



## Trashmagination Podcast #55 – Denim Jeans

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

This week's episode is about denim jeans. When I was 22 years old, I spent a summer working at a plant where we sorted donated clothing into categories [<https://trashmagination.com/recycling-textiles/>]. Many charities cannot sort all their donations on site because they get so many donations. Every day, companies would purchase specific types of material, and the most popular type was denim. The manager said that the denim jeans fetched more per pound than any other donated clothing material, even new clothing.

It's easy to find a use for denim jeans that are in good shape, but what can you do with jeans that are out-of-date, paint-splattered, ripped and ragged on the seams? Or if you make quilts from jeans, what can you do with the thick inseams, belt loops, zippers, pockets and waistbands? Earlier this year, there was a product called the Extreme Cut Out Jeans that was just the waistbands and inseams, selling for \$168, but I'm not going to make those jeans for myself any time soon, so let's talk about some more realistic project ideas! [<https://carmardenim.com/products/extreme-cut-out-jean>]

So here's what we'll talk about today:

- where to bring your denim clothing if you don't want to make them into something new
- how to repair, update or sew your own jeans
- denim projects that I made, as well as items I want to make
- artists I admire who work with denim
- yarn made from recycled denim

In Australia next week, there is a program called Jeans for Genes run by the Children's Medical Research Institute [<https://www.jeansforgenes.org.au/>]. On August 3, people across Australia wear denim to show their support for genetic research. Volunteers stand in public places to collect donations. Based on the number of posts on Instagram for this event, it seems like a very big deal in Australia, and it sounds like a great event that perhaps we should have in other parts of the world. Artists who make items from recycled denim are supporting the campaign, such as:

- **Kymerly Leicester [Lester] from Grubbee** makes dribble bibs from recycled jeans and will donate 50 percent of sales to the campaign [[https://www.instagram.com/p/BIVUrH\\_nbzJ/?taken-by=grubbee\\_kids](https://www.instagram.com/p/BIVUrH_nbzJ/?taken-by=grubbee_kids)]
- If you donate to the campaign, **Angela Van Boxel** will crochet your old jeans into a rug. Her son has a genetic disease. [[https://www.instagram.com/p/BljRo4dhHbs/?taken-by=angela\\_van\\_boxtel](https://www.instagram.com/p/BljRo4dhHbs/?taken-by=angela_van_boxtel)]

Maybe we can spread the idea of Jeans for Genes to other countries and encourage denim creative reuse as an important aspect of that event.

### Donating Denim Jeans

If your denim clothing is in good shape, take it to a thrift store. Even if they don't sell it in the store, they might sell it to a vendor, and it will be a good source of revenue for them.

One of the coolest uses of donated jeans is denim insulation for home building. It is not itchy and it is good for reducing the noise you can hear through walls. It has a 30 percent higher acoustic rating than traditional insulation.

[<https://www.hgtv.com/remodel/mechanical-systems/the-benefits-of-recycled-denim-insulation>]. It doesn't off-gas like other types of insulation and can reduce allergy or asthma triggers. The only downside is that it costs twice as much as traditional insulation.

The organization **Blue Jeans Go Green** collects jeans to make insulation [<https://bluejeansgogreen.org/Recycle-Denim/>] and contributes it to charities building homes for those in need. Blue Jeans Go Green partners with stores to gather the donations, stores such as Madewell [<https://www.madewell.com/inspo-do-well-denim-recycling-landing.html>] and J. Crew. Often you will get a discount on your next purchase in those stores. They also have info on how to organize a denim drive if you are looking for a community service project for an Earth Day event for your company or school.

Another place you can bring your denim clothing is to **Levi's and Dockers**. They give you a discount on your next purchase when you bring in your donation [<http://levistrauss.com/sustainability/planet/#recycling-reuse>]. They also have a partnership with Goodwill where you can mail your jeans for free. They work with an organization called I:Collect which sells wearable items are resold and re-worn and makes unwearable items cleaning cloths, insulation, padding or upcycled into new products.

Various zoos and universities have partnered to make a program called Jeans for Giraffes [<http://www.jeansforgiraffes.org>]. This involves gathering donated jeans to raise money for giraffe research east Africa. It doesn't look like they are collecting jeans right now, but maybe in the future?

### Update, Repair or Sew Your Own Denim Jeans

There are many tutorials to show how to repair torn jeans or add details to give them a new look. One skill I have learned over the years was how to hem jeans while keeping the original hem with the distinctive yellow-thread stitching. It's not an intuitive trick but once you learn it, you'll love how easy it is.

