



## Poetry in motion: The guerrilla wordsmiths bringing a literary touch to vintage chic



**BY HARRIET WALKER**

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"Words have a magical power," says Kate Daudy, sitting in her kitchen, surrounded by the multicoloured swirls of poems that she has appliquéd across the walls. "If I walk down [west London's] Harrow Road and there's a great big poem by Lorca written down my back, the person on the bus who sees me might have a happy afternoon."

The poem in question is called *La Casada Infiel*, which tells the story of a gypsy who rapes a young girl, so perhaps "happy" is the wrong word. The dress, also, is a vintage, red silk Bellville Sassoon gown with puffed black velvet off-the-shoulder sleeves, which might be a little incongruous on the Harrow Road. But Daudy and her creative partner Grant White are guerrilla wordsmiths, with ambitions to ambush the public with the eloquent and elegant poetry and proverbs that they attach to priceless vintage pieces.

"We had the idea of fusing poetry with old clothes: the meeting of the two made them both stronger, and gives them a new sense of meaning," says White. The pair have just returned from a successful exhibition of their pieces, at the Galerie Pixi Marie Victoire Poliakov in Paris. A review in *Le Figaro* compared their work to that of Jean Cocteau and the legendary Italian designer, Elsa Schiaparelli. "It was the most perfect gallery space for us," adds Daudy, "because there were all these mad little closets flying open and little drawers full of ribbon." Indeed, the salon interior of the gallery has echoes of an old atelier, a place where one-offs were created in the great age of couture, and where this modern version and its mottoes can speak for themselves. A chic but directional 2001 trench by Viktor & Rolf is edged in ice-blue satin and features lines from Louis MacNeice's *Snow* around the hem; an Eighties white tuxedo jacket that murmurs jet-set playboy, boasts pockets emblazoned with the words "cigarettes" and "invitation", with a stanza on its back from *Le Bateau Ivre* by Rimbaud.

"What we tend to do when we find clothes that we like the look of," explains White, "is try to find a poem that for some reason brings something out of it." So a green silk gown, twin to the Lorca dress in structure and

sumptuous yuppie-ness, features a poem by Charles Bukowski entitled, *There Was Once a Woman Who Put Her Head Into an Oven*. "It's a real pop-your-pills dress," says Daudy. "It's either worn by a slightly miserable girl whose boobs are squidging over the top, or a real shrivelled hag with crêpey arms and too much jewellery. So we chose to interpret it as the latter."

It's one of the pleasures of vintage shopping that pieces have an idiosyncrasy that off-the-peg clothes might not, and it's something that Daudy and White's work plays to, ascribing a personality to each piece through the artwork they use on it. But their designs also recognise the emblematic qualities of both media, that poems can be used to memorialise in the same way that clothes can. One of their most recent commissions is a dress which once belonged to the client's mother; the client wants it embroidered with the lyrics to a song her mother used to sing to her. "Her mother sang it every night, standing in the door with the light behind her, wearing the dress," says Daudy. "It's very powerful stuff," adds White.

Daudy and White met 12 years ago, on the recommendations of their mothers. They began with a jewellery line, which was stocked in Browns. White is also a full-time interior designer, while Daudy is a writer with three children under the age of five. "We made jewellery that was so beautiful," she recalls. "Although I once wore this necklace to dinner, which was our interpretation of a Chinese emperor's yoke and weighed about 15 pounds. I got a bad headache and felt very ill – I realised I was being strangled by my necklace!" They turned their attentions elsewhere, and the marriage of clothes and words came about when Daudy's first novel was dropped by her publishers. "I was desperately unhappy, so I started writing on my clothes, out of frustration," she says. The first piece that she customised was a 1970s plum, velvet suit by Oscar de la Renta, which reads, "I try to write poetry but sometimes it's fucking difficult" around the skirt. "Words are so over-used in every aspect of our lives that we become numb to them," she points out. White, meanwhile, has long been a fan of vintage clothes and cites the Red Cross charity shop on Chelsea's Old Church Street as one of his favourite trawling grounds.

The pieces they use are as diverse as a 2006 hot-pink Michael Kors skirt, a royal blue Donna Karan jacket, and a floor-length Catherine Walker gown, and the poems come from sources as varied as Verlaine and Anne Sexton, to Pink Floyd lyrics.

The wedding dress that they have worked on – by Catherine Walker, again – is another poignant piece in the collection, with a poem which deals with loss and death hand-stitched to its train in blood-red letters. "Everyone's got a dreadful relationship in their closet," says Daudy. "We've all got our own broken hearts, and this is a poem that really expresses that."

The next project for Daudy and White is an exhibition curated by the indomitable Pearl Lam – a fashionable fixture on the Chinese art scene – and will be shown in Shanghai next year. Entirely white, the pieces are hanging in Daudy's kitchen when I arrive: cotton nighties from the 17th century; christening gowns and lacy first communion dresses. They have chosen the white theme because of its connotations in China. "For so long, it was the colour associated with mourning," White explains. "But now every bride wears her white wedding-cake dress, and 100 years ago they would have been wearing red, so we've taken that as our inspiration."

It's refreshing to see these clothes being given a new lease of life, especially at a time when people are looking for individual pieces and items with longevity. Friends have even started donating clothes for the pair to rejuvenate. "Clothes are wonderful, graphic things," says White, "and so much thought has already gone into them, in terms of the choice of fabric, the cut, the styling, that when you use them as a canvas, it is so evocative. That's why I get completely jelly-kneed about the whole thing, because it just gets bigger and bigger."