

WEARABLEART



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INTRODUCTION

Like any great story, the tale of how the World of WearableArt (WOW) came to be has had as many twists and turns as a Tolkien novel. And as to be expected with any such epic, a deeply committed and tenacious cast of characters has had to deal with many trials, but also many triumphs in a remarkable 25-year-long adventure.

In 1987, sculptor and WOW founder Dame Suzie Moncrieff had just finished creating an art gallery in an historic cob cottage that she had restored in the country outside of Nelson. She knew she needed a way to promote this new venture, and fell upon the concept of wearable art. Her plan was to create a show where works of art would be showcased on moving bodies within a production that had elements of theatre, dance, lighting and sound.

World of WearableArt was born in a country where sport is the national obsession. New Zealanders love sport and, whether they play it or not, they watch it and support it religiously, and so finding sponsors to back Dame Suzie's fledgling event proved to be difficult. Eventually Dame Suzie procured \$1,000 dollars in prize money from legendary Nelson café owner, the late Eelco Boswijk, and so the journey of the World of WearableArt began.

Family, friends and fellow artists were the main ingredients of the first show's success and three months of full-time work went into organising and creating the show. For her first event, Dame Suzie knew she wanted more than just models on a catwalk – there should be lighting, mood and music to tell a story. Lights were strung around the veranda of the old cottage gallery and a stage stretched out into the garden.

Then the weather turned. Black clouds haemorrhaged with torrential rain and a marquee had to be hastily erected between downpours. But along with the rain that night came the excited crowds, and they streamed in, squelching through the mud with their boots and umbrellas. Music burst into life from the borrowed stereo and the first Wearable Art show was underway.

With the emergency weather contingencies having soaked up any profits, no money was made that night. The only toilet was a long-drop, no consents had been sought to hold the event and the neighbours weren't pleased with the noise, as a triumphant cast and crew partied through the night. But something else happened that evening. Both the artists and the audience had been captured by the idea of art adorning the human body in both bizarre and wildly beautiful ways, and presented not as a catwalk show but as an emotionally adventurous piece of theatre. The show made television, newspaper and radio news. People were fascinated by the concept of wearable art and those who had entered and attended the show wanted more.

A key cast, including Dame Suzie's sister, Heather Palmer, the show's competition director, came onboard to share Dame Suzie's vision. Together they would create a show that, year after year, rewards the very best in design and creativity and treats its audiences to a spectacular presentation of art, music, dance, drama, and comedy which has become a highly anticipated event on the New Zealand arts calendar.

In 1990, WOW tested its popularity by making the move to Nelson's much larger Trafalgar Centre. It was, according to Dame Suzie, 'a time of crazy

excitement’. By the third year in the Trafalgar Centre it was an established success. No longer a show for art and fashion lovers alone, the audience had widened to children, grandmothers, farmers and city dwellers, who increasingly flocked from all over New Zealand to experience WOW’s special brand of runway theatre.

At the end of the 1990s Dame Suzie received a life-changing call from a local family asking if she would like a permanent home for the World of WearableArt. The family wished to develop and bestow a purpose-built facility that is now one of the region’s most popular tourist attractions and cultural landmarks, the World of WearableArt and Classic Cars Museum. The building provided temperature controlled areas to store the garments, a large art and sewing department and a gallery and theatre where changing exhibitions could be staged. Today, around 40,000 people each year visit the museum and are inspired by the creativity and beauty showcased within its walls.

By now Tourism New Zealand had taken notice of this new marketing opportunity, which sat outside the country’s traditional promotional categories of sport, beautiful landscape and Maori culture. Tourism New Zealand sponsored WOW to tour mini-shows in Asia and later to Sydney, which meant more exposure for the artists and encouraged more overseas designers to enter the awards. International media were enthralled by the concept of wearable art, with esteemed BBC correspondent Michael Peschardt commenting after seeing the show, ‘I’ve seen major cultural and fashion shows around the world and this is unlike anything I’ve ever witnessed before’. With this international exposure the awards took on a new momentum.

A key corporate sponsor also came onboard when Brancott Estate (formerly Montana Wines) became naming rights sponsor in 1998. It was at the suggestion of Brancott Estate that Dame Suzie and her team changed the show’s name the following year to ‘World of WearableArt’ or simply ‘WOW’.

With the Awards show audience at capacity in Nelson, Dame Suzie and her team made the heart-wrenching decision in 2005 to move the show to a new location in Wellington. While the WOW museum still enjoys its home in Nelson, and is the base of WOW’s small full-time team, moving the WOW Awards show to the city of Wellington paid off, as audience numbers swelled from 8,000 to close to 50,000 annual attendees.

WOW is best described as a glorious rebellion against the mundane, a choreographed collision where fantasy meets reality and dreams merge with nightmares. For the audience, it’s sensory saturation, with the bodies on stage forming a moving canvas in a seamless, fluid exhibition. There is neither narration, nor are there any language barriers.

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The WOW Awards show not only continues to inspire the audience with its vast creative boundaries, but also through the brilliance of the designers. Creating a wearable art garment encourages lateral and original thinking, challenges

For me, the joy and energy of wearable art is that it enables designers to see the body as a blank canvas on which they can develop any idea that appeals to them. The garments do not have to be commercially viable. They do not even have to take themselves seriously. The only thing they must be is wearable.

– Dame Suzie Moncrieff

the normal convention of beauty and expectations, and provokes an emotional response throughout the design process.

The annual judging panel for WOW is made up of top New Zealand fashion designers and internationally renowned artists, who work alongside Dame Suzie and Weta Workshop’s Sir Richard Taylor. They have the unenviable job of selecting the winning designs from more than 300 designers, a third of whom are internationally based.

Exposure on WOW’s stage has launched the careers of many domestic and international designers. The appeal of \$165,000 in prize money and scholarships, across 39 awards, helps to attract designers working in a diverse range of creative fields, such as film, fashion and art, as well as enthusiastic amateurs. But for many the achievement of having their garment exhibited with some of the world’s best wearable artists, is reward in itself.

Each year the show starts with the *Children’s* section, where artists create wearable art to adorn a child, and the performers take the audience on a journey into a dream world of wonder and excitement, a place where anything is possible, and which sets the tone for the rest of the show.

Art and fashion collide in the *Avant Garde* section, which challenges designers to create a work of art that is revolutionary, extravagant and extrovert. Winners of this section have hailed from Hong Kong, China, Australia, New Zealand, India, the United Kingdom and the United States. Britain’s Mary Wing To was named the winner of the *Avant Garde* section in 2011, as well as the winner of the WOW Supreme Award, for her leather creation ‘Hylonome’, which reflects the poetry of saddler craftsmanship.

The *Bizarre Bra®* and *Man Unleashed* sections alternate each year in the WOW Awards show. Both provide an opportunity for designers to add a good dose of humour to their designs, well illustrated in Julie Brawley’s 2011 entry ‘Sir Lace Alot’, a revealing look at a masculine vanity.

The *South Pacific* section sees designers gather their inspiration from New Zealand’s own rich Maori culture and the cultures of our South Pacific neighbours. Often combining both cultural references and elements of the natural environment, this section also provides a special opportunity for WOW’s creative team to weave some Polynesian echoes into the section’s soundtrack.















