

Virtual Soapbox



Blurring the Lines: Costumers and Artists and Quilters, Oh My! **Kevin Roche***

On breaking through the unspoken barriers between artistic communities.

I was first introduced to the [Peninsula Wearable Arts Guild \(PenWAG\)](#) by Carole Parker in 2007, back when we were promoting Costume-Con 26. Our marketing and outreach for CC26 was deliberately exploring communities and groups outside of “the usual suspects” of conventions and costume groups, including drag events, gay rodeos and what we now refer to as “maker” groups. Carole suggested that one very good place to go was PenWAG. She was right.

Andy and I immediately realized that this was a community of people crazy about making things to wear that were exactly our kind of crazy. They weren’t too sure at first whether “costumers” were a good fit in their minds (never mind that several costumers including Carole Parker were already members), but we won them over as quickly as they did us. In fact, a number of PenWAG members were active attendees at Costume-Con 26, especially in the future fashion show.

The labels we apply to ourselves can be both affirming and limiting, and the line between costume and wearable art is an especially blurry one. For a time about twenty years ago, I took the occasional costume or other sewing commission, but after being hung up on several times as soon as I quoted my rates (why shouldn’t a custom-designed, -fitted, and unique costume cost exactly the same as a cheap mass-market polyester sack from a Hallowe’en shop?), I rebranded my work as “wearable art” and mostly stopped doing commissions. Using the “Art” label empowered me to set the price at the value my pieces had as creative works, rather than as the (undervalued) product of simple labor.

The ease with which we actively joined PenWAG may have been in part because I already considered my work wearable art, and certainly also because the group is always looking for new and fun ideas and techniques. Show and Tell is a major part of every meeting.



Getting the hang of PIQF was, on the other hand, a bit more complicated. PIQF is the [Pacific International Quilt Festival](#), held in Santa Clara in October 2014. PenWAG had a booth at the festival (in return for doing a day of “white glove” duty, which is the way-too-cool job of putting on a pair of clean white cotton gloves and acting as a docent to show attendees the backs and insides of pieces on exhibit. Many of the textile works on display at PIQF hide amazing things that can only be seen if you can turn them or reveal the inside.)

In addition to PIQF’s several quilt competitions, it sponsors a Wearable Art competition. This is a juried and judged show: you submit an application up to two pieces, and the committee juries which pieces to accept for competition. They are then judged on site the night before the festival opens.

It’s a very different mind-space from that of masquerade costuming. First of all, it’s a competition with cash awards; you pay an entry fee with your submission (whether or not it’s accepted by the jury!) and nothing is seen on the body. It is all about the workmanship, and there is (at first glance) no aspect of presentation.

First version of “Power Suit” using solid LED strips at Lonecon 3 for e-Textiles demonstration/workshop.

I'd noticed that only a few PenWAG members submitted work to the contest and wondered why. There were a bunch of "but I'm not a quilter" style remarks, and a few comments that "so-and-so-always wins." This seemed to me a case of being limited by one's own internal labels, so I decided to try and break that barrier. I had also noticed that there were many beautiful entries, but there was a sameness to the overall feeling from year to year, so I thought maybe as a costumer, I could shake things up a little.

My first essay was in 2013, after building "Saucer Country" (right) for the LoneStarCon 3 masquerade. This is where I ran into the first weird barrier: the competition only has two categories: "Jacket, Vest, or Coat" and "Full Ensemble". I wanted to enter one of the flying saucers and the leather-appliquéd "Red Chaps of Mars" but there was no obvious category for either.



Kevin was part of "Saucer Country" at LoneStarCon 3.

I contacted the organizers and persuaded them that the flying saucer could be entered as a vest, since it hangs from one's shoulders, and then submitted the entire outfit I wore with my saucer (which

included the chaps) as "Spaced Out Horse Opera". We took photos in an auspiciously SF-themed sub-lobby of a San Antonio hotel, I paid my money and we waited.

Both pieces were accepted. Both pieces had highly complementary comments from the judges. Neither received any awards recognition.

It became apparent I'd run into an unwritten rule of the competition. While it did not state anywhere in the rules that quilting techniques were required in the entries, this was, after all, a quilt festival. It was assumed that wearable art had to include quilting or piecing.

