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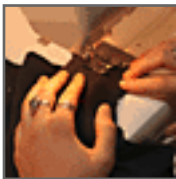
San Francisco Chronicle

CUTTING EDGES Do-it-yourself T-shirt surgery

Lisa Hix, Special to The Chronicle

Sunday, February 26, 2006

If you've been living in this country at least 15 years, odds are you have a T-shirt collection. Odds are also that you can't remember where half of them came from, although, thankfully, it's usually spelled out for you in chunky type. I was in a volleyball tournament? I signed up for that credit card offer? And really, what fashionista in the Bay Area wears your standard men's T-shirts? They're



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big, they're boxy, they're shapeless -- in other words, terribly unflattering.

The wonderful thing is that an ugly old T-shirt taking up space in your drawer can become something much, much better with a good-quality pair of scissors and a little ingenuity. You can cut new necks or sleeves and holes in strategic places, do lacing or ties. With two swipes of the sewing machine, a boxy shirt becomes a baby T. You can do shirring or ruching (i. e., making attractive wrinkles or bunches), make ruffles or add lace or ribbons, safety pins or other embellishments. T-shirts can become skirts, shorts or bags.

Even though punk rockers slashed their sleeves off decades ago and other examples of altered clothing states existed long before that, it appears that over the past five years a do-it-yourself trend known as "T-shirt surgery" or "T-shirt reconstruction" has taken off. On the LiveJournal blog (livejournal.com), a community known as "t_shirt_surgery" has exploded from a handful of members when it started in late 2002 to more than 13,000 at last count.

Stores like Needles and Pens in San Francisco and Oakland's Rock Paper Scissors Collective and Cyzuki Industries sell handmade wares and reconstructed T's. Places such as Stitch Lounge and the Sewing Workshop in San Francisco have offered classes on the subject. Even chain stores like Urban Outfitters and Abercrombie & Fitch have gotten in on the act -- selling clothes that look like the result of T-shirt surgeries.

And then there are books like "Rip It: How to Deconstruct and Reconstruct the Clothes of Your Dreams" (Fireside/



Get It Now

Simon & Schuster, \$15) by fashion designer Elissa Meyrich, published last month. Filled with 190 pages of tips and techniques, the book is a paperback version of the class she teaches at her Sew Fast Sew Easy studio in New York.

In March, Berkeley-raised sisters Faith and Justina Blakeney -- along with friends they met in their adopted hometown of Florence, Italy, Anka Livakovic and Ellen Schultz -- will publish a book called "99 Ways to Sew, Trim and Tie Your T-Shirt Into Something Special," a step-by-step guide for altering your T's with just scissors, needle and thread. If that's not enough options for you, "Generation T: 108 Ways to Transform a T-shirt" by Megan Nicolay -- who runs the Generation-T.com Web site -- will hit bookstore shelves in April.

In the fall, San Francisco's Melissa Alvarado, Melissa Rannels and Hope Meng, founders of the Stitch Lounge, will publish their first book in a series to help wannabe T-shirt surgeons, "Sew Subversive," which gives a basic introduction to sewing, with important tidbits like how to thread a sewing machine, as well as 20 how-tos for refashioning projects.

Hayley Williams, of Tomball, Texas, a co-founder of the LiveJournal forum, remembers how shocked she was when her online community, where people post T-shirts they've altered and sewing instructions, took off.

"A friend and I were talking about how cool it was to fix up all those plain band T-shirts that we had," Williams says. "And she was like, 'Dude, we should totally make a community.' I thought that

it was just going to be a few people and be kind of a dead community. But it just started growing and growing and growing. And now, it's thousands and thousands of members. It's insane."

"Now you're seeing it all over the place," Alvarado of Stitch Lounge says.

"People are doing deconstruction of T-shirts in, like, Us Weekly magazine. It's like the cool new thing to do. Even just the idea of taking control of your fashion and what it says about you."

The Stitch Lounge in San Francisco's Hayes Valley sprang out of the notion of reconstructing clothes. Three childhood friends, Alvarado, Rannels and Meng -- all crafty women with un-crafty majors: engineering, math and economics -- pictured opening a space where you could buy old clothes and then alter them on the spot. With some help from the Women's Initiative for Self-Employment, a nonprofit business school, as well as volunteers and donations, the three made their dream a reality in June 2004.

With its orange walls and faux-furry lantern lights, Stitch Lounge strikes you as friendly and urban chic the moment you walk through the door. You can rent one of the six regular sewing machines, dig through laundry bins of old T's and jeans to purchase and transform, and consult a whole shelf full of sewing books or clothes in the "inspiration" section. You can purchase grommets, zippers, snaps, ribbon, lace and bric-a-brac, and the thread comes with the machine rental. The lounge also features several specialized machines and a big cutting table. Up front, the boutique offers off-the-wall designs by locals, like

a skirt made of ties, and at the counter, you can sign up for classes or one-on-one sewing lessons.

"It's this community: There are people there to help you, people are throwing ideas back and forth," Alvarado says.

"We look at it as sort of the modern version of the sewing circle."

