

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

WOW: Where Art, Theatre, and Fashion Collide

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Even Kiwis will admit New Zealand isn't known for style, with a capital "S", like in London or Paris. A wonderful independent streak maybe – I've seen several mature women happily sporting vibrant pink or purple hair – but not necessarily making drop-dead fashion statements. One popular fashion fad that seems nearly ubiquitous is the tunic + leggings. It works for some, but I've tried it, and it mostly makes me look like I'm wearing my maternity clothes again. There are some fun and fabulous designers like [Trelise Cooper](#), [Karen Walker](#) and [Zambesi](#), a favorite of an American friend of mine. But Zambesi clothes are heavy on the black and gray and seem to "wear you" instead of the other way around. For my tiny-framed fashionable friend that worked well. For me, it looked like I was draped in a drab-colored costume.

In Wellington, where I live, black and gray seem to be the staple color for any wardrobe – men's or women's. And not just in winter. Black tights can be spotted year-round, though to be fair, summer here can be a bit chilly. I wear pants all the time to combat that. Also, the Wellington wind makes anything but Maxi skirts rather risky.

You certainly see more color in the summer, but then it swings to the other extreme: newspaper mailers that advertise summer styles seem to be filled with florid florals. The prints may be a vestige of Mother England's lasting influence, but even though I lived in England too, I'm rarely tempted to buy flowers for anything but my dining table.

So, after all I've described, it may seem counter-intuitive to hear that Wellington hosts a festival each year that spotlights style and creativity.

WOW – or the [World of Wearable Art](#) – is an extravaganza of creative inspiration and imagination. It's a competition for designers that welcomes both students and international talent (including Americans – [one of whom won an award this year](#)). WOW forces them to break through the constraints of fashion to incorporate art and transform clothes into something that can literally take flight – at least on stage.

As this year was my first chance to see the usually sold-out show, my friends dubbed me a WOW virgin. I was fresh-eyed and innocent. While they debated how elements of this 25th year of the show compared to previous ones, I sat transfixed, not knowing where to look, literally awed by what unfolded in front of me: a mix of Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics, modern dance Pacifica-style, Cabaret-esque entertainment and a fashion show with clothes made of everything you can imagine.



Inkling, by Gillian Saunders, Nelson, New Zealand. First Place Weta Work Shop Section. Materials: EVA Foam, paint.

Image courtesy of [WOW](#)

The [supreme award winner of this year's show](#) was a fascinating cultural/political statement made

of ceramic feathers and coins designed by two sisters from Christchurch.

The annual competition is a big deal here in the capital city, attracting tourists from all over the country. You can tell when the show is about to open – not just by the banners on street lights, but also by the gaggles of women shopping – noticeable for the fact that it’s during the workweek. The stores, too, get in on the spirit and design WOW-inspired creations for their window displays.

The WOW competition lures entrants not just with its pitch, “the human body is a canvas,” but also by offering \$165k (NZD) in prizes. This year’s supreme award winner (the sisters) shared \$30k in prizes. Soon they will garner international acclaim, and potentially coffee table book posterity. The newest [book featuring WOW winners](#) is for sale as well as an [entire publication highlighting bizarre bras](#). They didn’t include that category in this year’s show but past highlights have been bras made from everything from metal to hedgehog skins (we’re assured they were roadkill).



The Exchange by Taytanna and Natasha Meharry.

Image courtesy of [WOW](#)

The WOW competition bills itself as something “extraordinary” where fashion, art and theatre collide. It offers a challenge to designers who dare to be “brave.” And it seems to bring the creative best out of this innovative society. Kiwi innovation, up until now, [has perhaps been most evident in extreme sports](#) rather than extreme style.

Dresses made of plastic knives and forks or [Qwerty keyboard keys](#) may not make it to Main Street – or even the Golden Mile, here in Wellington. Then again, when I see highlights of fashion shows happening in fashion capitals like Paris, not many of those concept clothes seem to translate to street wear either. Admittedly, I’m no style icon, opting for comfort over a fashion statement (much to my colorful and adventurous mother’s eternal disappointment), but I am impressed by the brave, bizarre flights of fancy that transported me for a moment to another world. WOW is right.

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