When I started working on my "Power Suit" for the e-Textiles demonstration / workshop at Loncon 3, I realized it could be a viable entry for the PIQF competition. I decided that I would find a way to "crack the code" and see if I could get a ribbon.

My first tactic was to deliberately include some quilting-inspired embellishment in the suit. The lapels, breast pocket and tuxedo (trouser) stripes on the suit were all made by piecing 1/2" striped chevrons out of black cotton sateen, using a technique similar to Seminole Piecing (sewing narrow strips together, cutting and piecing those assembled pieces to create the pattern). This gave the suit a much stronger tie to quilting than the basic (if difficult) leather appliqué in the chaps. They also look really cool.



Quilting-inspired embellishment on lapel and trousers.





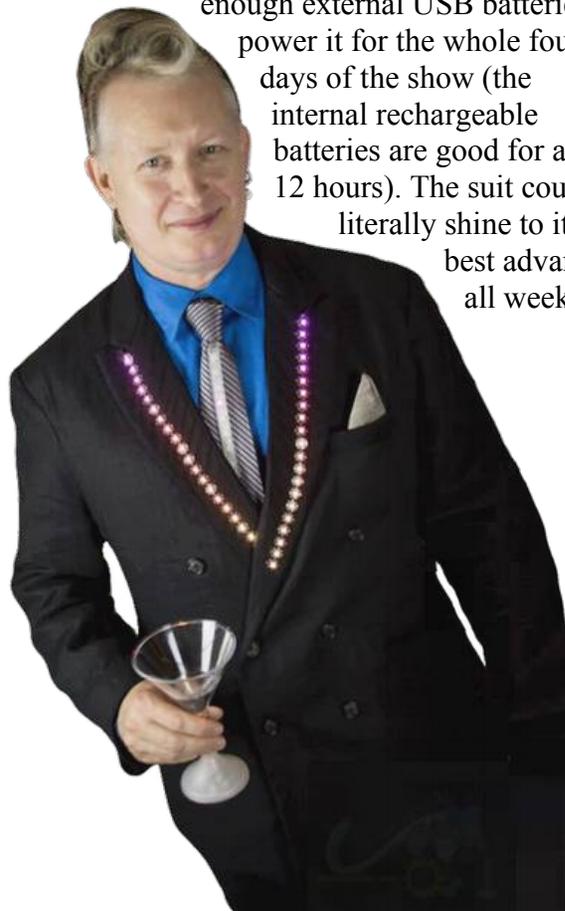
Lapels with original LED light strips

On top of the piecing were the [NeoPixel](#) animated lights. I wasn't happy with the version using strip LEDs I finished for London, so I pulled them off and hand-stitched 120 individual NeoPixels onto the suit using conductive thread. Not only were they shiny and flashy, but all that handwork would likely make an impression.

My second tactic was to be insanely compulsive about finishing details. The suit coat was an unlined double-breasted black linen jacket, with (five!) bound pockets and

notch collars. Every single raw edge in both the coat and trousers was either bound or french-seamed. (The effort was worth it; the judges' only criticism was for one of those pockets on the jacket; it was the first one I did and the one I was least happy with).

My third tactic was one of presentation. I printed explicit instructions to the show runners on how to connect and fire up the lights on the suit, and, upon discovering there was no power available in the wearable art exhibit, came back with enough external USB batteries to power it for the whole four days of the show (the internal rechargeable batteries are good for about 12 hours). The suit could literally shine to its best advantage all weekend.



Lapels with hand-stitched NeoPixels.

These tactics worked – “Power Suit” won the award for **Most Innovative Design** in the Full Ensemble division. I'd cracked the PIQF code, and broken through what seemed to be a major barrier between the quilters and the costumers / wearable artists!

I then discovered that the organizers had added the Most Innovative Design category just this year (2014), after seeing my entries from last year. It seems that Mancuso Show Management (who puts on PIQF and several other festivals) was

working to break down the barriers from their side as well.

I also discovered there is a whole circuit of these wearable art competitions; in casual conversation with a quilter, I was asked if I was going to try to put the Power Suit into the wearables “road show.” I said

no, since I’m actually planning to wear it to conventions and parties now that it’s done.

