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Title: Into the Abyss: designers Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach and their journey from Melbourne's post-punk milieu to street labels Stussy and Mambo and beyond.

Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach showed their collection for the first time in an alternative parade in Melbourne, *Fashion 83*, held at the Crystal Ballroom, St Kilda, a venue known for hosting Melbourne's post-punk bands such as the Boys Next Door, (later The Birthday Party). Fashion, or style, is unquestionably central to subcultures as argued in Hebdige's seminal work. But throughout the subsequent literature, insufficient elaboration on 'the look' has been undertaken: how style is taken up, how it shifts and changes over the life of a subculture, who follows who (ie. taste leaders, bands), or what (ie. magazines). More specifically, how does the dynamic of fashion bear on the subculture? My paper will address these questions through the work of Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach over the period 1983–1992. Their work featured the use of hand silkscreen fabrics and later jacquard woven textiles with their eclectic mix of imagery. Their labels ABYSS Studio, Funk Essentials, Konka, and Galaxy, street-wise and club scene perfect, were in cult magazines such as *Collection(s)* and *Crowd*, and they were members of the Fashion Design Council. When their partnership ended, they went on to work separately for streetwear labels Stussy and Mambo. The interdisciplinary nature of my study – fashion and music, and subculture, and media, and urban geography – will be informed by Peter Webb's proposal of a milieu theory. My paper will address the geocultural, which I propose are the social, political, economic and legislative conditions of Melbourne as a city in which post-punk subculture flourished, for example the many empty buildings in Melbourne occupied at low rent by designers, artists, musicians, etc. If we start from the study of fashion, will we end up with a different idea of the subculture?

Keywords: Street and club fashion, post-punk subculture, hand printed fabric, geocultural, milieu theory, 1980s

Intro: Into the Abyss: Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach 1983–1994

[2700]

My purpose in this paper is to elaborate on the insufficient attention given to fashion in the subcultural ensemble ‘music, style, argot, dance, etc’, through reference to post-Hebdige literature and other disciplines such as aesthetics, cultural sociology and new geography. I will focus on the work of Melbourne designers Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach over the period 1983–1994. Questions addressed will include: how is style taken up, and how are tastemakers made and through what means. I will conclude with a consideration of the proposition: If we start from the study of fashion, will we end up with a different idea of the subculture?

I embarked on this research because of a growing concern that post-punk in Australia was open to misrepresentation as its history began to be recorded by those who were not there. I was heavily involved with the subculture in Melbourne: as a DJ on an alternative radio station, part of the Super-8 film revival, and a contributor to fashion parades, magazines and music events. The subjects of this paper are known to me and I accumulated a small collection of their designs in the 1980s.

Sara Thornⁱ and Bruce Slorachⁱⁱ first exhibited their designs in *Fashion '83*. This was the second, and final alternative fashion parade presented by Party Architectureⁱⁱⁱ at a venue that was the epicentre of post-punk music, on 17 May 1983. The parades were built around the catwalk parade, but innovatively incorporated live music, hairdo demonstrations, stand up comedy and film. Original music was written for each designer by Dean Richards.

In 1983 Sara and Bruce were both just out of art school – Sara from East Sydney Technical College where she studied Textiles and Bruce from the Victorian College of the Arts, where he studied Printmaking – so their collaborative design work was in its very early stages. However, from the outset they had a distinctive identity: incorporating what we now call ‘street fashion’ and fashion associated with alternative popular music. Sara herself was conscious of the role clothes played in

setting subcultures apart from the mainstream, and indeed from other subcultures, and wrote at the time: 'I see textiles not just as fabric, but as a form of communication.'^{iv}

The *Cowprint* dress, shown in Fashion 83, and now in the NGV collection, was an immediate success: it received much media coverage, and was stocked in Olivia Newton-John's LA boutique Koala Blue. Sara credits it with giving them the wherewithal to continue designing.

