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**Sculptor  
John Petrey**







Left to right, the sculptures Elizabeth, Garment #AP42051986Z and Megumi were created using steel, copper and found objects.



# The *Fabric* of John Petrey's Art

SURPLUS MATERIALS  
AND FOUND OBJECTS  
PROVIDE THE TEXTURE FOR FASCINATING  
SCULPTURE BY THIS CHATTANOOGA ARTIST.

With calloused hands and paint underneath his fingernails, John Petrey puts the finishing touches on his latest work, a dress made out of barn wood and copper.

Petrey began his career in sculpting after years of working as a commercial photographer in Orlando, Florida. Petrey says his whimsical style was influenced by the television shows of the 1960s. His dress series plays with nostalgia and evokes a sense of history appreciated by almost anyone—not just to people over 50 years old, but even to children. It reminds the older generations of something from their personal history and for children, it creates a sense of wonderment.

Although mostly known for his smaller works, these larger museum pieces are becoming quite popular. The dress series ranges from a medieval time period, like a dress he's sculpted out of steel and copper for Disney's movie "Brave" to a dress with ultra contemporary, Japanese sub-cultural fashion. He takes rigid products—some vintage, some new—and creates the illusion of fabric. "Anyone can make something out of fabric. Let's have them make it out of steel!" Petrey says with a chuckle.

His work is very material driven. For example, a client from Kansas City had a surplus of a material and wondered if he wanted it. As it turned out the client had 30,000 two-inch round silver discs. The material sparked an interest in Petrey to finish a piece with that specific material. Other times, he uses leftover or familiar materials he's used from other projects.

"I'm always searching for material," Petrey says. The unorthodox finishing materials he uses to create these dresses vary from bottle caps to plastic knives and spoons

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Fushidara

Story by Lauren Brooks  
Photography by John Petrey





John Petrey uses a power drill to assemble a skirt.

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to old signs and license plates. "I look at material much differently than how most people look at it," he adds.

The biggest part of the process is choosing the style of the dress—a tabletop piece may be more innocent in style and size compared to one of extreme Amazonian height, the way his large dresses are fashioned. These are about seven-feet-tall and are either very haute couture or historically faithful.

The style of the dress always varies. One dress he's made, has metal pieces flying away from it and another has a Victorian feel to it with a bustle on the back. He is in the process of creating an evening gown made out of silvery barbed wire. "I'm going to build it, even if it kills me," he says. "I could bleed to death while building it."

**"Successful artists run their career like a business, don't let anyone tell you that making art isn't a business."**

—JOHN PETREY

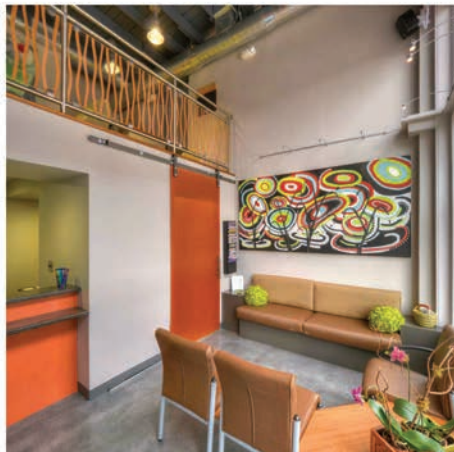
After determining the style of the dress, he casts the torso to give it structure to work with, and also shapes the arms into different expressions. Once this sub-structure is completed, he can apply the finished material as he wants the "fabric" to flow.

To apply the finished material it may take only a few steps or there may be many steps to complete. For example when he uses copper, he goes through about seven steps before it's ready to be applied to the sub-structure. "Some pieces are easier than others," he says. "Some material I can use in its raw state, whereas other material takes time."

Petrey doesn't work on one piece at a time, instead he'll work on five to seven pieces that are in different stages and doesn't keep track

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Genevieve

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of his time as he works. "I never feel like I get enough done," he adds. Sculpting not only takes time, but it's also a very physical job. Petrey bounces around to different projects to save his hands and shoulders from the repetitive work of creating these dresses.

First and foremost, sculpting is his job and career. He explains that he has to be disciplined and focused on it, constantly looking for new opportunities. He shares that, in today's world, sculpture is very competitive and many people use the word artist behind their name, but they don't necessarily have anything to qualify it.

His dresses can be found in collections all over the United States and through many experiences he has learned the difference between good and bad business. "Successful artists run their career like a business," he says. "Don't let anyone tell you that making art isn't a business."

With this in mind, he has to carefully choose where he places his art. A few years ago, one of his dresses was placed in Saks Fifth Avenue in Atlanta. He remembers how beautiful it looked next to the expen-

sive shoes and purses, but "it was a total dud and it didn't produce anything." Petrey also does custom work, but that varies from year to year. "2012 was a slow year," he says. "The elections always flatten the art market—I'm hoping there's more opportunity in 2013." He is receiving more requests to do museum shows and knows that these shows aren't immediate financial gains, but it all works out in the end. He explains that the shows are a lot of hard work, but also a good resume builder. "They're an odd beast to do," he says.

Now that he's settled in with his dress series, he wants to start working on another type of art, hinting that it's "very dark and might push people's buttons." He adds that it's something he's wanted to do for a long time.

When asked what he wants people to get out of seeing his works of art he replies, "I'm not trying to tell you something, I'm trying to make you feel something." **EM**

Visit [www.johnpetrey.com](http://www.johnpetrey.com) for more information.

JOHN PETREY'S LATEST SOLO MUSEUM SHOW, "EXPRESSIONS", OPENS ON MARCH 24 AND WILL RUN UNTIL MAY 10 AT THE TENNESSEE VALLEY MUSEUM OF ART, TUSCUMBIA, ALABAMA.

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