

## SECOND CHANCES

*Crispina Ffrench's cast-off Clothes*



**Most eighteen-year-olds think** they're ready to change the world, but don't have the staying power. Not Crispina french. She has resurrected thrift shop sweaters into toys, blankets, rugs, clothing, ottomans, and more, for 35 years. Along the way, she's taught her craft to scores of others, documented and published her techniques, breathed life into the idea of more sustainable design and manufacturing practices at some important players in the apparel world, and played a role in some big changes in the fashion ecosystem. And she's not nearly done.

As a young art student, french complained to her late father John, a teacher and an artist, that she hated the felting technique she was required to master by a professor. She was not happy with the muted tones of her hand-dyed rovings, and miserable about the wet, soapy process. John, ever an inventive problem solver, burst out with an admonition to fetch some wool sweaters from Goodwill. The heat and tumble of the family's

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washer and dryer, he said, would yield all the felt she could possibly need. Right he was. Recycling sweaters into felt met ffrench's needs. All manner of bright colours and vivid patterns were readily available. The process was easy. Supporting a worthy cause like Goodwill was admirable. In a world quite new to now-ubiquitous things like mandatory glass bottle recycling, reusing fabric seemed like an important thing to try. The fantastical toy creatures ffrench made with her recycled felt, dubbed Ragamuffins, sold as fast as she could make them. Before too long, she was buying 'loads of sweaters,' and not all of them felted well in the laundry. When the piles of material too light and loose to sew into toys became an obstacle, ffrench experimented with collaged mittens, blankets and sweaters. Her business then expanded accordingly, university course work notwithstanding. When frayed or spotted (or downright unattractive) bits of sweaters began to accumulate, ffrench improvised again. With a handmade loom cobbled together

out of an old wooden stretcher meant to support a painting, and a lot of optimism, she made her first potholder rugs. 'I realised that I could use pretty much every bit of fibre that came through the studio. It was sort of a zero-waste scenario before we had that name for it,' ffrench relates, still with some surprise. 'Thanks mostly to all the people who loved my work, I graduated from college debt-free. In 1989, after graduation, I wrote \$25,000 in orders at my first American Craft Council show. I quit my side-job as a waitress and I never looked back.'

Two years later, she had forty employees. 'We sorted by colour and quality. The best sweaters went for blankets, medium grades for toys and mittens, and the roughest stuff for rugs.' With this careful sorting, ffrench's patchwork compositions acquired the qualities they have today, with textures and hues playing off of each other often in tone harmonies and witty contrasts.

In the early years of her studio practice, ffrench often sensed a bit of polite alarm when customers learned that the goods were made of recycled clothing. Back in those days, she needed to develop descriptions of the material and the process that reassured her audience of the value of what she was doing. Today, recycling textiles and yarns, and resale of clothing, are increasingly part of the mainstream, with companies like Eileen Fisher and Patagonia taking a lead position.

Working with high quality recycled wool garments, currently less plentiful thanks to the popularity of synthetic fleece, must be balanced with ffrench's teaching at FIT, the development of her own soon-to-premier online courses, and a monthly subscription service of boxed DIY recycled craft projects. She is energised by this new phase of her career, 'It's a whole new realm of creative possibility that makes people participants in the ecosystem, not just getting people to buy more.'

\*\*\*Keith Recker [www.crispinaffrench.com](http://www.crispinaffrench.com)