In Italy, the Blakeney sisters and friends opened their Compai store, which features both vintage and reconstructed clothing, at the end of 2002. Soon, older Italians were coming by, dropping off their unloved old clothes, which they could find on the rack later, reconstructed and given a new life.

The sisters got so much interest in what Italians call "customized" clothing that they published "99 Ways" on their own a year ago and started a workshop called "the Style Clinic" for "nursing old T-shirts back to health." Now, their book is being republished and distributed through an imprint of Random House.

"The T-shirt is such a nice object because it's really something that everybody has and it's universal -- it's masculine and feminine," Faith Blakeney says on the phone from Florence. "They always have histories behind them and so that's also kind of fun to play with. And they're easy to use. You don't have to really sew, you can just cut, you don't have to worry about hemming. It's like the perfect elementary disposable object that anybody can use to begin learning how to transform clothes."

Surprisingly, although "99 Ways" focuses on girly designs, the Blakeney sisters encountered just as many men who wanted their T-shirts altered at their

Style Clinic. T-shirt surgery practitioners say the swell of popularity with men and women of the handmade, deconstructed look is an excellent sign that being true to yourself is in.

"People's personal style, and their own customization of their own clothes to whatever they personally like, is definitely a big, big thing right now," says Laura Brody, a clothing and costume designer living in Hollywood who has taught classes on T-shirt reconstruction in San Francisco. "I like that there's not just one style, because fashion always kind of dictates that to people, 'This is the look for fall.' It's not as rigid as it used to be -- which I think is fantastic."

Of course, clothing reconstruction has been going on since the early days of punk, when safety pins were all the rage. But it wasn't until the turn of the millennium that it spread from the punk scene into the world of big-city hipsters. Brody, who lived in San Francisco for eight years, says she first saw the look on Bay Area streets around 2001. And the normal progression followed. It hit stylish boutiques by 2002, and then the big chains in 2003-2004.

Both Williams and Brody see a connection to the music-fan community. When you go to a concert by the Need or Nine Inch Nails, you come home with a souvenir -- an oversized shirt declaring you were there, which you will probably never wear.

For Compai, T-shirt surgery has a very important environmental component: Keeping all that cotton knit out of landfills. "Here, strangely in Italy, even more so than in the States, we see piles of clothing in the garbage," says Faith

Blakeney. "And having grown up in Berkeley, that is something that I can't tolerate at all."

For Alvarado, it's also about not being able to let go of old clothes she loves. Sort of like the penultimate scene in "Pretty in Pink," when Molly Ringwald sews old prom dresses into her own creation, refashioning is a favorite pastime of Alvarado's.

"We're all sort of clothes hounds and we hold on to things," she says. "And we think, 'Oh, I've had this sweater because I love it, and I just love everything about it, and it has all these memories, but it's all pilly and I don't want to wear it anymore, what do I do with it?' Here's this sweater that I'll never wear normal because it's really tattered, but I've made some really cool leg warmers, because I cut the sleeves off."

Also, there's a component of taking manufactured items that don't quite fit your body or your style, and making them into something that suits you.

"We had so many clothes in our wardrobe or that were hand-me-downs or what-have-you, and we were like, 'Gosh, if this only had a different waistline,' 'Man, if this was only cut to a different length, this would be so cute!'" says Faith Blakeney. "That's kind of how Compai the store began, we were just kind of transforming our own things to adapt them to our style. Then we realized, Wow, this is so easy. You don't really need a base in sewing or in pattern making to transform your whole wardrobe. And it's actually a good way to learn how clothing is constructed."

The beautiful part is: There's really no

need to shell out big bucks at a Chelsea boutique or a mall store for a reconstructed T. Anyone can do it, even the clumsiest of crafters.

"I don't even really sew," Williams says. "When I reconstruct T-shirts, mostly I'll do a lot of cutting up or lacing or stuff like that. I can hand-sew to an extent, but I don't use machines and I don't do anything really, really fancy."

Of course, it doesn't hurt to support Bay Area artists at Needles and Pens, Stitch Lounge and the RPS Collective who are selling their ideas more than anything. (RPS also offers sewing classes and circles on certain nights.)

"I think so much more of it is paying for the person's creativity and years of training to develop their skill to just whip you up something fantastic out of recycled materials," Brody says.

That said, don't feel you have to shell out big bucks for Urban Outfitters' Urban Renewal line or clothes from other mainstream companies that look cut-up or hand-altered.

"For a while, Urban Outfitters was selling skirts that were made out of T-shirts," Williams says. "Which is exactly what people do on t_shirt_surgery. It was just weird to see all these things in stores that people are making themselves. In stores, they're so expensive. It just seems so much easier and so much more worth it -- more gratifying -- to do it yourself."

Resources for refashioning

Stitch Lounge, 182 Gough St., (415) 431-3739, stitchlounge.com. Next T-shirt reconstruction class is 2-4 p.m. March 11. \$45.

Compai: compai.com.

LiveJournal's t_shirt_surgery: community.livejournal.com/t_shirt_surgery/profile.

Rock Paper Scissors Collective, 2278 Telegraph Ave., Oakland, (510) 238-9171, rpscollective.com.

Needles and Pens, 483 14th St., San Francisco, (415) 255-1534, needles-pens.com.

Page J - 1

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