<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/P02Mne95-s8" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>

- For **holes in jeans**, you can iron blue interfacing inside the jeans and sew over it. You can have fun when patching kids jeans and make a hole into a monster mouth! [<https://www.artbarblog.com/monster-patches/>]
- There are tutorials showing how to **insert elastic** in the waistband to make the jeans fit your shape better [<https://www.itsalwaysautumn.com/how-to-fix-your-jeans-waistband-no-more-jeans-gap.html>].
- If you like to doodle, you can draw on jeans with a **bleach pen** to make them into a work of art [<https://www.pinterest.com/trashmagination/bleach-pen-art/>].
- I'll share a video that shows how to **embroider around the seams** on a pair of jeans to add a fun flourish.

Many of us have jeans that don't fit quite right, and that can be a source of waste. Maybe the jeans changed shape in the wash or maybe our body shape changed. If you find it frustrating to find store-made jeans, you can make your own custom jeans. Canadian pattern designer **Heather Lou from Closet Case Patterns** has developed a technique for teaching people how to sew custom jeans even if they don't have a lot of sewing experience. They are called Ginger Jeans and I have heard so many people say they love the jeans and they look just like store-bought ones. You can take an online course on how to sew custom dream jeans [<https://sewingclasses.closetcasepatterns.com/p/sew-your-dream-jeans>]. This company also sells hardware kits so you can put all those rivets and jeans buttons so your jeans look really polished. If we make jeans that fit us perfectly, we are less likely to buy a bunch of pairs that only sort-of fit us.

### Trashmagination's Denim Creative Reuse Projects

Let's move on to denim projects that I have made. I have a box of deconstructed jeans that I use for these projects. These are jeans that were from the 1980s i.e. a very wide leg or they had paint on them. The components of jeans are:

- Waistbands with belt loops and zippers
- Flat panels
- Thick inseams and hems

- Back pockets

The components that are the easiest to reuse are the flat panels and the back pockets. You have to get more creative to reuse the other parts. From those jeans, I have made:

- **Jean pocket organizer** [<https://trashmagination.com/toy-organizer-from-recycled-denim-jeans/>] – I sewed the back pockets of jeans together into an organizer that hangs on the back of my daughter’s door for toys.
- **Beanbag cushion chair** [<https://trashmagination.com/cushion-from-blue-jeans/>] – I made a giant cushion from jeans which I am not currently stuffing with unmatched socks and other rags.
- **Upholstered chair** – I just put a new cover on a chair from denim jeans. This was just the seat part of a dining room chair. I used three flat panels, sewed them side-by-side, and then stapled them over the foam base.
- **Ointment organizer** – How many times have you purchased a cream or ointment because you couldn’t find the tube that you already owned? I make an organizer with pockets for tubes that easily get lost in a drawer such as antibiotic cream or hydrocortisone cream. I used belt loops to hang it on the wall.
- **Beads** - When I make items from recycled jeans, my jeans scraps can sometimes be very thin strips. I was inspired by the work of Harmony Lawrence who makes beads from rolled denim strips [[https://www.etsy.com/shop/TemperateSupplies?ref=l2-shopheader-name&section\\_id=19392431](https://www.etsy.com/shop/TemperateSupplies?ref=l2-shopheader-name&section_id=19392431)]. I have made about 15 beads now, and I hope to string them on a necklace soon.

I have so many projects that I want to make with denim jeans, including:

- 1) **Coil basket from denim trim** [<http://untilwednesdaycalls.blogspot.com/2012/03/how-to-recycled-denim-coil-basket.html#.W1Y84dVKjio>]. This is a great way to use up the inseams and hems. You just coil the hems round and round, sew them together to make a basket.
- 2) **Coil necklace** – Another way to use up those inseams and hems is with a coil necklace [[https://www.etsy.com/listing/95414847/recycled-jean-bib-necklace-no24?show\\_sold\\_out\\_detail=1](https://www.etsy.com/listing/95414847/recycled-jean-bib-necklace-no24?show_sold_out_detail=1)]. This involves twirling the inseams and hems into circles and then attaching them together. You can then add beads for some shine and color. I love the designs by an artist named LoveandDream from Turkey.
- 3) **Whale toy** – The Finnish artist Valaan Villapaita has a free tutorial on her blog showing how to make a very cute baleen whale from recycled jeans [<http://valaanvillapaita.blogspot.com/p/hi-there-i-finally-managed-to-translate.html>]. This whale is a combination of blue denim and gray denim.
- 4) **Snack bag** – This project reuses the leg of the jeans so you don’t do much sewing. The blog “Between the Lines” shows how to add a belt to close the bag so you also creatively reuse a belt [<http://pm-betweenthelines.blogspot.com/2012/10/denim-snack-bag-recycling-project.html>].
- 5) **Denim quilts** – There are so many quilts I want to make from denim! My son likes to have about 10 blankets on his bed, so I think one big heavy denim quilt might make him very happy. Many people say they find heavy blankets soothing. I would also like to make a quilt from many square scraps of denim and then embroider a contrasting design on each square with red, orange and yellow threads. This is inspired by quilts from Tessa Dickinson. Denim is great for any quilt with a lot of embroidery because it can stand up to heavy stitching.

