



DRESSED FOR SUCCESS:

You can't find it – it finds you. Inspiration – that coveted moment when an impulse ignites a universe of possibilities in your mind. For Virginia Fitzgerald, it happened on a beach, while on vacation. Almost a cliché – except, in this case, the artist was saving a swarm of drowning ladybugs from the waves of Wells Beach, Maine with her two young daughters. This was the family entertainment for the day, natural and spontaneous.

"What do we do with the dead ones?" asked the children. Mother instinctively replied: "We'll make art!"

The simple image of a dress, etched into wet sand and summarily filled in with materials pulled from the natural environment, un-stuck the artist from a post-show spiral of artists' block generated by a few still-life painting sales back home.

"The marketplace was in my head – and suddenly I was in this pressure cooker and I wasn't losing myself in the paints anymore," Fitzgerald recalled.

Exhilarated by the impulse, she sat up that night and filled a notebook with ideas of different materials that she would make dresses out of.

She was off and running.

Fast-forward seven years: Virginia Fitzgerald has been busy. The mixed-media artist has a finger in just about every niche imaginable. Painting? Check. Installation art? Check. Environmental art? Check. Instagram? Of course!

Virginia Fitzgerald has something to prove. As a separated mother of two, she's adamant about supporting her family without sacrificing her free-flowing creative practice – and, in the process, she has built herself a brand.

I met with the artist in her Natick, Massachusetts studio on a dreary

December morning, shortly after the closing of her two-person show, "Breaking Open," with Anne Gilson at Fountain Street Fine Art in Framingham.

Myriad dress forms dangled from the ceiling, rose freestanding from the floor and flickered on the computer screen. A "medusa" dress made out of upholstery foam with a fluorescent pink zipper up its back trailed gut-like tendrils delicately above my head. A vintage slip dress hand-embroidered with flora and text clung to a seamstress' dress-form labeled: "This is me. A work in progress."

"I work in fiber, photographs ... and the dresses show up in all those things. I used to think of it as 'The Mark of Virginia,' like 'The Mark of Zorro,'" quipped Fitzgerald.

Her sculptures and installations include painstakingly labor-intensive dresses crafted from eggshells (2009's "this comes from within," exhibited at Medicine Wheel Productions in South Boston); latex gloves (2013's "to have & to hold"); and ephemeral, photographed dress works shaped spontaneously from found materials, including, but not limited to, french fries, lichen and frost.

To be fair, the dress itself cannot be claimed as a trademark by any one artist. We've seen the dress extracted from its wearer and examined in the mixed-media work of many successful, contemporary female artists: Louise Bourgeois, Lesley Dill, Janine Antoni – the list can go on. For Fitzgerald's growing audience, it is not the iconography of the dress itself that is unique; it is the artist's dogged persistence and how she chooses to disseminate her work.

In addition to exhibiting wherever she can (from regional university, museum and member galleries, like Fountain Street, to Starbucks),

Breaking Open exhibit at Fountain Street Fine Art (includes work by Anne Gilson, rear wall), 2013.

IN THE STUDIO WITH VIRGINIA FITZGERALD

Fitzgerald maintains an active online presence for her "Daily Dress Inspirations" via social media.

RANDOM ACTS OF DRESSING

In 2011, Fitzgerald began creating "dresstags": small, origami dresses "onto which I write a fortune, sentiment, intention or wish. I then place them in random public places – such as on a bus seat, in a payphone or at a Starbucks," she said. "Then, I walk away."

"My hope is that someone will ... pick it up, read it and either replace it for someone else to find or take it home. 'Dresstagging' is a way for me to spread some good vibes and positive energy in this sometimes cynical world."

Fitzgerald multiplies that intention by documenting her dress tags across myriad social media channels.

Says Fitzgerald: "I do not want to make any kind of exclusive art, intentionally. I've chosen the vehicle of the dress ... as a universal experience – because it can represent a mother, a sister ... even for men – they all know women."

You can find work by Virginia Fitzgerald online on her "Daily Dress Inspirations" blog and Pinterest board, "Daily Dress Intentions" Facebook group and on her personal Twitter feed and Instagram @virginiafizar. From February 1-March 14 she'll be part of "FLIRT", the inaugural exhibit for East Dedham's new Mother Brook Community Arts and Community Center, curated by Martha Wakefield and Jeanne Williamson.

| Meredith Cutler