

Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

WREN BRITTON Transcript

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[WREN BRITTON]

I still always say when people are like, "Who do you design for?" I always say "Me," because I am the hardest critic. I'm never gonna put anything out there that I don't like. So I feel like that's how art should be. You put it out in the world, but it should be for you, at least initially. And I feel like that's about, you know, making things about creative dressing, all of that.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

I'm Tamsen Young, digital media manager at The Museum at FIT, and this is our special podcast series, Lifestyles. In this series of interviews, I am speaking with people whose distinct expression of style is outside conventional fashion trends.

We have images of our guests on our website. Follow the link in the show notes.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]

[GOTH PUNK MUSIC FADES IN AND OUT]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Today our guest is Wren Britton. Using flea market finds, thrifted pieces, and found objects, Wren creates truly inventive clothing and accessories under the name PUREVILE. He is influenced by a wide assortment of cultural touchpoints including: Victorian mourning, comic books, New York underground nightlife, Queer icons and confrontational drag, the Brothers Quay (who are filmmakers), and icons of the '80s, such as the British designer Judy Blame and the Blitz Kids. His work can be dark and gothic but also includes camp and humor. Wren designs windows and visuals for many New York retail establishments and has DJ'ed at goth and new romantic nights around the city. And in his spare time, he enjoys making stained-glass! Thank you for joining me, Wren!

[WREN BRITTON]

Thank you! Thank you for asking.

[WREN AND TAMSEN CHUCKLE]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So can you describe the outfit you're wearing today?

[WREN BRITTON]

Today I'm wearing my bowler, which is like something I wear every day. It's become like part of my uniform. Some large hoop earrings that I got at Earrings Plaza just down the block.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[WREN BRITTON]

A crucifix earring that I made. I have a vintage... I think this is a naval cadet jacket with a broach I made out of a Sacred Heart with some ribbons. I have a necklace I made out of various chains and a cross. I have a dress that I made that's made out of old t-shirts that I pieced together. And my platforms, which I also wear all the time.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

The listeners are going to hear some jingling.

[WREN BRITTON, LAUGHING]

Oh, yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Will you describe the bracelet?

[WREN BRITTON]

Oh, yeah. This is by... they're a French brand, Parts of Four. I liked it because it's like a play on the punk bracelet. So instead of a bunch of spikes, there's just one giant pyramid spike. But the closure, it kind of screws together and yeah, it's clanking.

I know I was worried, I'm like, "Oh, am I going to make a lot of noise?"

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[WREN BRITTON]

But there's a great clip of Cyndi Lauper at "We Are the World," and she goes after the Grammys and she's wearing like 18 million pearl necklaces. And when she's singing, everyone's like, "What's that noise like going on?"

And then they realize, “Oh!” so they make... it's like two hours of her taking off her jewelry. So I always feel I was worried about that a little bit today. But yeah, it's my jewelry kind of clanking together.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

I think the sound of fashion is perfect for a podcast.

[WREN BRITTON]

Me too. Me too.

[WREN AND TAMSEN LAUGH]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How do you describe your style? Does it have a name?

[WREN BRITTON]

Not specifically. It's just kind of like a conglomeration of everything that I've kind of picked up over the years, starting from when I was like a teenager. So, I don't know if it specifically has a name. When I was younger, I was really into goth and new wave stuff, so that really influenced it. But I don't really have a specific name for it really, so it's just me.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Your look has a real assemblage aesthetic. What elements go into your style? What do you make? I mean, you've pointed out that you make your jewelry and your dress.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And you also shop vintage.

[WREN BRITTON]

Mhmm.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So how do you go about crafting your look?

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah, it's a lot of a little bit of everything from everywhere. And I try not to limit myself by where I look. I go anywhere, you know, low to high and vintage thrift everywhere, even local small stores, you know, dollar stores, things like that. You never know what you're gonna find. And same thing with fabric. And so yeah, for me, it is definitely like a collage of things and ages. And

I like so many different time periods and so many different looks. So then I kind of take it and literally sometimes make things and put it all together into one look. So yeah, I just... I love so many different things, so many different aspects of design and just love combining them all together. So I'm not one of those people who likes to do head to toe the same look, I love a little bit from everywhere so...

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Well, it's very effective.

