



## Trashmagination Podcast #119 – Umbrellas

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today we'll talk about creative reuse of umbrellas. Millions of umbrellas are purchased every year and millions end up in landfill. And yet, there are so many ways to creatively reuse umbrellas, especially the fabric.

In each episode, I like to share practical project ideas and also tell you about artists who are doing mind-blowing creative reuse. Usually I start with the practical ideas, but today I want to tell you about artists first.

### Installation Artists

Let's start with **Jean Shin** who I talked about in my episodes about denim and also my episode about prescription packaging. She made two installations with the fabric from discarded umbrellas. In 2001, she sewed colorful circular umbrella fabric together like a huge quilt ([http://www.jeanshin.com/umbrellas\\_stripped\\_bare.htm](http://www.jeanshin.com/umbrellas_stripped_bare.htm)). She also made a sculpture from the metal umbrella skeleton parts nearby. In 2003, she made a piece from mostly black umbrellas and which hung from trees like a big sun shade (<http://www.jeanshin.com/penumbra.htm>).

Jean notes that her first umbrella piece was a great way to think about working outside (<https://youtu.be/P-hY80-BHSE>). These pieces were kinetic sculptures meaning that they would move due to the wind. The wind would make her sculpture feel alive. She loved seeing the shadows that these umbrella pieces would make when the sun shone through them. It made her more aware of happy accidents or things that an artist cannot control. She also learned about how people interact with sculptures. Many people liked sitting under her sculptures in the park.

The next artist who works with umbrellas is **Sakir Gökcebag** [Sa-KEER GOKE-Seh-BAG] who I mentioned in my episodes on cardboard tubes and also my episode about shoes. Sakir has made so many sculptures with umbrellas, especially the classic black pointy umbrellas. His sculptures usually rely on taking a shape and repeating it within a sculpture.

In an installation from 2020, he took around 30 umbrellas and attached white string inside the umbrellas from one point to the other so it made a white web inside each umbrella [<https://sakirgokcebag.com/installations/nggallery/installations/firmament>]. He laid them down with the inside of the umbrellas facing up. The umbrellas already have so many interesting lines and with the addition of the white string, it makes it look like a mass of lines and shapes.

In an installation called Brella Um from 2014, there were many umbrella-based sculptures. In one called Parabol, he removed the black fabric from maybe 32 umbrellas, and laid them in a circle so all the handles are in the center except one (<https://sakirgokcebag.com/installations/nggallery/installations/brella-um-13>). In another sculpture, there is a mass of umbrellas that look like they have been chewed up by a dog with shreds of fabric and bits of metal skeleton, artfully arranged on a white wall. Another sculpture takes the curved handles from many umbrellas. He pairs them side-by-side on the wall so they make little black moustache shapes, and then connects them so it looks like little black waves.

In his installation called Black Forest from 2015, he took the shredded fabric from 100 black umbrellas on the wall like a tiny forest of black trees (<https://sakirgokcebag.com/installations/nggallery/installations/black-forest>). I have a feeling Sakir is will never run out of ideas for sculpting with them.

**Helena Loermans** is a weaver in Portugal (<https://www.instagram.com/helenaloermans/>). Her main passion currently is to study of the canvases of great master painters from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. She has figured out the weaving

patterns that were used (<https://labo.pt/>). How much did the pattern on the canvas influence these great works of art? She uses x-rays and a computer-aided loom to replicate these historic canvases. In addition to that painstaking research, she also takes the wooden skeletons from patio umbrellas and she weaves them with colorful strips (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BxnXselho82/>). This project started as a joke because of course the rain would come through on those woven umbrellas, but then she found people liked them as sun umbrellas. She gets the fabric to weave these umbrellas from selvedges at factories – it's a type of industrial waste. It makes me want to rescue the next patio umbrella that I see in the trash to make a colorful woven umbrella like Helena's! One thing I love about Helena's story is that she went back to school at age 45 in order to pursue her passion for art and design.

- Helena weaving painting canvases - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUyI4rcD-n8>
- Helena weaving umbrellas - <https://youtu.be/FIXDjYHs18>
- Lecture by Helena about her canvas project - <https://youtu.be/F-YS0xiMbxE>

The last umbrella-themed art installation is called the Harvest Dome, designed by architects **Amanda Schachter and Alexander Levi**. They built this dome, which was 24 feet in diameter, using 450 umbrellas. The metal frames were attached together in a way that looks like a geodesic dome. They attached this dome to a ring made from 128 2 liter plastic bottles. And then they lifted the dome on to the water and it floated on the waterways around New York City.

- <https://www.jebiga.com/floating-dome-nyc-umbrellas-plastic-bottles/>
- <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/481224446/harvest-dome-20>
- <https://www.sloarchitecture.com/harvest>
- <https://www.instagram.com/sloarchitecture/>

So those were all art installations. I liked talking about them first because they seem so gigantic and imaginative – it makes these next projects sound far more achievable and realistic. First I have projects which reuse the fabric from the umbrellas into every-day useful items. Second, I have projects that reuse the metal or wooden parts of the umbrellas to make every-day useful items. And third, I have trash fashion and costumes from umbrellas.

## Creative Reuse of Umbrella Fabric

Umbrella fabric is generally waterproof, lightweight, colorful, strong and easy to remove from an umbrella. The most common way that people creatively reuse this fabric is to make a lightweight shopping bag. And while you can reuse any kind of fabric to make a shopping bag, when you use a recycled umbrella, you'll find that the bag compresses into a very small size when you are not using it, and it's very lightweight. So this is a great bag to keep at the bottom of your backpack or purse for those unexpected moments when you need a bag.

