

FLAX OF LIFE

WITH ASHLEY LLOYD'S SUSTAINABLE SURFBOARDS AND CLOTHING

BY LIZA MONROY

When supply chain issues disrupted Ashley Lloyd's surfboard building during the pandemic, a friend asked her, "If you were to start something, what would it be?" Reflecting on the question led Lloyd to launch Unfurling, a sustainable fashion line that is so much more. As with Lloyd herself — a professional surfer, musician, entrepreneur, and magnetic personality — many fascinating qualities of Unfurling evade easy descriptions.

For Unfurling, Lloyd creates the kind of multiuse items she wished existed during her years of surfing-van life, to turn packing for a trip as light as possible while being environmentally conscious. Unfurling's hand-dyed fabrics become privacy screens for a van or home as much as wearable art: industrial-strength magnets turn a wrap into a dress, a dress into a shirt, and then some. Each piece, created from organic fabrics, is hand-dyed with natural dyes by San Francisco artist, writer and surfer Margaret Seelie, founder of the intersectional *Seawitches* Zine and assistant editor of *Emocean* surf magazine.

Seelie and Lloyd first met on a staircase above Pleasure Point when Seelie complimented Lloyd on one of her boards and asked about it, not yet realizing the woman whose work she was praising was Lloyd herself. They hit it off, surfed together, and Seelie began riding Lloyd's ecoboards.

"When I was starting Unfurling," Lloyd says, "I knew I didn't want to contribute to more waste. Even though I'm a small speck in this great speck of time, I'm still part of it."

It's an approach that defines both Ashley Lloyd Surfboards — certified ecoboards through Sustainable Surf — and Unfurling. Both endeavors are threaded together by sustainability: reducing waste while providing durable, high-quality products, whether for riding waves or clothing the body.

Plastics offer many wonders, Lloyd explains, but then things get out of balance. Many of the smallest pieces of plastic trash in the ocean are from clothing. Indeed, about 60% of materials that make up our clothing are cheap, synthetic plastic fibers that "leach into the ocean just by being washed," news website *Vox* reported in 2019. These microfibers are toxic to ocean life and don't biodegrade.

PHOTOS: MEI-LI RESTANI



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However, as Seelie points out, "With environmental messaging, the doomsday approach is not how to do it." Unfurling embodies a positive vibe, with patterns resembling water, the ocean, and flowers, created with dyes derived from sources like avocado seeds and even — forthcomingly — invasive urchin species.

Seelie and her friend, Hannah Bassett, are starting a natural dye company that uses invasive purple sea urchins to create the dye, Seelie says. The urchins create an enchanting pink dye, and the dye process is an enlightening micro-version of ocean acidification.

"You're literally dissolving the urchin spines in acid, and you're watching them bubble and foam, and what's left behind is this pinkish-white sludge," she says. "It's really scary to watch, because this is what we're doing to our oceans over time." In this way, the dye has a deep and symbolic connection to climate change.

Seelie plans to create dye kits and teach workshops using the method.

"We get to make beautiful art out of a resource that's wreaking havoc on our kelp beds, and making the dye is really fun," she says.

Before Unfurling, Seelie frequently visited Lloyd's shaping bay, where she started helping out during

Lloyd's pregnancy more than eight years ago. The space provided an ideal setting for Seelie to dye large pieces.

"There is a lot of waiting in the glassing process, so I'd indigo-dye fabric between coats (of glass)," Seelie says. Having a space to dye in that was much bigger than her 1,000-square-foot San Francisco apartment allowed her to start experimenting with bigger pieces of fabric.

"I love going big, but that is not typically how people work with natural dyes," she says. "Usually you see people indigo-dyeing a bandana or napkins or something small, but I wanted to drown in indigo by making curtains, bedsheets — everything I could get my hands on." Today, her work is often over six feet tall, and she's going bigger with every art show.

When Unfurling came about, Seelie was a natural fit to do the dye: "My work is all about color and nature," she says.

Lloyd's climate-friendly multiverse also includes Locus Surfboards Ecoboard Factory in Aptos, a glassing house that works exclusively with more sustainable materials. Tyler Hopkins is the shaper at Locus and does the glassing for Lloyd, with whom he shares the space.



PHOTO: MIKEY NORMAND

Soul surfers Natalie Marquardt, Sierra Garcia, and Trey Martinho display a few unique wraps in the Unfurling product line.

"Now our big eco-push is we have this bio-resin made with by-products from the existing petroleum industry and plant-based products. It is less harmful to the environment because there are lower VOCs (volatile organic compounds)," Lloyd explains. "There are so many belief systems I've shifted since I started surfboard making."

Lloyd began working with bio-based resins from the Banatao brothers' Entropy Resins along with recyclable expanded polystyrene foam and flax in place of fiberglass. Notable surfers such as Dave Rastovich and Cliff Kaponu surf ecoboards, helping highlight the importance of alternative materials and climate- and waste-consciousness in the industry. The ecoboard business may be the way of the future, especially given there is no compromise involved in aesthetics or quality. Lloyd and Hopkins are very particular about both.

Hopkins "knows how to translate the aesthetic I like into more eco-friendly materials," Lloyd says.

When Hopkins and Lloyd began working together over five years ago, "we were so aligned on how we

built boards already," Hopkins says. "She's great to collaborate with for surfboards: patient through the process and committed to the alternative material path." Hopkins emphasizes how much testing has gone into these more-sustainable methods, as well as how much he and his collaborators honor traditional methods of board building.

Local surfer and shaper Trey Martinho, who glasses at Locus, highlights another high-stakes benefit of working with the bio-resin: worker safety. "That's a huge thing for me and Tyler (Hopkins)," Martinho says. "It's one thing for it to be good for the environment, but it's also better for us, too, working with it every day. It's not toxic."

From her boards to bringing eco-conscious clothing into the mix, Lloyd's commitment to the planet and her work stems from her desire to play a part in solutions to climate change.

"A realist might say, 'You can't just have the desire; it's not how things happen,'" she says, "but things have come so far because the desire is there. The future is actually happening right now."



PHOTO: BRYAN GARRISON



PHOTO: MEI-LI RESTANI



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BUILDING AN ECOBOARD

Ecoboard building involves “a lot of R&D, because you have to use new materials and test them to make sure they do what you want them to do,” says shaper Tyler Hopkins. “It’s a lengthy process to develop what will work.”

Here’s a quick-guide rundown of the ecoboard process that Hopkins and Ashley Lloyd use:

1

Expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam is used instead of polyurethane because the scrap pieces of EPS are recyclable, while polyurethane foam is not.

2

EPS is a lighter foam, which can be desirable for types of surfing such as shortboarding, while heavier boards are preferred for longboarding. To counteract the lighter weight of EPS, flax is used to add weight to the board.

3

Cloth made from the flax plant is sustainable and has hollow fibers that soak up the bio-based epoxy for the glassing process. This adds weight and “vibration dampening” to the board.

One result of the EPS and flax combo is a board that “feels more like a classic noserider,” Hopkins says. This is a combo Lloyd often relies on for strong, vibration-dampening boards that don’t have the “pingy” feel and buoyancy of a typical EPS board. This more sustainable option can be suitable for any kind of surfer and equipment. 🌱

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