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WATCH**San Luis Obispo**
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Earth Gowns: Nature and Narrative in the Fiber Arts

Sarah Linn



Gaia has just awoken from her slumber, and she's not happy.

"Mother Earth has been in dreamland. She's been asleep," Santa Margarita artist **Jennifer Blue** explained, describing her piece "Reawakening." "She wakes up from her dream and looks around and goes, 'What's going on? I'm pissed off and I need to take some action here!'"

"Earth Gowns: Narrative Dresses, Stitched Storytelling" examines humankind's relationship with the environment through the medium of handcrafted clothing. The exhibition, which runs through Jan. 31 at the **Steynberg Gallery in San Luis Obispo**, is the latest collaboration between Central Coast artists **Julie Frankel** and Melinda Forbes.

Although based in different disciplines -- Frankel, a San Luis Obispo resident, is primarily a mixed-media painter, while Forbes is a fabric artist, dressmaker and organic gardener based in Santa Margarita -- the two share an interest in sustainability and the environment.



Melinda Forbes and Julie Frankel organized the exhibition "Earth Gowns: Narrative Dresses, Stitched Storytelling" at the Steynberg Gallery in San Luis Obispo. In the background is "Rooted in Beauty" by Mary Wood. | Chris Daly

As a self-described "real recycler," "I have a commitment to reusing and re-appreciating some of the things that have been thrown away," Forbes said, adding that the concept of "value" has changed as the clothing industry has mostly shifted from creating high-quality garments to inexpensive, easily disposable clothing. "Now 'value' is finding something cheap -- 'Oh, I got it at Forever 21 for \$3!'"

At the same time that college students snap up tissue-thin T-shirts sewn in South Asian sweatshops, Frankel added, the upper echelons of society eagerly purchase designer handbags at outrageous prices. "For some of us, it's downright offensive to look at an ad in The New York Times fashion magazine for a purse that costs \$4,500," she said. "It's not even 'Oh, I would never buy that.' It's 'That is wrong.' "

She and Forbes prefer fashion statements that double as political ones. (Although "Earth Gowns" deals primarily with the environment, a future exhibition may explore social justice issues in fashion. "Cheap clothing can only be produced if you're paying subsistence wages to women in underdeveloped countries," Frankel said.)

In 2011, Forbes organized the exhibit "**The White Gowns**" at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art. She and her fellow artists -- Blue, Peg Eckert and Nancy Martin -- created elegant, ethereal white dresses using recycled materials such as vintage wedding dresses, table cloths and plastic shopping bags.

Forbes said that exhibition was aimed at awakening art lovers to the precious nature of materials that would otherwise be thrown away. "Creating beauty does not have to be going out and buying things to enrich our lives," she told the Mustang News, Cal Poly's student-run newspaper, in 2011. "It can be achieved using what we already have."



"Demeter's Gown" and "Persephone's Gown" by Melinda Forbes. | Chris Daly

To create a total of 20 "**Earth Gowns**" pieces, each of them paired with a poem or statement, 10 San Luis Obispo County women combed through thrift stores, rummaged through rag bags and even foraged for seed pods, leaves, lichen, bark and woodpecker feathers at a local park. "Each artist had the opportunity to develop a gown that represented, to them, an aspect of nature," Forbes explained.

She created a pair of garments for "Earth Gowns" inspired by Demeter, the ancient Greek goddess of grain and the harvest, and her daughter Persephone, who was abducted by the god Hades and taken to his home in the underworld. While "Demeter's Gown" reflects her life-giver status with a spangled seed bag and subtle floral motif, "Persephone's Gown" features an elaborate patchwork that includes bits of embroidery, Victorian-era quilt remnants and tattered scraps of lace, linen and silk.

"All these pieces represents those gowns that she's worn over the generations," Forbes explained. "This (dress) protects her modesty when she's down there with her husband and it also connects her to her mother and the earth."

Frankel's pieces use paper -- painted, printed, pleated into origami-style folds -- as their primary medium. "A dawn chorus of her friends" is decorated with images of the birds she spots in her backyard, including quails, grosbeaks, cedar waxwings and hooded orioles, while "The Butterfly Effect" salutes a different kind of winged visitor.



"The Urges of Birds" by Chloe White, "A dawn chorus of her friends" by Julie Frankel and "Venus in Fur" by Peg Eckert | Chris Daly

"She wanders the forest," which features Asian-influenced flower and leaf motifs, take its inspiration from Japanese street fashion's Mori girls, young women who crave a closer connection with nature and a simpler, less cluttered lifestyle. "It's a little bit of the fantasy of living in the woods," Frankel

explained, adding that nearly all Mori girls live in urban settings.