This collection and its presentation were clearly influenced by Malcolm McLaren's 'Buffalo Gals' (1982) video clip and Vivienne Westwood's 'Buffalo' collection (Autumn/Winter 1982) [released only months before the May parade in Melbourne]. However, a close inspection of the respective outfits reveals how very different they are while sharing some overall characteristics. In Peter Webb's account of Bjork's post-punk development he describes the process of 'cultural globalization' whereby the initial impact which might inspire copying is transcended as it "seeps into the pores of different local communities" and the "host cultures emphasize their own concerns, histories and geographies in a dialogic engagement with a version of the artwork they now claim as their own."^v He calls this the 'glocal'. Westwood's 'Buffalo' style in this formulation perhaps gave permission to designers such as Sara and Bruce to explore clothing shapes from the past and from other cultures, to reference their wider cultural interests (the models were preceded by a 'rites of spring' nymph) and to break with the mainstream industry fashion cycle. Given the global dissemination of fashion, if we exchange 'fashion' for 'music', Webb's milieu theory might prove especially illuminating for the study of subcultural style.

A feature of Bruce Slorach and Sara Thorn's designs was all-over patterning, initially achieved by making their own hand screen-printed material. Fashion historians have noted that this was a characteristic aspect of Australian fashion in the 1980s, a period when:

‘Their free-form designs comprised complex visual narratives that found expression in combinations of clashing patterns and fabrics, incorporating visual puns and transgressive imagery.’^{vi}

In order to create the clothes that these designers wanted to make, suitable fabric could not be simply bought from retail shops. The ability to print one’s own fabric, thereby making the clothes exclusive and completely determined by the designer, was a very attractive option. Like their UK counterparts, their art school background gave them a huge advantage.^{vii} Printing was a way of transforming relatively cheap material (cotton jersey, calico) into bespoke fabric.

In 1986 Bruce and Sara opened an adventurous retail outlet Galaxy Emporium, the same year they introduced jacquard woven textiles into their collections. Galaxy became the place that provided the cool outfits for the urban post-punk, fashion savvy crowd, and for the denizens of the emerging club scene, although mainstream fashion press sometimes got it wrong and presented them as beach wear.

Fred Davis warns of the limitation of theorizing fashion only within the discipline of sociology – a criticism with great resonance for subcultural theory. He writes that “thusfar it has offered little by way of telling us what specific fashions *mean*” and ‘little about why some ‘click’ and others ‘fizzle’”.^{viii} To overcome this gap in the literature, he proposes that we ‘turn to the thing itself’. The apparel will tell us as much about the individual as the ‘social’ message, he predicts.^{ix} Davis’ close attention to the thing itself – detailing fabric, colour, texture, cut, weight, volume, stitch, etc – reveals not only individual agency but brings the role of the artist/designer into closer focus.^x And in a particularly important passage, suggests that perhaps alongside exploring signification, the fashion code “more nearly resembles an aesthetic code.”^{xi}

The iconography on the printed fabrics by Bruce and Sara changed rapidly with every range: Angels & Pirates, Fluro Schnooko, Moderno Tourist, Tropical Russian (all 1985), etc.^{xii} Their design approach –in textile design and construction– took its cue

from post-modernism, combining elements from different cultures and periods in a chaotic, a-historical mix that made a new kind of sense.

Bruce and Sara's reputation was established on many fronts: They become members of the influential Fashion Design Council – a lobbying body est. the same year and with a similar remit as the British Fashion Council (1983).

Abyss –“street clothes...that ‘create a story’”^{xiii} –were included in the landmark 1989 exhibition *Australian fashion: the contemporary art* at the V&A (an instance of cultural ‘dialogue’); and they were among a select few emerging designers (including Michiko Koshino and the Antwerp Academy) profiled in a 1990 *iD* article ‘The outsiders’, an article that positioned subcultural designers in a global community.

