



Trashmagination Podcast #109 - Leather

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about creative reuse of leather – as in leather couches, jackets, bags and scraps.

Whenever I see a leather couch in the trash, I feel like I should remove all that leather for a project. Since I already have too many projects, I haven't done that. But lots of other artists do, so I I'm going to talk about artists who work with leather scraps, leather belts, leather jackets, leather gloves and recycled cowboy boots. At the end, I'll talk about people who are creatively reusing other materials to make leather alternatives also called vegan leather.

Environmental Challenges of Leather

Leather is a wonderful material in many ways because it lasts for such a long time. However, it has many environmental challenges. First, raising the animals has a large carbon footprint. Also, cows drink a lot of water. Then the chemicals used to process or "tan" the leather are terrible for the environment. In many places around the world, the people who do this work are not well protected from these chemicals – neither those working with the leather, nor those who live nearby and drink local water. Leather is also not bio-degradable due to the methods used in creating it. Given that leather production produces so much pollution, it makes sense to creatively reuse leather that has already been made.

Reusing Leather Couches and Scraps

The first type of creative reuse I'll talk about is when people use up scraps. The scraps might come from factories where leather products are made, or it might come from that leather couch on the curb that you strip.

There are lots of scraps produced when making leather products because leather is made from skin from a real animal. It has imperfections and sections that will be discarded as items are manufactured. Also, when making leather clothing, there are scraps as items are cut on a pattern. Many artists work with leather scraps, so I'll tell you about a few.

Elvis and Kresse is a company in the United Kingdom that makes bags and rugs from recycled materials [<https://www.elvisandkresse.com/>]. The company started when the founders learned that all the damaged, decommissioned fire houses in London were going to landfill. They were difficult to recycle because they were made from a composite material, meaning they were not all rubber. They wanted to reuse this material because it had been involved in so many heroic deeds. They have rescued hundreds of tons of material. They also give away half of their profits. In addition to recycling fire hoses, Elvis and Kresse now work with a variety of other waste materials. In terms of leather scraps, they gather leather scraps and make them into luxury items. In addition, by making items from fire hose, they get people to buy a leather alternative. One of the founders of Elvis and Kresse said in an interview that her grandmother used to say, "If you are capable, you are responsible." I just love that phrase.

- <https://youtu.be/TRC9APiu5gI>
- <https://youtu.be/ij7AAWUPfXI>

On the Pinterest board for this episode, you can find many bags and wallets made from scrap leather.

- YoLe Bags in Israel - <https://www.instagram.com/p/B67eLA3HdQQ/>
- Oazo Bags in Brazil - <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9lxVjvp7fJ/> -Tatiana Messer Rybalowski
- Deniz Sađdıç – <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFHHJcMsrMh/>

Reusing Leather Belts

Next let's talk about creative reuse of leather belts. A popular way to creative reuse belts is to make them into bracelets. Many artists on Etsy make them, embellished with little metal decorations and recycled costume jewelry [<https://www.etsy.com/search?q=leather%20belt%20bracelet>]. Often they attach to your wrist with snaps.

Danny Seo is a creative reuse artist who usually makes home décor from recycled materials. He makes labels for glass bottles from recycled leather belts. He cuts the belt so that it fits snugly around the bottle. Then he punches a label into the leather with a leather punch [<https://youtu.be/n-2ee0Uy9AE>]. Sadie Seasongoods also makes labels for glass jars from recycled leather belts, but she doesn't wrap them around the jar. She punches holes and inserts rivets, then hangs them from a chain [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/got-i-d-leather-liquor-tags/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxLe1UeB7ee/>]

Rachel Denny makes animal sculptures from recycled materials [<https://racheldenny.com/home.html>]. She made a sculpture of a long-horned cow from leather belts [<https://racheldenny.com/artwork/4294018-Beast-of-Burden-Private-Collection.html>]. You can hear an interview with Rachel on the podcast called the Jealous Curator [<https://www.thejealouscurator.com/blog/2013/10/30/im-still-jealous-of-rachel-denny/>].

Reusing Leather Gloves

Many people like to do painting on recycled leather gloves. There are lots of examples of such gloves for sale on Etsy [<https://www.etsy.com/search?q=painted%20leather%20glove>].

One artist who takes this to the next level is Bunnie Reiss [<https://www.instagram.com/bunnieluvrocks/>] who has a series called Cosmic Animal Gloves [<http://www.bunniereiss.com/new-index-1/#/cosmic-animal-gloves/>]. She lays the gloves side-by-side and then she can play with symmetry in the painting across the two gloves. Often the eyes of the cosmic animals are painted on the thumbs of the gloves. Bunny mostly paints enormous murals on walls all around the world which I recommend you check out. She said she loves painting murals because it allows her to paint big without having to store or move any paintings. I also learned about Bunnie Reiss on the podcast called the Jealous Curator [<https://www.thejealouscurator.com/blog/2016/11/25/a-disciplined-free-spirit/>].

Reusing Cowboy Boots

I was surprised to learn that artists creatively reuse leather cowboy boots to make purses [https://www.etsy.com/market/cowboy_boot_purse]. First they cut off the soles of the boots and open up the boot along the back seam. Then they sew the boots back to back so the toes are sticking out. Then they tuck in the toes and add a new base. The last step is to add a strap on the top [https://youtu.be/rbbg_pQgaDY]. Some people also make a wine tote from a single cowboy boot.