Many of the "Earth Gowns" participants are members of the local Ragtime Collective, which specializes in "wearable art and functional craft." Backroom Bazaar, running concurrently with "Earth Gowns," features items created by the group, which started at Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo and now meets monthly at Forbes' home.

"This is all new to me, to sew," said Arroyo Grande ceramics artist **Meg Johnson**. "I joined Ragtime because I thought it was time for a change. I'm thinking I want to say to say 'yes' to everything now."

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Johnson's piece "Her Voice" is built around a simple cotton shift dyed with terra-cotta clay as a nod to her pottery past. A bustle fashioned from her 44-year-old tulle wedding veil reflects her personal history, and a "medicine apron" made of copper dish-scrubbing pads evokes her Cherokee and Celtic heritage.

"Copper has medical properties. It's a healing substance," so it's a suitable material to adorn Mother Earth, explained Johnson, a self-described "medicine woman" who goes by the "Earth walk name" Buffalo Heart Woman. "Basically I'm saying we need to heal her."

"Her Voice" is paired with "Connection with Star Nation," a dramatic headdress fashioned from a palm tree blossom; "Walk softly on Mother Earth," shoes made with persimmon tops, eucalyptus bark and moss; and "Life, Death, Rebirth," a delicate necklace featuring a snake skin discovered in Ojai and tilapia bones and shells salvaged from the Salton Sea.



A detail from "She Dances in the Briny Sea of Creation" by Stacy Williams | Chris Daly

San Luis Obispo native **Stacy Williams**, who's primarily a painter, also branched into new territory in "Earth Gowns." "When I heard what they were doing with 'Earth Gowns,' it just struck a chord with me," she said. "That's a theme that's been part of my work for a long time -- our relationship with the natural world."

Her gown "She Wraps Herself in Indra's Web," which started life as a lacy black peignoir, takes its title from Vedic mythology and the infinite, jewel-spangled web, or net, hanging over the god Indra's palace. "It's a metaphor for the interconnectedness of life," she explained.

"She Dances in the Briny Sea of Creation" examines "the idea of the sea as the source, as the origin of life," Williams said, with a mermaid-skirted gown featuring seaweed, shells and hand-painted fabrics ruched to resemble ocean waves. And the whimsical "Aunt Leaf" uses lichen, leaves, seed pods and the remains of a once-living Christmas tree to recall a childlike love of nature.

"All these pieces really have their roots in my childhood experiences of mystical communication in nature, feeling that sense of awe," she said. "I feel this real connection to the landscape here."



"Reawakening" by Jennifer Blue and "In the Beginning" by Marylu Weaver Meagher |
Chris Daly

While the majority of the garments in "Earth Gowns" veer toward the delicate and feminine, Blue's "Reawakening" takes a more aggressive tone with belted olive-green coveralls embellished with found metal objects, camouflage netting and rust-colored tulle and paired with a mosquito-netting hat and a bridal shrug.

"It's not time for a gossamer gown. It's time for combat," the Santa Margarita dressmaker said, adding that the dress represented a different direction for her. "This gown was a little more masculine, not quite bridal fluffy."

Local dancers will don "Reawakening" and other "Earth Gowns" creations on Jan. 17 for "Gaia in Motion." Directed by Anet Carlin, founder of Atascadero's **Brickyard Theatre**, the performance piece will feature choreography by Central Coast choreographers Joy Becker and **Jude Warnisher** and live music by San Luis Obispo musician/mixed-media artist **Timo Beckwith**.

According to Forbes and Frankel, "Gaia in Motion" speaks to the collaborative aspect that is at the heart of "Earth Gowns" and the other art exhibitions they've orchestrated. Since creating The Peace Library, a community-based, collaborative art project, in 2002, they've organized several exhibitions of artists' books dealing with the subjects of war and peace, as well as the 2013 exhibition "**Up in Arms: A Creative Response to Gun Violence**," featuring 100 protest posters.



A detail from "She wanders the forest" by Julie Frankel. | Chris Daly

"To make traditional hand-stitched garments ... requires a big investment of time," Frankel explained. "That's one of the reasons it was crucial to put together a group of artists to allow the show to come together in under a year."

The "Earth Gowns" artists provided each other with a source of support and practical problem solving throughout the entire process. "There's just many levels of collaboration going on between people who don't necessarily know each other, and a really, easy, lovely flow to the whole project," Forbes said.

Said Blue, "Just being in the same room with all these women is amazing. The energy just explodes around us."

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Top Image: "Her Voice" by Meg Johnson and "The Great Mother's Autumn Sojourn" by Susan Lara are two of the nature-inspired art gowns that appear in the exhibition "Earth Gowns: Narrative Gowns, Stitched Storytelling," running through January in San Luis Obispo.

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