

Saved from the Scrap Heap: The Mannequin's Second Life in the Studio

By Kayla Rosenberg

What Happens to a Mannequin

People rarely think about the silent forms posed in shop windows, stationed at entrances, or looking down from platforms. And yet, mannequins are essential for retailers to showcase the latest fashions. So, what happens when a mannequin becomes dated, damaged, or simply discarded during retail closures? The answer is more complicated, and more consequential than most people realize. And for a small but growing community of artists and entrepreneurs, it's become an unexpected opportunity.

Built to Sell, Made to Last (Too Long)

To understand where mannequins end up, one has to first understand what they're for and why retailers keep replacing them. Mannequins are more than props. They are silent 'salespeople.' According to Retail Dive, a trade publication covering the retail industry, "mannequins attract attention. They give customers visual clues as to what is stylish, they quickly show how an outfit can be put together and, at times, help shoppers discern how apparel will fit without the need to go into a dressing room." They carry brand identity, too. The same report notes they "have the ability to spark personal recognition in a client base, and thus serve as a way for customers to see themselves reflected in the shopping experience."

But the retail industry is under pressure to keep reinventing that aspiration. Driven by cheap online goods, mass-produced fast fashion, and the rise of AI-assisted shopping, retailers are increasingly competing on in-store experience, overhauling physical spaces every five to seven years. According to MIT Sloan Management Review, "to entice people to leave their homes, retailers need to be strategic about how their stores look and feel by investing in setups and experiences that engage all five senses."

The fallout from all this remodeling is enormous. It's estimated that hundreds of thousands of mannequins and dressforms are thrown out annually in the United States, and as large chains remodel more and more frequently, those numbers keep climbing. What makes this more than just a waste problem is the material. Mannequins are typically made from fiberglass, plastics, and metal, none of which break down easily. A 2019 study on plastic waste degradation published by the National Institutes of Health found that "a total of 8300 million metric tons of virgin plastics has been produced to date. As of 2015, approximately 6300 Mt of plastic waste has been generated, around 9% of which has been recycled, 12% has been incinerated, and 79% has accumulated in landfills or the natural environment. If current production and waste management

trends continue, roughly 12,000 Mt of plastic waste will be in landfills or in the natural environment by 2050.” As long as remodeling drives revenue, retailers have little-to-no incentive to rethink what happens to the fixtures they leave behind. One of many solutions, it turns out, isn’t coming from the industry. It’s coming from the secondhand market.

50 Mannequins and Craigslist Ad

Judi Henderson-Townsend started Mannequin Madness in Oakland, California in 2001 with just 50 used mannequins she found on Craigslist, fresh off the dot-com crash. Two decades later, it’s a nationwide operation, and a lot of that growth has to do with the people who kept coming back to buy.

“Retailers call us when they're closing, going out of business, or remodeling,” Henderson-Townsend, founder of Mannequin Madness, said in a personal interview in May 2026. “Twenty years ago when we first started, people weren't as concerned about recycling. Mannequins would often get destroyed or dumped. Now people are much more concerned about sustainable retailing, and are much more aware of the impact of non-biodegradable waste on the environment.”

Those people include a growing community of artists who see discarded mannequins not as trash but as raw material. They’re working in a tradition that stretches back decades. According to *Illustromania*, an art history publication, the “junk art” movement has been gaining momentum since the 1950s, mannequin art can be seen as an extension of junk art, “rooted in environmental awareness and social critique, blurring the boundaries between fine art and everyday life, encouraging audiences to reconsider their relationship with consumption and waste.”

What Artists See in the Discard

The mannequins’ afterlife in the art world ranges from backyard installations to gallery walls in Manhattan (cheesy?). What connects these artists is a shared instinct: that the discarded form is already doing something, and the ‘work’ is just paying attention to it.

James Bantone, a Geneva-born, Paris-Based artist, makes that argument most explicitly. According to *Art Viewer*, an online publishing platform and archive for contemporary art, earlier in his career (2022), Bantone pushed “the simple intimate human emotions into an absurdist twist by reconfiguring bodies and objects with the help of prosthetics or creating new ones from various materials and stitches.”

For his 2024 exhibition at New York Life Gallery, Bantone sources images from display mannequin company catalogs, featuring mannequins alongside the human models they were

based on then transferred those images onto discarded steel sheet plates treated with vinegar to produce rust, which he scraped off to reveal patterns left by the chemical reaction. Through this process, Bantone materially tethers the weathered use of the body to use the metal sheet itself. As the gallery noted, “transforms the detritus of industrial production, animating lifeless prefabricated materials through artistic intervention and chemical processes.” Bantone says, “As much as I feel like the mannequin is the ultimate metaphor for the body as an object, these works are also ultimate metaphors for the body as a commodity.”

Where Bantone interrogates the mannequin as a stand-in for how capitalism can shape identity, Jay Whitehill takes a different approach entirely. An artist and past Mannequin Madness customer, Whitehill uses her collection of secondhand mannequins to build elaborate community displays in her backyard, complete with a steam locomotive, zip line, and trampoline. “At Halloween, it's fun to bring a different experience to people that isn't based on gore,” Whitehill said in an interview. With dozens of elaborately posed figures, she says, “it's something [the community] can't get anywhere else.” She also reframes familiar stories, like retelling *The Bride of Frankenstein* by placing characters in an outlandish garden party scene rather than a sterile laboratory.

Finally, Nick Cave, a contemporary artist and dancer, uses mannequins as the armature for his iconic “Soundsuits,” sculptural works that function as both gallery displays and wearable costumes for performance. “I know that I am here to use art as this vehicle for change. So, I have to somehow come up with ways of working that sort of breaks down these divisions,” Cave said in *Forothermore*, a documentary produced by the Guggenheim Museum. His soundsuits are built from thrift-store finds, discarded toys and oven mitts layered with fibers like yarn or hair. Cave made his first soundsuit in 1992 in response to the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police, and according to Artnet, has referred to them as “armor,” something that renders a person’s identity, race, class, and gender invisible.

New Meaning

The mannequin moves through three lives. Starting on the retail floor, a body built to sell. It then gets discarded when the industry moves on, piling up in landfills where it will spend the next several centuries breaking down into our soil and water.

But, if the right hands find it, it becomes something else. Raw material. A ‘vehicle’ for art. A provocation.

What Judi Henderson-Townsend built in Oakland is, on the surface, a resale & rent business. But it's also proof that the so-called throw away doesn't need to stay *thrown* away. The artists who follow in that logic, whether its Bantone turning scrap steel and mannequins into a critique of commodification, Whitehill building a community around figures most people would have sent to the dump, or Cave transforming discarded forms and materials into body armor against racism and invisibility, are all doing something the retail industry never intended. They're giving the mannequin a meaning it never had on the department floor.

Sustainability and art don't always get discussed in the same breath . But the mannequin, of all items, makes the case that they should be. As Henderson-Townsend put it simply on the Mannequin Madness website: "Our mission is to make the world a little greener, one mannequin at a time."

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