

## Art to a 'T'

Artists find an entirely new canvas — on their shirts

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Now that architecture, design, skateboard decks and graffiti have moved into the gallery setting, are T-shirts the next quotidian objects about to have their day in the art world? On the evidence of a rash of Atlanta exhibitions and events devoted to T-shirt culture, it appears so.

After shows dedicated to green architecture and indie-rock posters, the Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA) is gearing up this October for an exhibition of T-shirt designs called *To a T: T-Shirt Culture ... Cute or Couture?* And both Yo Yo Gallery & Boutique and Young Blood Gallery prominently feature artist-made T-shirts in their gallery mix.

Also in October, the design team Sistahs of Harlem is releasing *T-Shirt Makeovers: 20 Transformations for Fabulous Fashions* (Glitterati Inc., 143 pages, \$25), which features step-by-step instructions so that the less crafty can refashion their thrift store finds into street couture.

Recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times Magazine* have documented the artist-designed T-shirt phenomenon. And a new Gap ad campaign has attempted to coast on the new "T-shirt equals individuality" indie sensibility by featuring their mass-market T-shirts "customized" by actors such as Aaron Eckhart and Jeremy Piven.

A phenomenon with deep roots in both alternative skateboard and music culture, the indie T-shirt craze is also enabled by the rise of indie craft with its desire for hands-on homemade goods and finding commercial applications for artist-made goods.

Another locus of the rising tide of T-shirt culture is the retail shop T-Shirt Construction Company, which blurs the line between art and retail by spotlighting artists whose work is featured on the walls in gallery-style openings and can then be purchased in T-shirt form.

As CL's own Carlton Hargro once asked of the store's owner Montine Blank, "Is the T-shirt the new canvas?" According to the artists who make them, the answer is a resounding "yes," especially for a generation of younger artists and entrepreneurs trying to find new venues where struggling artists can make a buck. Atlanta-based artist Michi, whose designs will appear in the MODA show and has worked with boutique T-shirt designers like Project Alabama (also on the MODA bill) affirms that artist-designed T-shirts are like "a wearable canvas."

"When artists team up with designers, it can't be anything else but art," Michi says.

With the wildfire growth of the D.I.Y. and affordable-art movements, T-shirts — already synonymous in American life with totemic expressions of selfhood in washable form — have now also become as symbolic to artists as to consumers. As the *Wall Street Journal's* Jamin Warren notes, the limited run of artist-designed shirts also gives them an exclusivity, that elusive "cool factor" that younger consumers treasure.

Laura Moody, a co-curator with SCAD-Atlanta of the MODA show, says the new "Art T" serves two markets: "With the rise of D.I.Y. designers and indie crafters creating limited-edition shirts, you probably won't be caught wearing the same shirt as your neighbor. For the designer or artist, T-shirts offer an affordable medium for experimentation."

Yo Yo Boutique & Gallery recently hosted a night with Indie Craft Experience co-founder Susan Voelker, who also designs with recycled T-shirts under her own design label drop TROW.

"That art then enters the consciousness of everyone who views it," says Voelker. "This notion, along with the element of affordability thus accessibility, is exciting as both an artist and an observer."

The rise in T-shirts-as-art also reflects the changed, younger generation's approach to art-making. Today's artists are more collaboration-minded, more interested in getting their work out in the world and less likely to establish hierarchies between designers, fine artists and street artists. T-shirts as wearable art reflect an art world undergoing a profound youth quake.

Today's artists are simply more pragmatic when it comes to recognizing that if you want to eat, you gotta sell it.

