

COATED IN IRONY

A fashion and art project upends the use of disposable face masks to expose the evils of pollution, writes Yvonne Brecher

South African fashion designer Lezanne Viviers and Dutch photographer Thirza Schaap recently collaborated to create fashion and artwork that conveys an important message. They wanted to use “beauty as a form of activism”, in trend forecaster Li Edelkoort’s words, in order to implement change.

Plastic is a powerful polymer which, in the right application, can contribute to saving lives. But it’s also a man-made material that lasts a very long time and is a major pollutant. Knowing that plastic harms our environment, many people still responded to calls to protect themselves from contracting Covid-19 by wearing single-use masks which, over the last year and a half, has exacerbated our already serious waste problem.

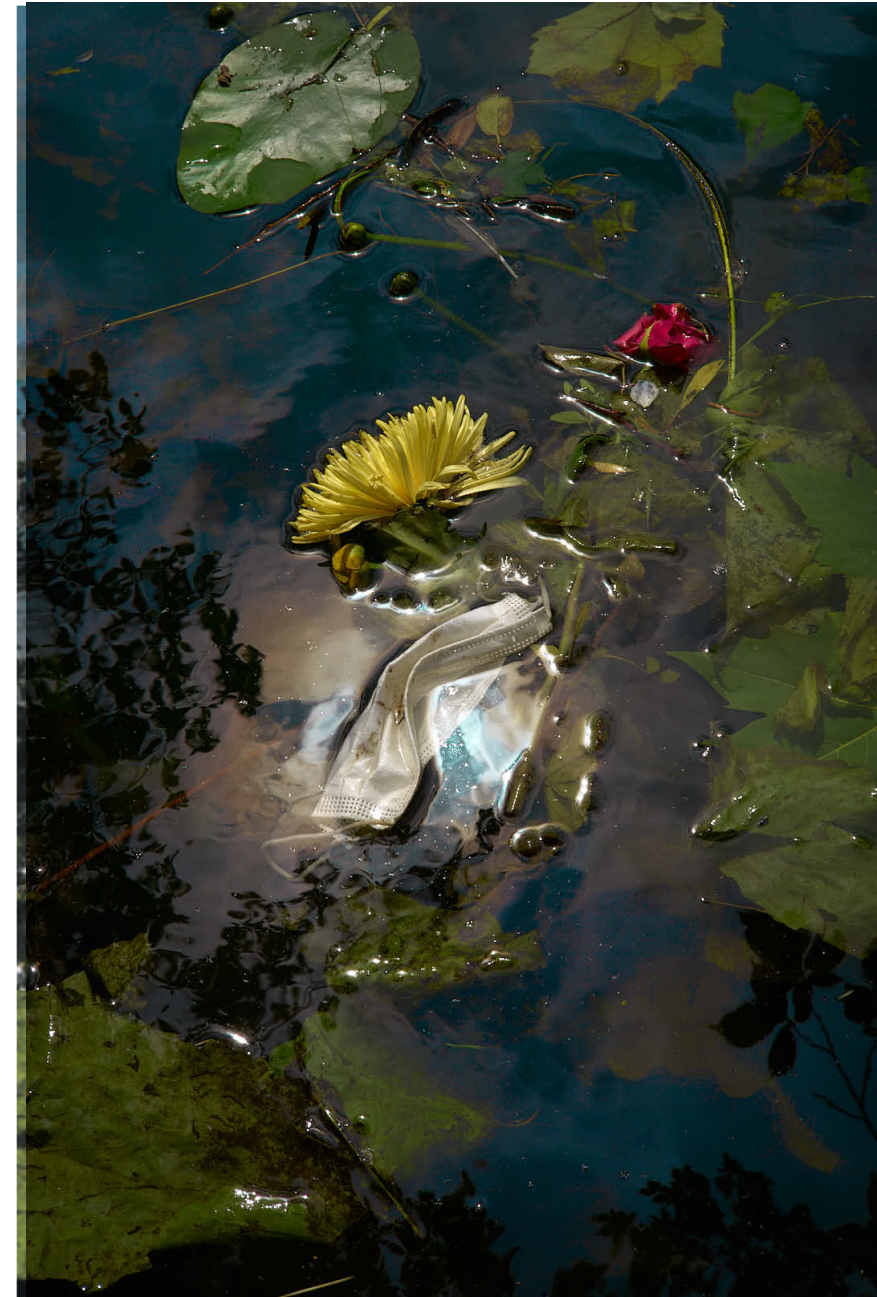
The University of Denmark estimates that we use 3m face masks a minute, most of which are disposable – and researchers at the UN estimate that the global sale of protective masks increased from around \$800m (R12bn) in 2019 to \$166bn in 2020. OceansAsia, a nonprofit marine conservation advocacy organisation, estimates that more than 1.5-billion face masks entered the oceans in 2020, resulting in an additional 4,680 to 6,240 metric tons of marine plastic pollution.