Abyss collections increasingly focused on the ‘street style’ market, and became a fully endorsed street label Funkessentials (1992–94) – given the imprimatur of the Beastie Boys no less, as seen in Andrew Lehmann's photograph.

Soon after Funkessentials –“wearable clothing with a twist...”^{xiv} –was featured in *GlobalUrbanTribalStreet GUTS* (1994) at the National Gallery of Victoria, Bruce and Sara went their separate ways.

When their partnership folded both found positions with major streetwear labels. It was their ‘alternative’ credentials that the labels were after, a measure of the reputation they had established. Bruce was design director for Mambo for 5 years. He explains the affinity he felt with their approach:

" It didn't come from Paris or London. They were doing it for the heck of it. The clothing was just basic shorts and T-shirts. They were really just a platform for the art work."^{xv}

Bruce established Deuce Design in Sydney in 2000. In 2011 he and his partner launched a printed fabric based range called Utopia Goods. With this Bruce has

returned to his great passion: “I’m obsessed with textile design, drawing, painting, illustration and the decorative arts.”^{xvi}

Sara designed for Stussy Sista (1996). There she further developed the intricate jacquard designs that featured in the Abyss range.^{xvii} Sara later went to Europe where she designed textiles for Christian Lacroix, Bella Freud (2000) and Michiko Koshino. She later co-founded WorldWeave (based on ethical practice with 3rd world craftspeople), and now has her own label.

At the moment Sara is repositioning ‘vintage’ Abyss Studio pieces with a contemporary interpretation; consistent with her assertion from the outset that the designs are timeless, and sit outside the traditional (wasteful) ‘fashion season’ cycle.

Theorists of a new geography, such as Skelton & Valentine’s *Cool Places*, have been looking at how and why youth carve out spaces for themselves on the margins of society.^{xviii}

I am going to resist the temptation to leave the Melbourne sites unspecified: although they may not be as well known as, for example, King’s Road, London or CBGC, New York. It is well to remember that AT THE TIME the London punk scene or the NY post-punk milieu were small and marginalized in derelict and desolate parts of those cities. I do not want to perpetuate the dominance of master narratives, but rather allow glocal centres to take their place in the story.

Attracted by cheap rent post-punks in Melbourne occupied city spaces that had been vacated for a variety of reasons: economic recession, government policy of decentralisation, old building stock (eg Stalbridge Chambers, where Party Architecture, *Crowd* magazine and graphic designer Robert Pearce had offices), decline of certain professions (eg Commercial Travellers, studio of Abyss), access to scarce liquor licenses (eg Hardware Club), changes in textile industry trade regulation, etc. A more detailed investigation of the social, political, economic and legislative conditions of Melbourne still needs to be undertaken to account for the

evacuation of such a large amount of building stock and, the counterpoint vibrancy of the city's subcultural life.

Fashion '82 and *Fashion '83* were held at the Seaview Ballroom, a pivotal site in the city's post-punk cultural geography. The venue itself fed into the alternative status of the parades, as it was where Melbourne's post-punk crowd regularly gathered for gigs. The Ballroom was one of a handful of venues that supported emerging bands whose following at the time was outside the mainstream of pop music, such as *The Boys Next Door*. Community radio 3RRR had a lot to do with this culture, playing high% of Australian music, putting on gigs, and promoting the fashion parades. Many of the key participants were also 3RRR presenters, or were musicians and/or involved in the growing club scene.^{xix} I was a co-presenter of weekly *Bedlam* with Party Architecture's Julie Purvis; graphic designer Robert Pearce presented *en masse* fashion radio, Philip Brophy's *eeek!*, etc.

The importance of location, and of the minutia of biography, are articulated in Peter Webb's concept of the 'milieu', which, he posits:

“...makes a space for new and environment-specific knowledge, information, and experiences to add to their stock of knowledge through the idea of a 'momentary milieu’”^{xx}.

