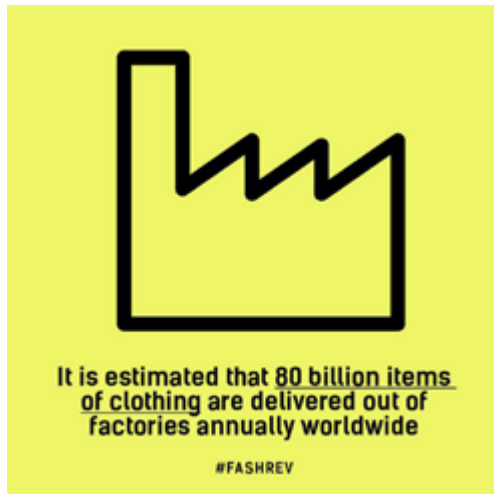
At the forefront of the global response to fast fashion is Fashion Revolution, a global coalition of designers, academics, writers, business leaders and parliamentarians who are calling for systemic reform of the fashion supply chain. On a global scale, Fashion Revolution is advocating for changes to working conditions in the fast-fashion industry.⁴

According to Fashion Revolution co-founder Carry Somers, “When everything in the fashion industry is only focused on making a profit, human rights, the environment and worker’s rights get lost.”⁵ Fashion Revolution Day is held each year on 24 April, the anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Rana Plaza was an illegally built garment factory which collapsed in 2013, killing 1133 people and injuring over two thousand. In New Zealand, this is the day before Anzac Day, an already emotional time – “Lest we Forget.”

Fashion Revolution Day 2015

Fashion Revolution aims to use the power of fashion to inspire a permanent change in the fashion industry and reconnect the broken links in the supply chain. At the moment of purchase, most of us are unaware of the processes and impacts involved in the creation of a garment. We need to reconnect through a positive narrative, to understand that we aren’t just purchasing a garment or accessory, but a whole chain of value and relationships.

To achieve this goal, fashion reports have been conducted on various retailers and retail streams within the fashion industry worldwide. The Australian Fashion Report was released by Baptist World Aid Australia on 16 April 2015, a week before Fashion Revolution Day.⁶ The report surveyed 219 brands, assessing their performance according to four categories: policies, traceability and transparency, monitoring and training, and worker rights.



Figures 2-5. Be Curious, Find Out, Do Something! A call to action to all consumers from Fashion Revolution Day.



Figure 6-8. Taniko weave in the cloak rear of Robbie Burns' statue and as viewed from front and side.

This year, Fashion Revolution Day fell during iD Dunedin Fashion Week 2015, and in response I created a large-scale public textile work as a visual cue designed to trigger conversations about the sustainability of fashion in the marketplace.⁷ The work featured the words “#who made my clothes” on a korowai (a woven cloak) which I made from recycled t-shirts that would otherwise have been destined for landfill. The cloak design was based on korowai from the Otago Museum’s collection, and I received direction in korowai construction from weaver and teacher Robin Hill.

I constructed a makeshift loom from a clothing rack, to which was added a length of wood with a row of nails protruding from it. The large size of the work meant that I had to first sketch out the overall design on graph paper as a guide for the size of the panels (Figure 9). I also worked in thirds, limiting the amount of weaving undertaken at any one time. My use of unorthodox materials meant that much experimentation with the width and tensions of whenu and aho⁸ was required to attain an even weave texture. I found that cotton was easier to work with than synthetic fibres.

I wove consistently for six weeks, using approximately 150 deconstructed t-shirts. I pushed myself to work under sweatshop conditions in any spare moment (outside of my day job). Physically, it was extremely hard work and was mentally exhausting. I was joined by a large and dedicated volunteer workforce who helped with cutting, sewing strips and weaving as the project deadline loomed closer. Without their help, the work would not have been completed, and this experience strengthened my view that such projects are best undertaken with communities of people working towards common goals.⁹

With more awareness of ethical garment-making – including the fairtrade movement – and since the inauguration of Fashion Revolution Day, customers are starting to ask more questions of their retailers. So I ask you, #whomademyclothes? Do you care? Will you be more aware the next time you purchase a garment – will you ask your retailer where it came from? Will you aim for a more sustainable wardrobe?



Figure 9 Working pattern for korowai.



Figure 10 and 11. A community made this: friends and whanau cutting and sewing t-shirt strips.

Senorita AweSUMO is **Fiona Clements**. Of Pakeha and Kai Tahu ancestry, Fiona is the founder of sustainable fashion designer clothing label Senorita AweSUMO. Her work includes community and education-led initiatives. Fiona gained a Bachelor of Design (Fashion) from Otago Polytechnic in 2011 (passed with merit) and her final year collection, *Te Warehouse Whakapau*, was included in the runway show held at the Dunedin Railway Station during iD Fashion Week XV (Fashion iD, Dunedin) in 2012. See <http://www.idfashion.co.nz/content/exhibitions.php>.

- 1 "The industry is huge, producing – by my reckoning – more than 80bn new garments a year. We often dump clothes before the first wash. And while initiatives like Greenpeace's Detox Fashion try to clean up fashion, in pollution terms the fashion industry still comes second only to the oil and gas industry. That's some rap sheet." Lucy Siegle, "What Clothes can I Wear to Help Save the Planet?" *The Guardian*, 5 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/05/what-clothes-can-help-save-the-planet-lucy-siegle>.
- 2 "Recent decades have seen the rise of fast fashion, a retail style that consists of the expedited production and distribution of short runs of trend-based fashion." Tansy E Hoskins, "Sweatshops and Slavery;" in her *Stitched Up: The Anti-capitalist Book of Fashion* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 70.

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "Upcoming Events," *Fashion Revolution*, <http://fashionrevolution.org/events/> [accessed 24 April 2015].
- 5 "Fashion Lovers to Demand That Global Fashion Industry Cleans up its Act on Fashion Revolution Day 2015," *Fairtrade Foundation*, News, 25 March 2015, <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/en/media-centre/news/march-2015/fashion-revolution-day-2015> (press release).
- 6 Gershon Nimbalker, Jasmin Mawson and Claire Cremen, *The Truth behind the Barcode: Australian Fashion Report 2015*, <http://www.baptistworldaid.org.au/assets/Be-Fair-Section/FashionReport.pdf>.
- 7 Alongside the public artwork, I took part in a panel discussion to debate contemporary ethical and sustainable fashion initiatives that 'put people, purpose, and planet ahead of profit.' The panel was chaired by Simon Swale of the Otago Polytechnic School of Design and held at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. See "Cloak Points up Fashion Issues," *Otago Daily Times*, 21 April 2015, <http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/339718/cloak-points-fashion-issues>.
- 8 The *aho* (weft, or horizontal threads) and the *whenu* (warp, or vertical threads).
- 9 Thanks go to Otago Polytechnic, the Robbie Burns Pub and 'anon' for their generous donations to cover the cost of my being an iD associated event. Thanks are also due to my cutters, sewers, weavers and general helpers: Paul and Glenys Clements, Aroha Novak, Alice Anonymous, Hinewai, Ali Shackelton, Shae McMillan, Nathan Kelly, Colleen Kelly, Vanetta Rosenburg, Rosie Manins, Melanie Child, DiZZiePiXie, Rachael Lodge, Anna Clements, Brenda Morrison, Daniel Kwok, Dallas and Christine from Aunty, Sharon Te Au, Meeral Patel, Tom and the Blue Oyster Art Project Space