You can find wonderful umbrella fabric sewing tutorials on the website Cucicucicoo [coo-chee-coo-chee-coo] by Lisa Neri. Lisa has three tutorials about creative reuse of umbrellas:

- Shopping bag, which includes a free sewing pattern - <https://www.cucicucicoo.com/shop/free-carry-everywhere-shopping-bag-pattern/>
- Backpack rain cover – which is something I first learned about when Scouting but is a good idea for anyone who wears a backpack - <http://www.cucicucicoo.com/2016/10/diy-backpack-rain-cover-from-umbrellas/>
- Waterproof picnic blanket – and really shouldn't all picnic blankets be waterproof? - <http://www.cucicucicoo.com/2014/12/waterproof-picnic-blanket-umbrellas/>

She dedicates a whole page to tips for removing fabric from umbrellas - <http://www.cucicucicoo.com/2014/10/tutorial-remove-fabric-from-umbrellas/>

The next umbrella creative reuse idea involves sewing a raincoat or poncho from an umbrella. You take a pattern for making a raincoat or poncho, and just use the fabric from an umbrella instead of new fabric. I saw someone made a poncho for haircutting from umbrella fabric, which is a great idea especially considering that we are doing a lot more hair cutting at home these days!

There used to be an Etsy shop that specialized in making dog coats from umbrellas, but it has since shut down – I mentioned it in my episode about pets and creative reuse.

Another project idea that I wish I had learned many years ago is to sew a waterproof drawstring bag as a bicycle seat cover. I used to bike to work in all weather, and I bought a cover that would go over my whole bike when it was raining. But really, the only part that was essential to waterproof was the seat, since the rest was metal. It would have been a very practical solution to make that from a recycled umbrella, and sewing a drawstring bag is a beginner sewing project.

The last ideas for creative reuse of umbrella fabric are to sew them together into a big tarp or tent shape, similar to how Jean Shin did it in her exhibits. I saw a group made a big banner from recycled umbrella fabric, and that was great because it was fine in the rain.

## Creative Reuse of Umbrella Metal or Wood

The next ideas creatively reuse the metal or wooden parts of the umbrellas. Well, actually the first idea is to take a clear umbrella with the plastic still on it, and make a portable greenhouse. The clear umbrella lets the sunshine come in, and I even saw a tutorial where they rigged up a basic irrigation system under the umbrella (<https://www.instructables.com/UnBrella-a-Portable-Greenhouse/>). For another gardening related idea, I saw a gardener who took the wooden skeleton from a patio umbrella and put it in the garden to support cucumbers or beans.

If you have defunct umbrellas where the handle is a curve, these can make a great wall of hooks if you attach them to a piece of scrap wood.

Finally, I saw a fun craft to make pussy willow branches using the spines from an umbrella. They made the fluffy part of the pussy willow from cotton swabs or Q-Tips, and wrapped the spine with floral tape (<https://youtu.be/46JGEYw4xzI>).

## Costumes that Creatively Reuse Umbrellas

The last category of projects today are costumes or trash fashion designs. As you know, my favorite trash fashion show in the work is Junk Kouture, and in 2018 one of the finalists made a design called Cirque de Parapluies which means Umbrella Circus (<https://wwwirishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/bank-of-ireland-junk-kouture-grand-final-2018-1.3467267>). This was designed by three students from Malahide Community School in Dublin.

These next costume ideas are all for Halloween. In 2011 when my son was five years old, I made him a bat costume. The wings were made from a recycled umbrella. I took out all the metal components because I was worried he would poke himself with them. In the show notes, I'll link to a tutorial by Lenore Edman from Evil Mad Scientist Laboratories for making a bat costume where she did reuse the metal components in the umbrella, which gives the wings more structure (<https://www.evilmadscientist.com/2006/how-to-build-a-better-bat-costume/>). They even used the metal and fabric parts to make impressive bat ears.

The next umbrella-inspired costume is by Alicia Brown who is one of the world genius' for creative reuse of cardboard. On her website Zygote Brown, she shares how she made an awesome spaceship costume by combining a clear plastic umbrella with cardboard. She calls this a "bubble umbrella." The umbrella forms the part of the spaceship where you see the alien or the spaceman sitting (<https://www.zygotebrowndesigns.com/post/spaceship>).

The next Halloween costume that creatively reuses an umbrella is a Wheel of Fortune wheel (<https://www.costume-works.com/pat-sajak.html>). The artist who made this costume said her son was a huge Wheel of Fortune fan and wanted to be the host Pat Sajak for Halloween. She hand-colored each section of the umbrella with Sharpies to look like the panels on the Wheel of Fortune wheel.

## Environmentally-Friendly Umbrellas

Now wouldn't it be great if we all purchased fewer umbrellas? I read that there are so many patent applications related to umbrellas that there are people who specialize in only umbrella-related patents. And yet most umbrellas are made to

be almost disposable. It doesn't help that we all lose umbrellas so we might not be keen to spend a lot on a more sustainably produced umbrella.

I researched to see if I could find an umbrella made from recycled materials and I found a British company A Brolly makes umbrellas from recycled materials (<https://abrollyuk.com/>). So that might be a good place to start to reduce the impact of your umbrella purchases.

## **Thank you!**

Thank you for listening! I made a Pinterest board about creative reuse of umbrellas [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/umbrellas/>]. Let me know if you ever creatively reused umbrellas to make art or costumes at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time, may you see umbrellas as a source of art in your life!