What is certain is that Bruce and Sara were firmly established within a subcultural milieu that prospered. To demonstrate, take this 1985 photoshoot for the short-lived magazine *Collection(s)* published by Robert Pearce.^{xxi} This milieu comprised cutting edge entrepreneurs in a cross-section of fields: The pool was designed by local postmodern exponents *Biltmoderne* – [Roger Wood, Randal Marsh and Dale Evans] for the owners of trendsetting clubs Inflation and Metro (where Abyss staged parades) [Sam and George Frantzeskos]. Photo by a young Polly Borland.

One commentator recalls that “in 1980 inner city Melbourne loungerooms housed some of the best record collections in the world”^{xxii}, fed by import albums in shops where the subculture gathered. We have seen already how the 1983 designs of

Bruce and Sara formed a dialogic relationship with London design. The traffic was, as Webb suggests, two-way: Leigh Bowery debunked to UK in 1980 and played an influential role in the rise of post-punk culture; as did The Birthday Party who like Bowery, were driven by a motivation to 'shock the middle classes'.

Given all of the above, I propose that Melbourne was one of a handful of very receptive *glocal* centres of post-punk subculture around the world.

Since the 1980s, Caroline Evans argues, subcultural identities are '...in reality fluid, unstable, complex and shifting...' ^{xxiii}; and people '...move through subcultures [and] are constantly made and unmade...' ^{xxiv}. This understanding certainly fits better with my recollection of post-punk Melbourne. Julie Purvis of Party Architecture recalls "I remember when I went to London in 1980, this kid came up to me and said 'so what are you s'posed to be then? A mod or a punk?' My response was pretty much 'I dunno, I'm wearing what I want to wear' ... for most of us it was more about not conforming to any cultural 'uniform'." ^{xxv}

If we start from the study of fashion, do we end up with a different idea of the subculture?

In answering, an interesting question to pose is this (paraphrasing Evans): "Am I a skinhead/punk/neo mod before I get the clothes and the haircut, or do I constitute myself through the process of dressing?" ^{xxvi} Our answer is helped by close attention to chronology and to the 'glocal' process. If the answer is 'no' then we must give subcultural fashion design more credit within the subcultural mix: in this regard it is at our peril that we disregard the production process and salutary to recall, for example, that Seditonaries pre-existed Punk as a musical phenomenon. ^{xxvii}

Taking Davis' lead, it is not enough to simply catalogue examples of subcultural style. One must also attempt to answer the question implicit in the model of fluidity: who are the trendsetters and why do they hold sway? From the outset, Abyss positioned itself within a local & national framework that identified them as "alternative": exhibiting with subcultural parades; having a shop in a growing rather than established fashion precinct; working with emerging and adventurous

photographers; featuring in alternative magazines; connecting to club scene and music personalities; developing an international reputation. The extent to which Abyss has been exhibited and collected by major institutions, and continues to be archived, is testament to its original importance, enduring quality and a recognition of its place in the history of Australian subcultural fashion. Only this year, in *Mix Tape: the 1980s* at the National Gallery of Victoria, the *Cowprint* dress was featured.

ⁱ Sara Thorn born 1962.

Spanish mother, English father; East Sydney Technical School 1980–81; Sydney College of the Arts 1982–83 Designing (with Bruce Slorach) 1983–1994

Abyss Studio est. 1985; Galaxy Emporium est. 1987; Funkessentials and Konka 1992–1994; Dangerfield mid 1990s; Stussy Sista c1997; Christian Lacroix, Paris; Bella Freud (Jaeger), Michiko Koshino, UK, late 1990s; La Boutique Chic, Melbourne 2002; Worldweave (with Piero Gesualdi) 2009–2011; Sara Thorn Studio 2012–

ⁱⁱ Bruce Slorach born 1961.

Victorian College of the Arts 1980–82 (printmaking)

Designing with Sara Thorn 1983–1994; Abyss Studio est. 1985; Galaxy Emporium est. 1987; Funkessentials and Konka 1992–1994; Head designer Mambo mid 1990s; Sharpie streetwear; Established Deuce Design, Sydney (with Sophie Tatlow) 2000–

ⁱⁱⁱ Party Architecture was Julie Purvis and Jillian Burt.

