

# Erica Spitzer Rasmussen

## Clothes Tell the Tale

by Mason Riddle

**Erica Spitzer Rasmussen's sculpture is as much about storytelling as it is about process and materials.** Taking the form, primarily, of the female body or the clothes that women wear, her dresses, jackets, vests, kimonos, collars, and corsets are metaphors for ancestral heritage, family illness, pregnancy and motherhood, femininity and masculinity, travel and death. In origin, hers are personal non-literal and non-linear narratives that, through the works' commonly recognizable forms of dress buoyed by eccentric materials, achieve a sort of one-off universality.

Rasmussen's proclivity for unconventional materials is well known and her handmade papers are the essence of her artistic practice. "Paper speaks to me of the fragility and vulnerability of the flesh," states the Twin Cities (Minnesota) artist. "It is the thing most akin to the skin." Since the mid-1990s, she has meticulously crafted sculptures from exotic and handmade papers whose elements are frequently assembled with waxed linen thread, jute, and flax. Certain works are dyed with Kool-Aid, Tang, or tea, or embellished with gold leaf and acrylic paint burnished to a lustrous patina. With others, taut paper surfaces have been animated with eccentric, non-art materials such as dehydrated apricots or sole, human hair and animal fur, tea bags, feathers, seeds, matchsticks, bottle caps, shells, buttons, and upholstery tacks. In some instances, Rasmussen chooses materials for their innate physicality and others for their inherent meaning. Few of her pieces can be worn due to their fragility.

Tomatoes, sun-dried or otherwise, are a particular favorite. For more than a decade Rasmussen has made works inspired by the age-old quip that "eating tomatoes will put hair on your chest." Told to her as a child by her sociologist father, she feared eating tomatoes for 20 years, and the silly aphorism has been the source of numerous works that explore what Rasmussen identifies collectively as the "Tomatic Myth."

The most recent chapter of the Tomatic Myth is the just shy-of-elegant *Tomatic Jacket* (2011). Short, collarless, and Chanel-like in cut, it is made from handmade paper, camel hair, and jute with the front edge embellished with long straight black human hair from China. Using black thread, Rasmussen embroidered images of tomatoes on the blood-red velvet lining. Its materials also refer to early Christian hair shirts,

a symbol of denying physical comforts. "Hair shirts were a form of penance," says Rasmussen. "I am interested in the correlation between the body and the notion of shame." Which, of course, returns to the shameful notion of a young girl sprouting hair on her chest.

Equally visceral is Rasmussen's mixed media *Vestments of Valor* (2011). Frequently working in series, the artist cast three long handmade paper vests from her own torso that incorporate, variously, cotton, jute, camel's hair, field grass, acrylics, wax, gold leaf, animal teeth, bone, tomato paste, metal office clips, embroidery thread, and human hair. Metaphorically, the vests are emotional armor, a sort of defensive garb to protect Rasmussen from physical or psychological harm. The three garments are also rooted in cultural traditions. One is a contemporary expression of 15th-century Italian under-armor punctured with rusted metal office clips that imbue it with a sense of age. The second, more fantastical, is based on contemporary wear from Japan and England. The third is influenced by Ghanaian hunting tunics in which the hunter would harbor parts of the desired animal, such as hair or teeth, in his clothes to protect him during the hunt. Here, each of the small handmade packets adorning the surface is stuffed with animal and human hair as a talismanic device.

The *Vestments* are related in basic form and materials to Rasmussen's ongoing series titled *Corsets of Talis*, suggestive bustier-like garments that recount personal stories such as her battle with infertility, or explore the larger polarities between "masculinity and femininity, bestiality and humanity, and attraction and repulsion." For Rasmussen, "They are intended to act as talismanic devices to protect a feminine identity from psychological harm." Not without humor, the shimmering metallic gold *Red Hot* (2005), one of the few with a title, celebrates the conception of her son and is sheathed in red-tipped kitchen matches, like quills of a porcupine. Representing the artist's ovaries, two orbs made from fishing lures dangle from the corset's bottom edge. In short, *Red Hot* is a bodacious metaphor for sexual entanglement and procreation. Rasmussen's most recent corset (2012) is more sobering. Untitled, it is constructed from camel's wool and trimmed in clipped black feathers. Poking ominously through the soft fuzzy surface is an army of metal upholstery tacks.

**INSET: ERICA SPITZER RASMUSSEN *Tomatic Jacket***  
Mixed media with handmade paper (cotton, jute, camel's hair, field grass, velvet, embroidery thread, shellac), 26" x 32" x 10", 2011.  
Detail in background. Photos: Petronella Ytsma.





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Recently Rasmussen has explored issues of family history and events. *Expiration Date* (2011), which embodies her statement that paper is akin to skin, suggests a shoe cobbler's apron. Constructed from commercial papers and embroidered with the date of her fortieth birthday and a "diagram" of female organs, the wall-mounted sculpture is indeed skin-like. Stained a patchy brown from shellac and rust, *Expiration Date* is a metaphor for the "withering" of her reproductive organs, a subject that she's addressed continually with her sibling-hungry, seven-year old son.

