

# Sandra Backlund

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The recent designs of Swedish fashion designer Sandra Backlund make their presence felt through the surprise of form and the hovering suggestion of a private narrative. Backlund is a designer who refuses to accept the cliché that fashion is a matter generated by trend forecasters and marketing agencies. Peter McNeil interviews Sandra Backlund at Stockholm's Berns Salonger, a famous and completely intact nineteenth-century music hall.

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Words: Peter McNeil



Sandra Backlund, from the *In No Time* collection, 2007, collaged hand-knitted wool. Photo: Ola Bergengren



All photos pp. 44–45 are of Sandra Backlund's designs for the *Last Breath Bruises* collection, 2008, collaged hand-knitted wool. Photos: Annika Aschberg

Making her own fabric from heavy wool collage knitting, Sandra Backlund bypasses many of the limitations of conventional fashion design. 'For me fashion is simply art. A democratic form of art that almost everyone can relate to whether they want it or not. Therefore I think that it has to be treated that way,' she says.<sup>1</sup> Her *Last Breath Bruises* collection (Autumn/Winter 2008) displays the colours of bruised flesh; we sense cuts sealing, bruises healing. It appears like the armour that didn't protect you, the clothes that didn't save the fall. Looking rather like samurai plates transported to a sci-fi setting, the soft, knitted garments would protect you somewhat in the tumult of life, but is the protection of clothing more metaphoric than physical?

Sandra, you studied at Beckmans Design School but your knitted forms also have a relationship to fibre art and craft practices. What has been the reaction of the Swedish art and craft communities to your work?

Everyone is impressed by the energy of handicrafts, and that I work with no assistant, save my mother who helps me to meet deadlines. It's not that common any more to work like this. My knitwear is different to an ordinary sweater. I try to translate what I like about fashion and silhouettes into my knowledge of knitwear. When I started with knitwear it was one of the best ways to achieve these shapes. You build your own fabric while working. I want to stay within fashion but still think of myself as an artist, my first training.

You have used an incredible range of materials, including even human hair. To me there are some historical references

such as to the hair jewellery of the Victorians. Do you derive ideas from the materiality of things, or as much from cultural references?

Both. I like it when my work has different angles, different points of view. Some might think it awful, others interesting, others beautiful, others find it a little strange. My graduate collection had three knitwear pieces, and two made from hair. I tried to translate my shapes from knitwear to working with hair. My goal was to make a small jacket that felt like fur but was not fur – luxurious, a bit creepy – although I don't do fashion to provoke. Fashion is a good way to get to a lot of things that attract me. The ideas are there, but fashion is also a difficult business. It has negative sides, but it is still something that everyone is involved with. It allows me to explore my ideal of beauty.



**'I don't want to know the history of fashion ... I am more confident now that every time I do something it is not about a trend.' Sandra Backlund**

Beauty?

Beauty. Not beauty in a narrow sense. Almost every time I remake my work, I never give up on a piece. It's very rare. Sometimes, they come back in another way. In the end it is down to expressing personal feelings. To me it is very personal, and what it is about – the collection – is always waiting until the last minute. My designs look big and heavy but they fit the body really well. They are built on me, and they work on the body. Knitwear is flexible. You have to be a certain type of person to wear them. It is scary to wear them myself; here, people think it is like a costume.

Designers in recent years have used the notion of a narrative to create momentum for their design. How does the narrative

of, say, *Last Breath Bruises* relate to the actual process of designing?

In the beginning I wanted to look at bruises, the healing process of the skin and all its shades. I used seven colours to explore the way the skin changes colour. When I was working in my studio I fell from the second to the first floor, for no apparent reason. The phone was ringing as I fell. A minute after the shock of the fall, I learned my grandmother had passed away at the exact time, so I had to pursue this theme, and it's a good example of how I invent while making. I start with old or basic knitting techniques, then I often choose to enlarge them and make a basic block or piece, and then I multiply and put them together in different ways. All pieces that appear unified are in fact multiples. I pin the shapes and then stitch by hand.

I sculpt them while making them. It's intuitive and I work on myself, sometimes on a form. A lot of my designs are based on small projects I did at design school. For the techniques – and materials – I 'store' them. I had a passion for collages, I always spent all my time on collages. Drawing clothes on a computer was not for me.

You don't use any assistants to create the work. Does this mean you differ from a designer? Is this conscious or about quality control?

For me I have two jobs – designer and producer. I invent the clothes while making them, and it is difficult to hand it over to someone else. Some are hundreds of small pieces: small bricks for the clothes. At the moment, I resist the idea of passing the work on.



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Sandra Backlund, from the  
*In No Time* collection, 2007,  
collaged hand-knitted wool.  
Photo: Ola Bergengren



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What was it like to work for Louis Vuitton, a brand noted for a fairly controlled and non-radical design ethic?

It was a really good experience. I hadn't even done an internship before. They saw my work and contacted me. They had been looking for a knitwear designer for collaboration but they had not found someone who exceeded what their machines could do. I did a limited edition and produced two pieces for the flagship stores.

Sandra, you clearly pay a great deal of attention to the photography of your fashion shoots. The styling, make-up and especially the hairdressing is quite remarkable. How do you determine this outcome?

For my graduate collection at Beckmans Design School I knew that I needed a mentor, so I approached Peter Andersson, the best stylist in Sweden, and he is my connection to the fashion business in Stockholm. I try to have a strong idea about how the clothes appear but I like collaborations. I'm not a control freak. I'm not always happy, but I have been lucky.

What's your general view of fashion?

I don't want to know the history of fashion. It might create an anxiety about something having been done before. I am more confident now that every time I do something it is not about a trend. I don't work with that kind of view on fashion. I don't like the way mass production and consumption is poisoning modern fashion, it is no longer expressive. I don't believe that saying no is a good solution either.

You get so narrow minded when you say no. If you are just going to say no to everything you will not change anything.

When people ask me for advice I try to say: just experiment - with traditional tailoring, handicraft techniques - and be very aware of things that will happen to you during the process. The mistake might take you beyond what you knew before. Like a difficult technique, it is a choice you have to make, to be open-minded as a designer. ■■■■

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**NOTE**

1. <http://filepmotwary.blog.com/1676454/>