Drawing attention to these statistics Viviers, of VIVIERS Studio in Johannesburg, recently unveiled her latest project, “Unmasked Moments”, a repurposed zero-waste outfit made for the ReFashionPlastic 2021 annual #PlasticFreeMzansi campaign. Viviers upends the use of a disposable item, giving it longevity and adding beauty to function and sustainability. Her garment was photographed and presented alongside an artwork by Schaap.

“The garment examines the irony of the fact that the item meant to offer us protection is actually damaging our environment and harming the species we share the Earth with. This, in turn, threatens our own survival.”

“Unmasked Moments” is a two-in-one garment made entirely of single-use masks. It can be worn either as a jumpsuit or, when turned upside down, as a batwing jacket.

Aware of the impact of single-use plastic pollution, Viviers collected each mask she’s used since January 2021. “I wash and re-use the disposable masks up to 10 times before placing them in my special mask-recycle bin. I also asked my team and everyone I knew who used disposable masks to do the same. We collected about 120 masks. Each of them was sterilised in boiling water and ironed with hot steam before we started our



Vale from the series **Plastic Ocean**. PICTURE: THIRZA SCHAAP



Model Rhulani Kubayi symbolises nature driven to madness by plastic pollution. PICTURE: ARMAND DICKER

creative process.”

Viviers says the process was like playing Tetris, laying bricks guided by symmetry where form became function, ultimately forming a herringbone pattern. The simple rectangular arrangement of masks cascades, repeats and transforms into a new, quilt-like fabric which was machine-stitched together with nylon thread. The impractical looped elastic bands act as a metaphor to illustrate the struggle of animals trapped and entangled in plastic items in our oceans, rivers and streets.

Photographer Armand Dicker, together with creative director Anthony Hinrichsen, created the images that were used alongside an artwork by Schaap. Together, the images can be read as a form of activism intended to raise awareness about the environmental damage being done by single-use masks. Says Hinrichsen: “Our intention was to highlight the despair that our world is currently facing due to accelerating climate change caused by human activity.”

Taking inspiration from Schaap’s artwork, Dicker and Hinrichsen tried to evoke the tragedy of Shakespeare’s Ophelia – the character’s madness can be seen as a commentary on the state of the world at the moment. “We found a pristine location that represents untouched nature. Our model Rhulani [Kubayi] symbolises nature driven to madness by plastic pollution,” says Armand. “She braved the icy water to bring our vision to life.”

Schaap finds beauty in garbage and celebrates the clash between attraction and repulsion. While she expresses deep sadness and a cry for help in cleaning up the planet in her work, Viviers expresses the desire for change through repurposing plastic and keeping materials in use. This, in turn, eliminates waste, replacing it with objects of quality, beauty and luxury that last and are not considered trash.

To Viviers, luxury is quality – items made with care, love, integrity and meaning. “Time, or at least the illusion of time, is always instilled in items and the experience of luxury. Luxury is conscious, considered, ethical, and has a personal service component to it. Luxury items must be sustainable. They must last.” The epitome of successful super-conscious consumerism can only be achieved by unlearning our disposable lifestyle habits and integrating sustainable trends as new norms. Our take-make-waste lifestyle needs to be radically reconsidered and shifted towards a circular economy.

‘Unmasked Moments’ is a collaborative art project by VIVIERS Studio and Thirza Schaap

Sunday Times

