

One Woman's Trash

By Brenna Sheets

Since we were teenagers, my twin sister Alyssa, who is creative, scrappy, and a little stubborn, has developed a habit of turning everyday trash into treasures. She's made fake nails from bits of plastic water bottles, handbags from grocery bags, holiday decorations from discarded yarn and fabric, and jewelry from old cardboard, clay, and metal. She has always been good at inventing the new from the old.

Looking at her creative work now, I see that her art foreshadows a broader shift in the fashion and jewelry industries. We are now living in a moment where reuse, recycling, and reinvention are more than quaint ideals; they are economic, ethical, and aesthetic imperatives. In her own small practice, my sister enacted a generational assertion: The world we inherit must be preserved, and creative reinvention is part of the legacy.

In recent years, the fashion and jewelry industries have been under pressure to reduce waste and resource depletion, even with its continuous growth. According to one market forecast, the

global recycled textiles market is projected to grow from about USD 5.76 billion in 2023 to USD 8.69 billion by 2032.

This growth comes with massive consequences. The fashion industry produces over 100 billion garments annually, 92 million tons of them destined for landfills or incineration.

Textile production doubled from 2000 to 2015, but the duration of garment use decreased by 36%. The recycling rate for all textiles was about 15% in 2018, and only 8% in 2023.

Luckily, trends with younger consumers showcase a new mindset that may just help solve the problem. The thrifting and upcycling market for clothing and textiles has taken off in recent years thanks to social media, with the value of the global

secondhand apparel market rising from \$138 to \$211 billion from 2021 to 2023 alone, and is expected to reach \$351 billion by 2027. The online resale market has also experienced a major boom, accounting for \$20 billion in 2023 alone.

Choosing to thrift and give items a second life shows that the younger generation doesn't prioritize the new and



shiny if it won't last; they want what's going to leave the oceans clean enough to glimmer against the sun.

According to Vogue, fast fashion—which primarily targets younger audiences due to its low prices—is responsible for 10% of carbon emissions and 11.3 million tons of landfill waste each year. However, Vogue notes that Gen Z is leading the push for more eco-friendly and ethical fashion choices, representing a shift in the attention of the target market.

These shifts not only reduce carbon emissions and mining waste, but also signal to consumers that sustainability is integral to luxury, not an afterthought.

My sister's studio of upcycled art is a microcosm of how younger generations are redefining what's desirable. Where older models prized pristine newness, many younger consumers now prize authenticity, traceability, and ecological responsibility.

My sister often sends photos of her new artwork to our family group chat. I'll open my phone at 8:00 p.m. to see, "I crocheted a garland from old fabric and stuck fall leaves on them!" or "I made this carpet out of scrap fabric lol." My mom will always respond, "You should sell that!" or "Where do you find the time for this?" but it's something we've all come to admire about her.

Her creations are an act of resistance saying "We will not discard our planet for our vanity." Despite the tension of older business models, younger creators and consumers like her are pushing a countercurrent: Material should

tell a story; that waste is not inevitable; that regrowth and regeneration are design parameters.

Brands that were once dismissive of "craft upcycling" now have entire programs to promote recycled components. The narrative is shifting. Material origin is becoming part of the aesthetic.

When I reflect on my sister's experiments, I am struck by how prescient they are. Her side projects were actually seeds in the larger movement unfolding now.

We are watching the "new old" replace the "old new." Discarded plastic becomes high art, wasted textiles become couture, scrap metal becomes sterling. Those who cling to the old paradigm will feel its disruption, and those who embrace reinvention will help shape a more resilient future.

In the end, fashion and jewelry are not just about adornment. They are about identity, promise, and responsibility. And if my sister's clay-and-plastic necklace tells me anything, it's this: What we make today is a statement to the generations to come.

