



SYMBIOTICA

NINA LAVARINI DAWSON



SYMBIOTICA:

RECENT WORK BY NINA LAVARINI DAWSON

Artworks to wear, and artworks to contemplate; *Symbiotica* is an exhibition to reflect and muse on our resonance with the natural environment, so beautifully articulated in Nina Lavarini Dawson's photographs. The artist's exquisite naturally dyed fabrics and garments are only equalled by her outstanding photography – or is it the other way round?

This is not fashion photography in the usual sense, where we instantly associate certain styles on the catwalk with places or occasions they could be worn at – a low-cut black item, with nightlife; or a loose flowing piece with the beach, or a cruise. In contrast, Nina's photographs don't show where the garments are going; they show where they have come from. Her photographs are statements of our links with nature - a split second pause, which explains how all is connected, the colours of the garments matching the plants from which they came. And these are not just clothes either. They are works of art, each making an aesthetic statement about our natural environment, but also about sustainability: natural fabrics and dyes are free of toxins.

The artist is a passionate environmentalist, holding various positions within biodiversity and revegetation projects, as well as having a busy exhibition schedule, which includes interstate residencies and events, such as presenting her range at the *Identity Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival*. She also works closely with several North Queensland Indigenous communities, celebrating their mutual respect for nature with a range of art and environmental projects. Nina is a clear example of an artist being regional as well as national.

Nina always had an interest in making her own clothes. This started as a child when she created outfits for her dolls, and has continued into her adult life as she made and makes all her own clothes. The artist's inspiration and instruction for working with textiles and handmade clothing came from her grandmother and her Nonna. Nina's grandmother was a seamstress who designed and made her own clothes and 'always looked great', while her Nonna taught her all her other textile skills of embroidery, tapestry, knitting and crochet. Another passion was



passed down through the generations – the artist's Nonna's and mother's love of plants, amazing gardens and growing their own food. Nina started to apply her love for plants by embellishing her fabrics with natural plant dyes, but these proved to be impermanent.

Over the years, Nina experimented with many ways to embellish and decorate clothing, including with screen prints and lino prints. She has engaged in extensive personal research into dyes, mordants and colour permanence, and gathered an impressive string of tertiary qualifications - in photography, environmental management and botanical sciences, plus years of art making and attending eco-dyeing workshops (including a course in traditional dyeing in Mexico). The artist has accordingly developed unique techniques to forego synthetic dyes (which are an environmental hazard) in favour of her first love of using plant-based dyes. She feels she has found her medium now, using her beloved plants to create the designs on the fabrics, echoing the local environment.

Nina's tiny studio is located in the middle of the rainforest, close to Mission Beach. Unlike many, her studio does not smell of paints; it smells of eucalyptus. Instead of canvases, brushes, and tubes of paint, there are lengths of natural fabric spread on tables. Various layouts of leaves, twigs and grasses also occupy the space, ready for the artist's complex and secret processes. Outside the studio are cauldrons, drums, large buckets and burners. This is where the magic happens - permanent natural colours!

It is a privilege to see all this work come together in one exhibition; to see how garments have become artistic explorations, interacting with the model and the environment, and how Nina brings together her longstanding passion for plants, clothes, nature, and community. Above all, *Symbiotica* gives form to a multitude of artistic and environmental considerations.

Dr. Anneke Silver

Visual Artist
Art educator and art writer



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Check the event for COVID-19 requirements & updates: www.umbrella.org.au/symbiotica
Our COVID-safe plan and details are also available here: www.umbrella.org.au/covid-19

Images all by Nina Lavarini Dawson. Front - back: Waterlily Woman 2, 2021, Photograph. Page 1: Earth, (detail), 2022, Photograph. Page 1-2: Leaves, (detail), 2021, Photograph. Page 3-4: Wrapped (Camryn) (detail), 2020, Photograph. Page 5: Let the light shine (Rowena) (detail), 2019, Photograph. Page 5-6: River woman (Leara) (detail), 2019, Photograph. Page 6: Water Goddess (Ayesha), (detail), 2018, Photograph.



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