*Silent Harvest* (2011) is a symbolic *précis* of Rasmussen's 2010 trip to Vienna with her father and son to explore their Austrian heritage.

An armless, figurative dress form, hips to neck, the cast paper work is painted gold and sheathed in dehydrated apricots. A wide gash-like opening down the front reveals a Star of David pinned down the figure's dark interior where the heart should be. A side adventure on the trip took the group to the picturesque village of Spitz, the source of Rasmussen's maiden name, which is heralded for its apricot orchards. Extended searching proved the obliteration of her Jewish past, even in the cemetery grave-stones where Christian names had replaced the earlier Jewish ones. Tactile and psychologically complex, not only is *Silent Harvest* a metaphor for the village of Spitz's annual harvest of apricots, but also the Nazi's horrific harvest of Jews.



ERICA SPITZER RASMUSSEN *Expiration Date* Mixed media with commercial papers (Better than Linen, embroidery thread, cotton thread, brass grommets, shellac, and rust), 30" x 22" x 4", 2011.

LEFT: *Coat of Invocation* Mixed media with handmade paper (mulberry fibers, commercial envelopes, cotton thread, matte medium, acrylics, Rit dye, and Japanese green tea), 32" x 46" x 32" x 2", 2011. Detail below. Photos: Petronella Ytsma.

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ERICA SPITZER RASMUSSEN *Vestments of Valor* Mixed media with handmade paper (cotton, jute, camel's hair, field grass, acrylics, gold leaf, wax, animal teeth, bone, tomato paste, office clips, embroidery thread and human hair), 28" x 58" x 11", 2009.

INSET LEFT: ERICA SPITZER RASMUSSEN *Portrait of My Father* Mixed media with handmade paper (abaca, flax, various plant fibers gathered from ancestral land, acrylics, cotton thread, and bovine blood), 24" x 10" x 8", 2011. Detail in background. Photos: Petronella Ytsma.

A related work is *A Portrait of My Father* (2011), another visual metaphor for her family history that is ostensibly engaging and later repellent. Using fibers culled from the ancestral property in Vienna, Rasmussen's *Portrait* is a diminutive lederhosen edged in green. In 1938 at age five (the same age as the artist's son during their 2010 trip), Rasmussen's father and his family fled Austria for Paris when Hitler invaded Vienna. Increasing the work's psychological context and visual tension, Rasmussen painted the small, almost tender-looking garment with bovine blood. Now a deep red hue, *Portrait's* endearing nature has vanished. By employing such loaded, story-specific materials, Rasmussen has reified her family history and given it, including herself, a new voice.

More lyrical is *Coat of Invocation* (2011), based on a traditional Japanese *happi* coat, a gender-neutral garment worn at festivals. Made from handmade paper, stained and painted commercial coin envelopes, and Japanese green tea, among other materials, *Coat* was inspired by the Shinto tradition of writing requests to the higher powers. Mottled gold in appearance and lined with dyed ruby red mulberry paper, *Coat* is constructed from nearly 500 small envelopes each containing a handwritten request for the health of a loved one who is currently negotiating cancer. The artist compares the repetitive process to uttering a mantra, or "the folding of 1000 cranes."

*Coat* is an illustrative example of Rasmussen's attention to process and detail. To achieve the exact hue and quality of surface

desired, she initially dyed 1500 small envelopes across several batches of colorant and then painted them, selecting only the best. Although labor-intensive, her process is also meditative. The artist never opts for the quick and easy, preferring to slow the process down and contemplate each step, whether it is dyeing envelopes, hand-stitching garments, dehydrating fruit, or gathering fibers from a field to make paper.

Rasmussen understands clearly the inherent power of materials to evoke meaning, trigger memories, and define an ethos. Her distinctive practice aligns her with the universal, millennia-old tradition of making objects—functional, spiritual or decorative—as a way to cope with unpredictable milestones from birth to death. Densely coded with the ideas and practices of gender, cultural institutions, economic class, professional identity, clothing is provocative and defining. Rasmussen is fond of quoting Virginia Wolff who once said "Clothes wear us." Although Rasmussen's individual narratives may be oblique, viewers are compelled—almost forced—to construct their own narratives, so associative and tactile is the work. Effortlessly, we all become storytellers in their wake.

—Twin Cities-based critic Mason Riddle writes on the visual arts, architecture, and design. She has contributed to publications including *Architecture MN*, *Architectural Record*, *Artforum*, *Ceramics Art & Perception*, *Ceramics Monthly*, *Elle Decor*, *Dwell*, *Metropolis*, *Public Art Review*, *Rain Taxi*, and *Sculpture*. She was the former director of the *MN Percent for Art in Public Places* program and Interim Director of *The Goldstein Museum of Design*.