

# CAROLINA LIVING

## INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS



Will White Jr. is one of the local artists chosen by ArtPop Street Gallery to have his art displayed on billboards around the region. White is wearing a kimono he made that will go up on a billboard, then eventually it will be repurposed back to fashion.

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## ArtPop Street Gallery project recycles billboards as clothes

BY LIZ ROTHBAUS BERTRAND  
Arts Correspondent

For the last decade, the nonprofit ArtPop Street Gallery has partnered with outdoor advertising companies to transform unused ad space into huge canvases for local art.

From highways and light rail stops to bus sides and shopping centers, this year's class of 20 artists has appeared on \$7 million worth of donated advertising space around Charlotte and beyond — stretching from Los Angeles to New York's Times Square.

The exposure is a boon to the artists, but it also comes with a challenge.

The 20 Adams Outdoor Advertising billboards on Charlotte roadways, which represent an important component of ArtPop's Cities Program, require more than 13,000 square feet of vinyl material each year. And none of it is biodegradable.

"It's really important that these don't go to a landfill, because if they do they won't ever

disappear," said ArtPop's founder and Executive Director Wendy Hickey. "They're gonna be here forever."

So ArtPop takes an innovative approach to ensure it stays out of the landfills: it turns it into fashion.

For the third year in a row, ArtPop will host an Upcycled Fashion Show. The organization has commissioned 14 local designers to create haute couture out of retired ArtPop vinyl billboards, to be unveiled Sept. 9 at a ticketed event held at Lenny Boy Brewing Co.

The event, which serves as ArtPop's major fundraiser, sold out the first two years at other smaller venues. As of publication, a limited number of general admission tickets are still available.

"These designers are just extraordinary," Hickey said. "...You can't believe you're looking at upcycled fashion."

### BILLBOARDS AND ARTISTS

Upcycling has long been a priority for the billboard industry, according to Hickey, who



ALEX CASON

The 2022 Upcycled Fashion Show featured a dress designed by Itala Flores from billboard art created by Jesse Carlin. ArtPop Street Gallery turns to fashion to ensure its billboards don't end up in landfills.

spent 20 years as an outdoor advertising executive before moving full-time into her role at ArtPop.

"They send their vinyls all across the world to be used for roofs for homes," she said. "There's companies that have

been upcycling billboards for many, many years into all sorts of things."

The industry also is moving toward biodegradable materials, Hickey said. But it's not currently available so upcycling continues to be essential.

At first, ArtPop focused on transforming billboards into accessories like tote bags, koozies and bucket hats. It hired and paid a living wage to refugee women who had learned to sew through the nonprofit Make Welcome Sewing School.

Now, those projects — sometimes commissioned in the hundreds as corporate gift items — have shifted to local artists.

They are created as part of ArtPop's new Inspiration Projects initiative, a full-service division that connects businesses to artists for creative work. Since 2020, that division has put more than \$575,000 in the pockets of local artists.

Hickey saw the fashion show as another opportunity to highlight the special skills of artists. "They can make magic out of everything," she said.

### FASHION SHOW FASHIONED FROM UPCYCLED ARTWORK

Among this year's designers is Will White Jr., a former semi-finalist on TV's "Project Runway" and a national finalist on "American Idol." His artwork is also featured on a billboard as part of the Cities Program.

"I've been able to have so many opportunities" through ArtPop, White said. "...And super blessed to know Wendy because she herself is a game-changer for the arts community. She's like our fairy godmother."

The fashion show provides an unusual creative opportunity, too, he said. Usually, White is commissioned to create pieces based on the individual tastes of clients. Here, he can design exactly what he wants to showcase his capabilities.

"In my head, it's Met Gala," White said with a laugh. (He was referring to one of the fashion world's biggest events and celebrity draws, an annual fundraising event for New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

But his creation could just as easily find a home at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

A key aspect of his design is a long opera coat. "It's going to give a lot of drama, it's going to give a lot of volume and that's kind of my aesthetic," White said. "I always want it to be as over the top as possible because — why not?"

And by using donated vinyl, its cost-effective, he said, since White doesn't have to purchase expensive fashion fabrics which can run around \$100 a yard.

### DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

White also worked with billboard material in spring 2022 when he made a replica of a statue of Queen Charlotte during Charlotte SHOUT! for a

SEE PROJECT, 2C



ALEX CASON

Edelweiss Vogel created this 2022 Upcycled Fashion Dress. It's made from billboard art created by Caroline Rust. The model is Vogel's sister, Eileen De Guzman, who also will model Vogel's design at this year's show.



Courtesy Edelweiss Vogel

Edelweiss Vogel uses her art to pay homage to her Filipino heritage.

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## PROJECT

miniature golf course in uptown Charlotte.

"There were thankfully some learning curves that I was able to figure out then," White said. "That leave me so much more confident going into this next experience."

That included learning from an artist friend that using a stronger, stretchable thread would speed up the process. Instead of taking two hours to sew one foot of linear stitching in the early days of that project, he's now able to work at a normal pace. "It's a solid eight seconds max at this point. A complete breeze," White said.

Besides seeing his own creation on the runway, White said he's excited to

spend time with other designers, as well as to learn and share, at the fashion show.

"Design is such a solitary experience, 'cause it's really just you, your threads, your machine and your clients as they come and go... But you're not really a part of community all the time with that."

### SHOWCASING FILIPINO CULTURE

Another upcycled fashion show designer, Edelweiss Vogel, is using her artwork as a way to pay homage to her heritage.

Vogel grew up in Manila, the capital of The Philippines, and moved to Charlotte at age 18 to



KEVIN HARRIS

Wendy Hickey is the founder and executive director of ArtPop Street Gallery, which takes unused billboard ads space and changes them into local art.

pursue a BFA in Studio Arts at UNC Charlotte. She's now an illustrator and art educator.

Her design will combine traditional and contemporary elements representing Filipino culture.

For the fashion show, she's taking a traditional

dress style — the "tuliniana" — and adding her own twist, combining the characteristic puffy butterfly sleeves with an A line dress. She is also creating headgear in the form of a "salakot," a traditional wide-brimmed hat worn by farmers and

fishermen as protection from the sun and rain.

Last year, Vogel also participated as a designer for the show and was part of ArtPop's 2022 Cities Class.

This time around, she has taken on an intriguing challenge. Her dress will be made out of her own former billboard art. Vogel was overwhelmed to see her work at such a large scale and is grateful for the opportunity to repurpose the billboard.

"I'm an illustrator," she said. "I'm absolutely not a fashion designer but I like to make dresses made from unconventional materials."

In the past, she's created fashion for local shows and events from items as varied as soda tabs, bamboo sticks and plastic. In 2019, she participated in Paris Fashion Week, sponsored by

Opera Carolina, with a dress constructed entirely out of the organization's flyers and postcards.

With upcycling, "you can experiment more, play more," Vogel said. "You can be innovative. You can manipulate things that... you can't really do in traditional fabric or materials."

Vogel has worked with recycled materials so often that family, friends and even acquaintances tell her they have saved random item for her in case they are usable. That includes used KCups and old office posters.

She has even integrated upcycling into her classroom.

Last spring, her 6th grade students at The Brawley School, an International Baccalaureate World School in Mooresville, created two upcycled fashion collections for an arts showcase: avant garde designs made from old newspapers and another line using old clothes from Goodwill, reconstructed into fashions from the 1910s through the 2000s.

For both artists, upcycling is a key part of their practice. As White put it, "upcycling kind of feels like home."

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