It’s already been in one cabaret number (left).



The idea of building a costume or a wearable piece and sending it unworn from

show to show doesn’t seem all that different from the bad old days when one might make a single costume and enter it in every masquerade one could get to for a year, unmodified.

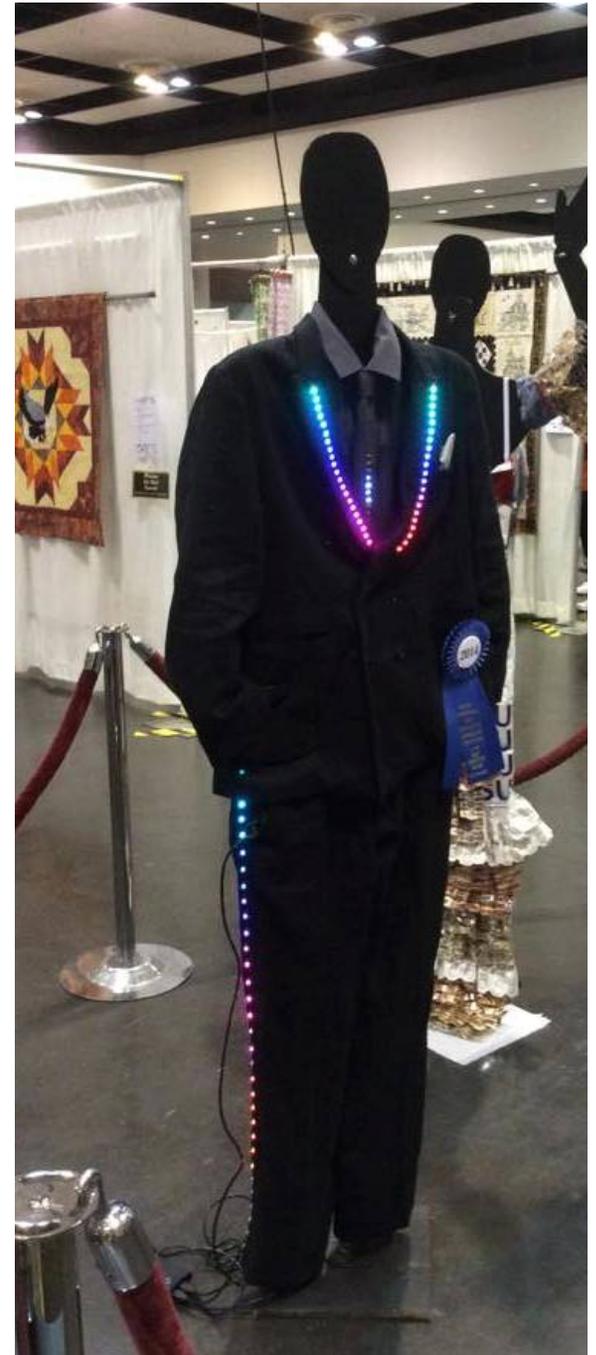
That’s an attitude I abandoned a while ago. My Wearable Art is to wear, and that’s one thing I love about PenWAG, people wear their creations!

Above: I wore the “Power Suit” as part of a cabaret number. Photo: Rich Stadtmiller.

I’m not sure there’s any sort of moral here, other than be willing to take a chance. In conversations with individual PenWAG members and quilters, I’ve never actually felt any of the barriers I worried those labels seemed to have. The institutional “barriers” proved to be traditions rather than inflexible axioms, and the contest organizers seem willing or perhaps even eager to let it evolve. I have plans for next year already, and they are something completely different in theme from the “Power Suit” (I have no intention of being trapped in a box as the “light up costume guy”).

I’d absolutely encourage anyone who creates art that can be worn (whether you call it costume or wearable art) to consider entering one of these competitions. Just be aware and check out the cultural assumptions ahead of time!

Kevin Roche is a sci-fi/fantasy and historical costumer with extensive experience entering, judging, and running masquerades. He was Chair of Costume-Con 26 in 2008. Kevin received the ICG's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007. He is a past ICG vice-president, and is currently president of SiW. Visit his [website](#) to read his blog and view his album of costume photos.



“Power Suit” at 2014 Pacific International Quilt Festival.