



Second Skin

7th November 2014 – 25 January 2015
National Craft Gallery

Curator essay by Louise Allen

There are many reasons why **Second Skin** is an important undertaking at this moment in time in Ireland. We have an incredibly talented pool of internationally acclaimed fashion designers. Support in Ireland for established and emerging designers is limited. Most graduates move abroad and for those who return, a lack of access to skills, production facilities and finance makes it difficult to locate and remain here. Fashion is big business. We often underestimate the cultural value that Irish designers of international repute contribute to the perception of Ireland overseas. We have also failed to recognise the economic potential that the fashion industry, given a level of investment and dedicated supports, could bring.

There are common challenges facing the industry across Europe. Here in Ireland, the demise of production and manufacturing has displaced jobs, skills and our appreciation for quality and craftsmanship, the bespoke and the tailor-made. While the change is influenced by multiple factors, supply, demand and profit are the key drivers. As a child, almost every mother I knew could knit at the speed of light, owned a sewing machine, regularly made, fixed, adapted or customised clothes. When they had the opportunity, they saved and carefully considered their purchases before investing in them. Today we have become used to fast fashion. It is cheap, new and disposable. We buy without thinking. A top for €19.99, a dress for €59.99, the quick win, the instant gratification, the 'bargain' has become our norm. The psychological effect of this has come to determine what we consume, purchase, demand, wear and feel.

We rarely equate these actions with consequences. We don't tend to consider the collective impact of our individual buying patterns. We rarely relate them to a loss of skills; or an opportunity to create jobs in Ireland; or the future impact that a disposable fashion economy has on our environment. We have been living in a society of immediacy that has created a disconnect from our value systems. In the very recent past the impact of this level of disconnect led to the near collapse of economies. This in turn is leading to a reordering of our priorities and a renewed connection to and consideration of our values, our communities and our local and global economies.

Trends in fast fashion are slowly changing as awareness of the long-term issues of sustainability grows. This is supported by the very real and significant impact that technology and the Internet are having on the way we communicate, share, create, access and consume.

While it may be unlikely that we will once again return to the high levels of manufacturing and production that Ireland once had across the EU, there is a cultural, economic,

educational and psychological argument to be made for bringing back a level of production, skills and infrastructure. The current trend in sustainable fashion is leading the way back to community engagement, providing access to skills and engendering a sense of empowerment in the design of unique, local and individualised clothing. In Ireland, the work of organisations such as Re-dress, the Council of Irish Fashion Designers and the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland plays a pivotal role in raising awareness and offering a level of support to our highly talented fashion designers who have gained, or are seeking to gain, international recognition and who wish to work, live and produce in Ireland.

Second Skin posed a challenge to four Irish fashion labels - Jennifer Rothwell, Joanne Hynes, NATALIEBCOLEMAN and Lennon Courtney - to design, source and produce a garment or range of clothing on the island of Ireland and to document the opportunities and challenges in doing so. In the realisation of these garments, designers collaborated with and were supported by a myriad of third level institutes, organisations and producers in Dublin, Donegal, Derry, Kilkenny and Wicklow.

I hope that Second Skin will help to create a dialogue and raise further awareness in order to empower people to make conscious and informed choices; choices that support and foster pride in our indigenous and internationally recognised fashion designers. It is my ambition that the dialogues and conversations supported by research currently being undertaken into manufacturing and production on the island of Ireland will provide a very real foundation for future investment in the sector and in the fashion industry.

In 2015 we will celebrate a year of Irish design throughout the island of Ireland and internationally. Second Skin is one of the core touring exhibitions in the Irish Design 2015 programme that will highlight the calibre of Irish design across a broad range of disciplines.

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