^{iv} Sara Thorn quoted in Crafti, Stephen, 'Highly decorated career', *The Age*, 27 March, 2002.

^v Peter Webb and John Lynch, 'Utopian punk', *Utopian Studies*, 21: 2, 2010, p315-16

^{vi} Leong, Roger and Somerville, Katie, 'Beyond the boundaries: Australian fashion from the 1960s to the 1980s' in English, Bonnie (ed.), *Australian Fashion Unstitched The Last 60 Years*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p176.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p60 "by harnessing the talents of textile designers fresh out of art college..."

^{viii} Fred Davis, *Fashion, culture and identity*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p113

^{ix} *op. cit.* p112

^x *op.cit.* p26

^{xi} *op. cit.* p11

^{xii} The National Gallery of Australia have fabric swatches of several of these designs: *Collection of fabric swatches* 1985, 19 for the summer range, Textile, cotton, rayon, mercerized cotton, Gift of the artists 1986 Accession No: NGA 86.670, 1–19.

^{xiii} Terri Cowley, 'Victoria would have been amused', *The Weekend Australian*, 17-18 June, 1989

^{xiv} Robyn Healy, *GUTS*, National Gallery of Victoria, exhibition brochure, 1994, u.p.

^{xv} Demasi, *op.cit.*

^{xvi} Lucy, 'Interview with Sophie Tatlow and Bruce Slorach of Utopia Goods', *The Design Files*, 30 November 2012.

<http://thedesigntfiles.net/2012/11/interview-bruce-slorach-and-sophie-tatlow-of-utopia-goods/>

^{xvii} Robyn Healy, curator's notes for Acquisition Proposal from the National Gallery of Victoria archives, 1997, accession numbers 1997.1–1997.77. The NGV have 67 items in their collection.

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/artist/8872?view=textview>

^{xviii} Valentine, G. and Tracey Skelton T. ed. *Cool Places*. London: Routledge, 1998

^{xix} 3RRR presenters included Merryn Gates, Julie Purvis, Robert Pearce, Jules Taylor, and Philip Brophy.

^{xx} Webb, P. and Lynch, J. "Utopian Punk." *Utopian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 315.

^{xxi} Tear sheet: *Collection(s)* magazine, paper; pool designed by Built Moderne, clothing by Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach, photograph Robert Pearce, Melbourne, 1985. 2 double-sided pages, the outside two pages feature black and white photographs of models wearing clothing designed by Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorach. The pool setting was designed by Built Moderne and features tiling and wrought iron fencing around the pool. Article title, pool designers name and clothing designers name in black beneath reproduction photograph 'PANTHEON/ BUILT MODERNE &/ SARA THORN and BRUCE SLORACH', *Collection(s)*, 1985.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=155540#ixzz1uXF4ncvc>

^{xxii} Riley, Vikki. "Death Rockers of the World Unite! Melbourne 1978-80 – Punk Rock or No Punk Rock?" in Hayward, P. *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular Music and Australian Culture from the 1960s to the 1990s*: 117.

^{xxiii} *ibid.* p170.

^{xxiv} *ibid.* p180.

^{xxv} Interview, 9 January 2013

^{xxvi} Evans, p181

^{xxvii} Kathryn Flett, 'THE ONLY PUNK LEFT: VIVIENNE WESTWOOD', *Harper's Bazaar*, "I was about 36 when punk happened and I was upset about what was going on in the world," [Westwood] continues. "It was the hippies who taught my generation about politics, and that's what I cared about—the world being so corrupt and mismanaged, people suffering, wars, all these terrible things—while Malcolm [McLaren] hated the older generation as a result of his background; he hated any authority."

<http://www.harpersbazaar.com/magazine/feature-articles/vivienne-westwood-profile-0313>