Reusing Leather Labels on Denim Jeans

Episode 55 of Trashmagination was about creative reuse of denim jeans, and on many brands of jeans, there is a rectangular label made from leather. Here are some cool ways that people have creatively reused those labels when they were upcycling their jeans.

The artist from Made or Remade does more than reuse the denim from jeans. He carefully removes all the thread for reuse. That is painstaking work. Most denim artists just cut off the seams and toss them. He reuses all the waistbands to make waistband quilts. Finally, he also reuses the leather labels. First, he sews them into thimbles, which is genius [<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTfYaSHvVP/>]. Second, he uses them to label his quilt by using a wood burner to write the information into the leather label.

Another way that people reuse these leather labels is to sew them together into a leather rug. These are actually so commonly available – you can even get them on places like Amazon and Overstock.com.

Reusing Leather Jackets and Pants / Trousers

Next I'll talk about artists who creatively reuse leather jackets and pants (or trousers for those from the United Kingdom). Many artists do this, but I'll mention two who I follow.

The first company is called Hildur2John and it's located in Sweden. They make beautiful throw pillows from many small circular leather scraps that they cut from recycled suede jackets [<https://www.hildur2john.com/>]. The name Hildur2John is named after the artist's grandparents Hildur and John. In addition to cushions, they also make small branches with leather leaves for decoration, pine cone ornaments, headphone holders, bow ties and rugs.

- <https://www.instagram.com/hildur2john/>

Aly Ashton upcycles all types of leather. I first heard about her work when she made a bag from a protective leather suit worn by a motorcycle racer who was in an accident and his suit saved his life. She made him a commemorative bag [<https://www.facebook.com/alybondbespoke/posts/6284269114968491>]. Aly's company is called AlyBond Bespoke and her website shows many leather reuse projects [<http://www.alybond.co.uk/>]. She started working with leather with one leather jacket after watching a Martha Stewart video, and then acquaintances started asking her to make them items from sentimental leather clothing [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFX6AdP8Ot4>].

- <https://www.youtube.com/c/AlyAshton/videos>

Leather Alternatives or Vegan Leather

As I mentioned at the start of this episode, producing leather is damaging to the environment in many ways. That's why many inventors and entrepreneurs are seeking leather alternatives.

In episode 67, I talked about creative reuse of inner tubes. Sometimes people use recycled inner tubes to make items like bags as a replacement for leather. I mentioned Elvis and Kresse at the start of this episode who use recycled fire hoses. But another alternative to cow-based leather is to grow it.

There is a product called Desserto which is made from cactus [<https://desserto.com.mx/>]. This company was started by Adrian who worked with leather in the auto industry and Marte who worked with leather in the fashion industry. They saw a lot of waste in both industries [<https://youtu.be/x4sGOYbHoXo>]. Since they live in Mexico, they have access to a lot of cactus. Unlike cows, cactus doesn't require a lot of water. It absorbs carbon dioxide instead of emitting methane. They don't even have to kill the plant to make the leather. They just trim some of the mature leaves and the plant keeps growing. They joked that it is like giving the plant a haircut. It costs about the same as animal leather to produce and can be made in any color.

Another way to grow leather is to make it from mycelium or fungus. I found two companies working on that option – Bolt Threads [<https://boltthreads.com/>] in California and Ecovative Design [<https://ecovatedesign.com/>] in New York. Mycelium can be grown in shapes to replace polystyrene packaging (which I mentioned in episode 105) or pounded to make into something like leather [<https://youtu.be/ACoA6vUD-h8>]. It takes relatively little water to grow the mycelium compared with the water use of cows.

Craft Projects from Salvaged Leather

So let's finish up today's episode with some creative reuse activities you could do at home to upcycle your leather.

For the simplest possible leather craft project that might be fun to do with teenagers, you can make luggage tags where you punch in your information using leather punches [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2iiKDzz1V4>].

You can make a leather sling to hang up your plant [<https://vintagerevivals.com/slouchy-leather-sling-planter>]. You cut out a circle of leather, punch four rivets around the edge, add rope and you hang up your plant in this pouch.

You can make a journal or book with leather scraps. Sadie Seasongoods made a tiny book that you wear around your neck like a pendant [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/how-booking-cute-miniature-book-pendants/>]. She took pages from an old book that was falling apart, cut them into very small pages only a few inches wide, then cut a rectangle of leather as the book cover. She then punched a hole through everything and made this tiny adorable book. You can also make a full-sized book for a journal using many tutorials online [<https://www.instructables.com/id/Left-over-paper-journal/>].

A simple sewing project would be to make a leather throw pillow, which adds the right color tones and textures for a more rustic home décor.

For a more ambitious but very satisfying project, you could make your own shoes. Sharon Raymond has a blog called Simple Shoemaking where she teaches people how to make shoes from salvaged leather [<https://simpleshoemaking.wixsite.com/website>]. All of her designs avoid using toxic shoe cements.

- <https://www.instagram.com/simpleshoemaking/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/Simple-Shoemaking-122659024556516/>

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know if you have ever creatively reused leather at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time, may you see recycled leather as a source of art in your life!