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Casing Couture

Cristin Richard's House Of Raw

by [Angela Wisniewski](#)

Detroit's Eastern Market — a popular place for people to pick up fresh-cut flowers and ripe fruits and vegetables on sunny weekend afternoons. When local artist Cristin Richard shops there, however, she returns to her Cass Avenue studio with plastic bags full of pig intestinal linings, also known as natural sausage casing, wrapped in salt and brine.

The translucent, ivory-hued intestines are the 29-year-old College for Creative Studies alum's choice textile to create beautiful sculptural gowns, lingerie and shoes. The pieces are not so much practical wear as they are art, still, Richard (pronounced Rih-shard) continues to push boundaries with her avant-garde concepts and, as of recently, unite other creative-minded people in the community to collaborate, communicate and comment via her new Detroit-centric blog, House of Raw (detroitor.blogspot.com).

"I like the juxtaposition of the ugly/pretty deal," Richard says about the unorthodox medium of her feminine designs. "Thinking more in terms of fashion as a concept, you're blurring the boundaries of the human and the boundaries of the skin, so it's like creating another skin."

Richard initially studied Industrial Design at CCS, then switched into the world of Fibers. Through instructor Susan Aaron-Taylor's direction, she experimented with all types of mediums for design. "She basically told us that everything around you is fiber and you can work with anything. That's where you're like, 'OK, let me see what I can do with this.' That's always kind of interested me — the whole idea of playing with your food, it's



[JOE GALL](#)

creepy in itself. It was great to take a material and handle it, manipulate it, transform it. It's that process of starting from scratch and making something, and that's what really got me into the casing."

Making clothing from casing, however, hadn't occurred until she visited an exhibit at the DIA featuring a translucent Inuit parka made from seal intestines, adorned with feathers and other natural materials. "I really got into, 'How'd they do that? Why'd they do that?'" she says. "Basically, like, they killed an animal and they could use anything. They wouldn't waste any bones, or they would carve those into tools, and the intestines just happened to be waterproof because they're from a water creature and they worked out well, so I tried to do the same sort of deal with playing around with cow and pig intestines. It took a while for me to try to figure out how to manipulate the material. I really loved how when it dried you can see the veins, all the weird inconsistencies. I like the fact that not everybody can work with it, too — like a lot of people get creeped out by it, so I can take ownership of it."

Richard has exhibited her (what she refers to as) "sausage couture," at the now-defunct District Arts Gallery, the now-defunct C-Pop and the Robert Kidd Gallery. She's won praise (Gilbert and Lila Silverman purchased a piece for their home), and, of course, some criticism. "Even when I was showing at galleries it would be, 'Oh, well, this medium is not archival,' 'Oh, you can't mount them to the wall,' and I always wanted to suspend them in the middle of the room. So there's always somebody who wants to tell you how to do something and you worry about it. Like, 'Oh, I want to be a successful artist; I want my stuff to go somewhere,' and it kind of comes to a point where it's like, 'Why am I making it anyway?'" At a show at the District Arts, a PETA representative attended, information in-hand. "It's kind of funny, when I started working with the material I was vegetarian, and people were always weirded out by that. I was like, 'Well, it's kind of like the waste product of the animal.'" Richard now eats meat and is knowledgeable on where her consumables come from. "It took years, but I came to terms with the fact that my body needed protein. As an O blood type, it's in my genetics that I was meant to have a diet consistent with high amounts of protein. My whole shtick these days is buying locally-raised, pasture-fed animals. The way the commercial meat market is run is disturbing. Americans are so far removed from the reality of food, most of us could probably not watch an animal being butchered, let alone do it ourself. But we sure love cheese-smothered Big Macs. In the making of my dresses, there's a whole process to it. I know it inside and out. I've become interested with the life the animal has had before I got my hands on it."

The silhouettes of Richard's designs are as beautiful as they are creepy. In fact, when they're suspended in air, they're like gorgeous ghosts. Some sculptured blouses have ruffle details and some dresses have frills. Sure, sausage casing isn't Linton tweed or silk, but her pieces embody femininity. Richard's been intrigued by biology and cellular structure since she was young, and when asked where the "girly" inspiration comes in, Richard responds: "I'm still a kid at heart; I like to play dress up. I guess it's all kind of weird but I'm still playing." She's taken more interest in fashion and design since graduating from CCS in 2003. "I did a lot of research on fashion, and it's just kind of natural to move on that level finally. I'd been denying myself of doing fashion kind of stuff for so long because I thought that it wouldn't go anywhere in Detroit, and now I've finally come to terms with it. I don't need to make things for everybody else, I need to make things that I really enjoy."

Richard recently joined the world of art/culture/style blogs with House of Raw, an online approach to fashion featuring other Detroit artists and collaborative photo shoots with a particular interest in color palettes. "I wanted to do something involved with the Internet. It's a way to show your work when not everybody can come and see it in person. You get to hear other people's perspective and how it's totally different from yours. Working in this format is forcing me to do something that I wouldn't normally do, so it's a challenge. I'm going to let it evolve, but it's kind of what's gone on with my work, too, like when you try to force something you just get stuck, so I'm just like, 'The pressure's off, I'm just letting it evolve.'" | **RDW**

More: cristinrichard.com, detroitrhor.blogspot.com

Angela feels like sausage when she wears Spanx. Email her: Angela@realdetroitweekly.com

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