[WREN BRITTON]

Thank you!

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Because the bowler hat is certainly a throwback fashion item.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

Yes. Yes.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

But then the whole ensemble is very contemporary.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yes. Yeah. And that's what I like to kind of make it feel modern to me at least, you know something. So it's not all vintage. It's not, you know, all of a certain era. I kind of like that mixture. And that's the mixture that I feel like makes it modern, is that I kind of take from all different time periods, but don't stick to just one thing.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

You said that you made your dress out of t-shirts.

[WREN BRITTON]

I did, yes.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And I think you said that you're an FIT alum.

[WREN BRITTON]

I am an FIT alum.

[TAMSEN AND WREN LAUGH]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So could talk a little bit about how you came to go to school for fashion design and learning dressmaking skills and designing.

[WREN BRITTON]

Oddly enough, design came to me through reading comic books. I was reading comic books since I was young, and I'm trying to remember maybe like late early '80, mid to late '80s, a comic book came out called *Meet Misty*, and it was by this illustrator, Trina Robbins. She unfortunately just died a couple of years ago, and she was one of the first big female illustrators. She was, I think, one of the first people to illustrate Wonder Woman. And she, the comic *Meet Misty* was based on Cathy Keane, which was, you know, an Archie-era comic where you could submit designs and they would draw them into the cartoon-- the comic book. So Trina Robbins did that.

She had... people could write in design outfits and she put it in the comic and I thought, "Oh, that'll be fun." I had been designing superhero costumes and I thought, "Well, it can't be that different," I was just starting to get into music, reading magazines. So I thought, "Oh this will be fun," and then I got in a few times. She started another comic book. I was featured as designer of the month. So that kind of-- initially I was going to go into the sciences. I really wanted to be an entomologist and something I'm still interested in. But then when that happened, I was like, "Oh, maybe I could be a fashion designer!"

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[WREN BRITTON]

And I always kind of made my own stuff. My mom made clothes for my brother and I since I was young, and her and my grandmother taught me how to sew when I was young. So I've always kind of was putting stuff together. But that was like the catalyst of like, this is kind of what I want to do and focus my life towards. So and yeah, so then that kind of made me focus on fashion and wanting to go to FIT.

I started going to Saturday Live, when they used to have that program. I don't know if they still have that program.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Yes, they do.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah, that was such a great program for me going in high school. And I went to a very big high school, and we actually were able to pick like a major. So I picked art, but then we also had a big fashion design program in my school. So it was cool. I learned drafting and draping and stuff like that in high school, and then also was able to come here and really learn more specifics. So yeah, that end of high school, that kind of really started to be my focus.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So you said that since the '80s, you've been kind of putting your looks together.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How do you think that your look now differs from the way you would put your looks together then?

[WREN BRITTON]

Then?

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How the trajectory of your style.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah, it's similar, but maybe I have a, definitely a broader view now. I think then I was... it was a lot of thrifting, mostly putting stuff together that I couldn't find. Getting ideas from stores, you know, not having a ton of money, but having a lot of resources. And especially back then, I feel like thrifting was different because without the internet, people didn't always know what they had and what was available.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[WREN BRITTON]

So you were able to get cooler things, designer things. I mean, I remember going to like, there was a Salvation Army off of 23rd Street that we used to go to all the time that would have Victorian stuff just like on the racks. And like, it was just so easy to get that kind of stuff. And so I think that's where that started. The resourcefulness of like, I could get stuff, I could cobble it together. I could make my own stuff out of that and make things that I saw or make things that I was imagining out of that.

And I feel like that's pretty much still what I do now. Like things that I collected became, you know, I started collecting things and then like, "Oh, I could turn this into jewelry." And it started just for me. And then it became something where I was like, "Oh!"

People when I would go out would be like, "Oh, I like your necklace! I like this." And then I realized, "Oh, again, this is like something that I could turn into something that I could kind of share with other people."

But yeah, I feel like definitely teenage me and me now had the same idea, but now just my view of style has broadened a lot since back then. And I just have more skills to know how to make things and where to get things that I didn't always have then. Then I was just discovering, but

even still now, I love still searching and discovering. So again, I feel like that's helped me keep going is keeping that like energy of young me inside always or trying to.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Is everything that you make one of a kind?

