

# Cut from the same cloth

The cut of a jacket and its owner's memories are revived by a hands-on fashion philosopher, writes **ANGELA BENNIE**.

I hand my old blue jacket to Masahiro Nakagawa. He takes the jacket tenderly. "Very nice," he says. "Soft," running his hands over the material.

He notices the almost imperceptible presence of a gold thread running under the predominant smoky-blue colour in the fabric. It gives the garment an unexpected but discreet shine. This pleases him more. "Very beautiful," he says. But to my eyes, my poor old coat is just plain and dull.

He asks me about the jacket: when did I buy it and why? What are my feelings about it? What memories does it carry?

I tell him it sits at the back of my wardrobe, discarded, almost forgotten. But for some reason I do not throw it out. It was bought about 10 years ago and was shared by my daughter and me. We share a lot of things but this coat, in particular,

was often either on her back or mine. When I look at it, I can see her in it then as much as I remember myself in it. There was something about the colour we both liked. I remember it made me feel sure and serene. She liked it because she had just started her first "real" job and it gave her a feeling of confidence.

Now she wouldn't wear it in a fit, she says. It makes her feel insecure, frumpish, dull. The same goes for me when I wear it: I feel old, tired, unadventurous.

Nakagawa nods his head, listening. I say farewell to him and to my coat.

Tokyo Recycle Project No. 15 has begun.

In the fashion business these days, there are two commodities a designer must have: street cred and radical chic. Young Tokyo fashion designer Nakagawa has both in abundance. What's more, his art is the fusion of both - a strange hybrid that is both a fashion statement and a work of performance art.

He has a worldwide following. Some see him as a philosopher working out his ideas about mutual obligation and renewal in the language of high fashion and consumerism. Others see him as a somewhat sentimental dreamer whose materials are human emotions and memories, which he twists and turns into new shapes and patterns articulated in the language of clothing.

Most see him as an artist working at the boundary between postmodernity and its ideological consequences - a somewhat apocalyptic vision on occasion, it has to be said, given the strange, exotic mutations he creates out of mass-produced clothing or his clients' discarded apparel.

He certainly has guru status among the fashion-sassy Japanese youth and ideologically gritty students of fine art and design. He is particularly known for what is called the Tokyo Recycle Project and is in Sydney to conduct the 15th such exercise. My jacket is one of the 15 garments

PHOTO: NATALIE BOOG



**Wore story ... Masahiro Nakagawa examines Angela Bennie's jacket before transforming it (below left). PHOTO: QUENTIN JONES**



participating in the exercise. Assisting him in the project are 30 students from the TAFE fashion design course at the Sydney Institute in Ultimo. The project is part of a new exhibition, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, that opened this week at the Powerhouse Museum.

Nakagawa's Tokyo project series began in 1999. That year he underwent a serious crisis about his work. A graduate of Osaka's art school, Nakagawa was already a successful fashion designer, having established, along with his partner, Azechi Lica, a series of boutiques in Tokyo and Osaka in 1994. They also had a successful label, 20471120, which soon became a must-have among the streetwise from Tokyo to New York.

However, Nakagawa's thinking began to shift. The Japanese economy was in crisis, spending was a global preoccupation and consumerism was the engine driving it. He felt a need to shift his work from being an expression of the times to a critique.

"I thought to myself, why do I always have to create something new from new materials and designs? Fashion is consumerism. Fashion creates new things that will always go out of date and then will be discarded. I thought, why - why not make something new from old clothing?"

"Of course, I like creating new fashion, new designs, very much, this is very important to me. But I felt it was time to create a counterpoint to this."

Tokyo Recycle Project No. 1 was his first exercise in counterpoint. Pared down to its basic elements, it went something like this: a client would submit an article of clothing no longer in use. Nakagawa would take the garment and the memories, feelings and history relayed to him by the client about the garment and turn it into a new item of clothing that represented both the past and the future. The client would receive the garment in its new splendour, recognise the old in the new, feelings as well as patterns, and feel

a sense of renewal himself. Over the years, each project has had different structures, objectives and themes, but those fundamental principles remain.

"What he does is as much a kind of performance art as it is fashion design," says TAFE's Sally Gibbs, who is coordinating her students' collaboration with the Nakagawa project. "What he does is a kind of recycling of the heart, as well as the clothing; it is an emotional recycling. And with the involvement of the students, it is a kind of knowledge recycling, too. He recycles physical things and he recycles memories and emotions.

"He has a cult following all over the world. Our students knew of him immediately. It is fantastic that they are taking part in this, working with him."

The Powerhouse's Louise Mitchell, curator of the *Cutting Edge* exhibition, puts it this way: "Nakagawa believes we keep clothing at the back of the wardrobe, we don't throw it out, because he believes we have some kind of emotional attachment to it. So as much as he is trying to reshape the article into something new that we would wear, he is also trying to resuscitate memory and feelings."

Four days after I had handed over my old blue to him, I meet Nakagawa again. He leads me to a special dojo, or consultation area, he has created in the Powerhouse, takes off his shoes and sits me down on the tatami floor mats. He explains his thoughts about my jacket.

"I kept thinking about you and your daughter together, very strong. This one image stayed with me very strong. I also had an image of an angel's wings, of an angel - because of you, your name. That started it off, and so I let this drive me. And so I have made it that way. I am very happy and excited by what it has become."

I look to where he is pointing and there it is - unrecognisable, except for the smoky blue. The back is now the front, the hitherto staid front now a rather daring, low-cut, V-shaped, buttoned back. The sleeves are gone. Two thin shoulder straps hold up the entire creation. A silver splash of material - taken from a kimono's obi - courses its way snakily up over the hips to the low, but straight, bustline, from which springs a corsage of netting - a hint, a kind of memory in its shape, of angel's wings.

It is daring. It is flamboyant. It is utterly new. I know I could - would - never wear it. But I know my daughter could and would. I also saw that the hint of angel's wings meant Nakagawa knew I would be there with her in spirit whenever she did.

The Tokyo Recycle Project No. 15 is at the Powerhouse Museum until October 9, in conjunction with *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, until January 29.