



Beth Hatton and I both attended a Nalda Searles workshop at one of the Mittagong FORUMs back in the 1990's, where Nalda taught us her technique of stitching with grass, and it became clear that we all have an affinity for the grass that grows under our feet.

This year I made a grass sneaker for the Craft Victoria exhibition 'Perspective'. The exhibition theme was City / Country and addressed the changes occurring to geographical boundaries between urban and rural areas. This is what I said in my statement for *Grass Sneaker*: "Demographic change is sneaking across the Victorian landscape. The rural town of my childhood is becoming a dormitory suburb, now only an hour by train or freeway to the centre of Melbourne. Urban style development of land into housing estates rather than single block development exacerbates the destruction of rural landscape. Social change occurs as new residents demand services and standards readily available in areas with a higher population density.

"Worked predominately in natural fibres, my sneaker is crafted from the most common of materials - grass collected from my home town. The 'logo' or flash on the side of the sneaker, of an arrow travelling backwards, utilises stems from an endemic fern. The increasing loss of such small plants in large scale housing developments is indicative of a backwards step. As sneakers replace Blundstones on the pavements, I ponder the increasing impact of footprints on our fragile environment."

Nalda Searles calls the technique that both Beth and I used "cobbling", because the technique cobbles together whatever diverse range of materials the maker chooses to incorporate. But the association with shoe repairing and cobblers of old means my thoughts often turn to shoes as I form the myriad stitches to create new work.

The inspiration for the 'Shoe Collection' made by Therese Flynn-Clarke began in a drawing and concept development class as part of her Diploma of Visual Arts at Southbank Institute of Technology in Brisbane. A task was set to create a 'container' that incorporated text and/or image. Therese folded and stitched a soft palm sheath to make a pair of shoes.

To include text in her work, Therese said: "I had a stamp that said 'If the shoe fits buy one in every colour' - very appropriate as I have always loved shoes and have followed this very process, usually buying an outfit to match the shoes and not the other way around, so I made a label with a size on it and the stamped text and stitched this into the plant fibre shoes."

This first pair inspired Therese to go on and make a collection of shoes experimenting, with different techniques and materials including palm sheaths, vines and seaweed. Amongst the varied styles was a pair of baby shoes twined in one piece, slippers, shoes with a small heel and clogs. The collection was exhibited in October 2008, at the Museum of Brisbane retail window and was entitled "If the Shoe Fits Buy One in Every Colour."

For Therese each pair of shoes she made expressed a different meaning; for instance her clogs carried a handwritten story concerning her grandmother during the Second World War. The tradition of women stitching and sewing and their adornments began to lead to her creating bangles and handbags as well as shoes.

Rocio Roman's installation is part of her work for her Honours in Fine Arts at Monash University. Her installation gave me a different perspective on shoes in our society, but I'll let her words tell the story.

"This project was initiated after my grandfather's death on the 7th November 2008. A few days after his passing I received some registered mail, and a box addressed to me. As I began tearing the wrapping off the box I realised it was a shoe box. When I opened the box, my grandfather's shoes that he had worn for 28 years were carefully placed inside.

"As a child I would ask my grandfather "why don't you buy new shoes?" and his response was "I have hands to fix them." When I returned to Chile 15 years ago, I glanced at his feet and he wore the same shoes I had seen before. I drove down to the main town to buy him new shoes. When I returned and gave him the new shoes, ever so softly he whispered 'thank you, but you shouldn't have.' He never wore them; instead he placed them next to his found book collection on a shelf in his bedroom.

"As of the 17th November 2008, up until 12th May 2009, I began picking up shoes off the streets of Melbourne. All sorts of shoes, men's, women's and children's. Each shoe was photographed in its found state and each shoe's address archived in a little black book. In total 4,137 shoes were found in six months."

Rocio's installation alluded not just to cultural differences, but to the culture of over consumption and waste in our society. A chat with Rocio, to see what common ground we might share, led to us discovering new aspects and meanings in the shoes we all wear, and I think I have enough inspiration to make shoes imbued with meaning for years.

This interest in shoes is possibly not universal but I've thoroughly enjoyed looking at the shoes made by geographically isolated artists, each quietly using footwear to express their own particular vision. I've wandered foot loose, trying not to use a heavy tread, or be too big for my boots, but light of foot as I wonder where my feet will next lead. □



Shoes seen this page top, Therese Flynn-Clarke; bottom of page, 'Stiletto' by Virginia Kaiser.