[WREN BRITTON]

Mostly. I mean, I've made some similar things, but yeah, mostly because almost everything I make is from found things. So sometimes I can find something the same or similar. But yeah, mostly it's one of a kind. I tried to do things that I could reproduce and it was fine, but it just didn't have the same feeling to me. So yeah, pretty much everything is one of a kind or of a similar style.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

What does having a distinct style mean to you?

[WREN BRITTON]

It's important for a lot of things. It's just a way for me to express myself in the simplest way to just show people in a quick way who I am and however they interpret that. And I feel like that has been beneficial to me in a lot of ways, because, you know, as much as it draws people to me, it also sometimes keeps people away, which also isn't always the worst thing.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

But yeah, I feel like it's for me. There's a lot going on in my head all the time, in a good way. There's a lot of ideas. So for me, it's a way to get a lot of that creativity out in a very instantly and gratifying way, where I maybe don't have time to get everything made that I wanna make. Being able to kind of dress myself in a certain way is good.

And I also feel like it's a great... I love, especially now, things have shifted in a good way. And I love being able to be like an older, weird queer person in this world so that young kids can see that there is a future and you don't have to be scared and you don't have to tamper yourself down for other people that you can just live how you want to live and have a great life, which I've had, you know. And it hasn't always been, you know, what I expected it to be, but I wouldn't change it. And to me, I feel like that's also important, to be that kind of person for people, whether I know or not. But I have had people come up to me and say stuff. And to me that means more to me than anything, because I never... you know, you do it for yourself and then you don't realize how it kind of has a ripple effect in the world. And that, like I said, to me is super important.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Yeah, I think this sense of non-conformity in a world that's always trying to have people conform...

[WREN BRITTON]

Yes.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

... is very powerful.

[WREN BRITTON]

For sure.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And also very polarizing.

[WREN BRITTON]

Absolutely.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So you must experience that on the street.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yes. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Both people embrace you for it.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

And may be more hostile.

[WREN BRITTON]

Absolutely. I always say it's a hard, weird balance of not caring what people think, but also I care a lot about what people think.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

So it's that hard balance. But yeah, you do get the negative. And it's strange because, as conservative as maybe things have taken a turn recently, I feel like younger people, especially, and even older people, there's been a tide and a change in the world where I feel like I don't hear the negative as much. I know it's there, and I know also, I live in New York and it's different. But, you know, I did... I grew up here, so I heard it growing up. But it's different now. And I feel like people are willing to engage at least. And that's nice, you know, where it's not as hostile all the time. And again, you build up a thick skin with that. So that's what I mean about the "I don't care."

There's a big part of me that, you know, you have to kind of put a barrier up and learn how to kind of deal with getting that kind of not always positive attention from people.

[WREN CHUCKLES]

[WREN BRITTON]

But, you know, it also teaches you how to then be soft when you need to be and to share yourself with people. Which again, I think to me the most important thing about all of this, and which is a big reason why I wanted to do this too, is to be able to share that with people.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So what relationship does your look have to your creativity?

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah, it's pretty direct. And again, originally it was, I was just making stuff because I thought, "Oh, this will be fun. I can't afford stuff that I want, designer stuff. I'll make my own version of it."

Or again, like collecting things. I was like, "Oh, I have so much of this at home. I wanted to kind of take these things that I loved, like, I don't know, dolls or religious things and things that were like part of what I collected and how can I bring these things out into the world with me?" So that's what I started doing. And I thought, "Well, this is for me. And you know, people can like it."

But I just didn't think initially it would turn into a design thing, you know, or something that people would like. And then people started asking me more. And then I thought, "Oh, this is my way to kind of work around..." 'cause again, when I went to school here, kind of the ultimate goal was like you're going to go work for a designer on Seventh Avenue and this, that, this. And then maybe you'll start your own thing.

And I was like, "That's not what I want to do." And there was like... it was hard because I... there was a focus that I had that maybe people just weren't seeing yet. And so then I kind of put a little bit of that aside, even though I was always doing stuff for myself. But then as I got older and I realized, "Oh, this is something that people want," then I found like, "Okay, this is a way to really correlate me and what I do and what I like and kind of form it all together."