## Artists Who Creatively Reuse Jeans

Ever since people have been using indigo to dye clothing, people have been creatively reusing the resulting cloth. One style of creative reuse that I admire a lot is called “boro.” It is from rural Japan and it was a patchwork style used to repair cotton clothing. Boro means “ragged” or “tattered.” When a kimono or other fabric item started to wear thin, the women in the family would sew a small piece of scrap fabric over that spot using a stitching technique called sashiko based on a running stitch. These items would get gradually covered by patches and the pieces of clothing might get very heavy. There is a textile gallery in Brooklyn called Sri Threads which specializes in these types of boro fabrics and I recommend their Instagram feed for inspiration [<https://www.instagram.com/srithreads/>] or search on the tag #japaneseboro. Now many designers are incorporating the techniques of boro into their designs [<https://www.heddels.com/2015/08/all-about-boro-story-japanese-patchwork/>].

So the blue of denim jeans is associated with the dye known as indigo. Indigo dyeing, and specifically shibori, is really “hot” crafting technique right now. Indigo dye can be made from natural ingredients. People make indigo dye vats that they maintain over time [<http://www.grahamkeegan.com/indigo-vat-basics/>]. I have heard about artists who end up dyeing just about anything in their home that they can get their hands on!

There are so many artists who work with denim! Here are some that I follow and admire.

**Katrina Rodabaugh** [ROAD-a-baw] is a fiber artist who advocates for slow fashion. She is publishing a book called *Mending Matters: Stitch, Patch, and Repair Your Favorite Denim & More* [<http://www.katrinarodabaugh.com/books/>]. Her work reminds me of boro and I’m really looking forward to her book in October.

**Pam DeLuco** is a paper artist who makes books from jeans [<http://shotwellpapermill.com>]. I’ll share a video where she demonstrates how she deconstructs jeans, chops them up and puts them in a machine called a Hollander beater which beats the denim to a pulp. To make the paper, she doesn’t need to add anything to the jean pulp except water.

<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/vcoPE3cgu5U" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>

**Karen Stevens** makes adorable pencil cases from recycled denim. Many feature her signature image of a moon embroidered tiny facial features [<https://www.kzstevens.com>]. I believe she is making these moons by drawing on denim with bleach. If you do it right, it can really look like the moon because it doesn’t bleach everything 100%, so it looks like the shadows of the moon in the places where the bleach doesn’t touch.

**Jean Shin** is a creative reuse artist who I mentioned in the podcast episode on prescription bottles. She made an installation called Alterations from blue jean legs stiffened with wax [<http://www.jeanshin.com/alterations.htm>]. They stood up like pots.

**Claire Armstrong** from the blog Pillar Box Blue makes a lot of upcycled crafts from denim jeans [<https://www.pillarboxblue.com/>]. She wove a lampshade from the inseams and made a succulent pot from waistbands. She has sewn a rug from the waistbands that features the leather brand found on many types of jeans. She made an advent calendar by sewing 25 jeans pockets on a canvas curtain. She is my go-to inspiration for denim upcycling ideas.

## Yarn Made from Recycled Denim Jeans

I found four companies who make yarn from recycled denim and I will share links to them in the show notes. They are all located in Europe but yarn stores around the world sell their products. The yarn has variable color, which comes from the natural fading of jeans. The companies are:

- BettaKnit from Italy [<https://www.bettaknit.com/product/1490448/love-my-jeans>]
- Venne Eco Jeans yarn from the Netherlands [<https://www.vennecolcoton.com/catalogus/garen.html?merk=1&zoek=&zoom=970>]
- Wol zo Eerlijk (earlick) from the Netherlands [<https://www.wol-zo-eerlijk.nl/producten/garens/eco-jeans-garen/>]
- Wool and the Gang from the United Kingdom [<https://www.woolandthegang.com/product/billie-jean-yarn/yarn-and-wool>]

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I hope you got ideas for how to creatively reuse denim jeans. I would love to hear about your creative reuse projects for denim at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). I gathered ideas on a Pinterest board about denim [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/jeans/>]. This is one of my favorite Pinterest boards! There is even a quilt that uses up the belt loops from the jeans. My goal is to provide a creative reuse pep talk, so let me know if you feel inspired to try that project that’s been on your mind!

Until next time – may you see denim jeans as a source of art in your life!