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So in your unconventional style, do you have different types of looks, like your influences, like comic day or Brothers Quay day?

[WREN BRITTON]

Oh!

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

I do have those kinds of things and I do have levels of it. You know, I do like to go ride my bike and things like that. And, you know, people are always like, “Do you wear your platforms?” And, and it's like, well, you know, I do my version of what I think is like athletic wear and stuff. But yeah, I do theme a lot depending on my mood and depending how I'm feeling and what I pick. So yeah, I have days that are a little more specifically influenced by certain things.

And then other days where I kind of mash it all together. And yeah, some days where I'm a little maybe more dressed up than other days. But, you know, I always say any day I wake up is a day to get dressed up and to put that out in the world and to celebrate whatever, you know. So even if I'm going to the supermarket, you might see me in this outfit.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

So, you know, ‘cause to me, again, it's like, you know, it's like such a blessing to wake up every morning and to be here and to express myself. So I feel like, well, you know, why waste it?

I remember seeing Simon Doonan talk a while ago, and he said when he first moved to New York, he put two piles of clothes, his day clothes and his nightlife clothes, and he could only pack one set. And he got rid of all his daytime clothes ‘cause he was like, “Nighttime clothes make you feel the best, make you look the best, and that's how you should live your life.” And I thought, “Yeah, that's exactly it. You know, we should try to focus on that.” So that to me really resonated. So I try to do that as much as I can.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you have any insights about personal presentation, about being fashionable or about a life of making things that you'd like to share with our audience?

[WREN BRITTON]

I think you need to focus on yourself and not worry too much about everything else that's going on and what everybody else is doing. I think it's good to be inspired by people. I for sure am inspired by a lot of people, but I think it's about taking that and distilling it into what that means to you.

I think it doesn't have to mean dressing so extremely, or what you feel like is extreme. It doesn't have to be trying to outdo the next person or something like that. I think it's just about being true to yourself. I mean, that's, again, I feel like when I was young, I kind of made a conscious decision and like, deal with myself like, "This is how I want to be. And like, whatever that means, this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my foreseeable life." And, and I feel like that's just what you have to do. You just have to make that deal with yourself and find that thing you find joy in and that makes you happy and makes you feel good, whatever that is.

It doesn't have to be how I look or how somebody else... but whatever that means, whatever level that is. I feel like that's the thing.

And same thing with creativity. It doesn't have to be for anybody. I still always say when people are like, "Who do you design for?" I always say Me, because I am the hardest critic. I'm never going to put anything out there that I don't like. So I feel like that's how art should be. You put it out in the world, but it should be for you, at least initially. And I feel like that's about creative... making things about creative dressing, all of that. I feel like that's what you should really... It's hard for a lot of people. It was hard for me too, to really focus on yourself a lot. But I think that's the most important. And that's how things come and feel the most truthful. And that's what people relate to, even if they can't relate to exactly what I go through or what someone else. That's what draws me to art and to fashion and to film and to music is the emotion that's in it. And I feel like people can definitely sense that.

And so to me, that's the thing. It's just, follow that, whatever that is, you know. And again, just don't pay so much attention to the other noise, and what other people might say and just, you know, stay as true to yourself as you can.

And, you know, everybody falters. But, I feel like if you stay true to yourself, again, when I lay down at night and I think, "Okay, I did what I wanted, I did what I set out to do, it might not have been perfect, but I could be happy with that." And I think to me, that's the secret that I feel is the secret to being a happy creative person or trying to be.

[WREN LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us.

[WREN BRITTON]

Yeah, thank you so much. I enjoyed it.

[WREN AND TAMSEN CHUCKLE]

[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag #FashionCulture.

[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[WREN BRITTON]

I lived on Staten Island for a while and it was rough. People would drive by and throw stuff at us from cars, rocks and bottles, and so we were always kind of ready to run and hide and whatever. But again, it never really stopped. And in school it drove me further. I feel like the more people made fun of me, I would be like, "Oh, if you think that's bad, just wait until tomorrow!"

[WREN LAUGHS]

[WREN BRITTON]

It really... they goaded me on. So to me, it really... they pushed me in a good way, you know? And then I had a group of friends and that I'm still friends with 'cause we really bonded through that.

[GOTH PUNK MUSIC FADES IN AND OUT]