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When haircuts
are hair-raisers
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The Friday Edition

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Splatter art that's ready-to-wear

Gena Hutton and Camille Cole show off some of their paint-splattered Gemille originals with a friend and family

Clothing-as-art is, as a concept, ancient and practically irrefutable. People have always dressed up, dressed wild, dressed to suit their fancy — to express themselves. The similar notion of art-on-clothing, painted designs or clay buttons for instance, isn't newborn, either. But two Eugene women, Gena Hutton and Camille Cole have redefined the clothing-art idea — in their own terms.

It was on a Mexican vacation early in 1984 when Cole, 35, was struck with the provocative notion of changing careers. She wanted an alternative to her free-lance writing business, but she only had vague ideas about what else appealed to her sense of work.

She pondered alternatives in the sun, but it wasn't until on the drive back to Eugene that she came to several conclusions. The brightly colored and distinct fashions typical of Los Angeles enthralled Cole, a self-professed clothes lover, and convinced her that working with fashion was in her future. After spotting some window displays featuring hand-painted T-shirts in San Francisco, she realized exactly what it was that she wanted to do.

In retrospect that final decision which was made on I-5 somewhere near Ashland seems elementary. "I wanted to splatter on clothes," she says, laughing. Paint, that is.

So Cole, who had gone to a New York design school just out of high school, approached Hutton, a friend and fellow artist, with the idea of doing splatter

paint art on clothes. The two formed a partnership and a company was born.

Hutton and Cole began their splatter art venture on a rainy winter afternoon. They spread newspapers on the floor of Cole's office and experimented painting clothes. "It was so much fun," says Cole of the first futile but enlightening attempts. "We realized we weren't just designing clothing. We were creating art on clothing."

She says it took about a week for the two artist-entrepreneurs to refine the splatter paint process, incorporate appropriate design elements, and create the kinds of designs they thought would sell.

Since those first test shirts Hutton and Cole have expanded their operation into a fledgling but soon-to-be-flourishing clothing company called "Gemille"

Story by Kim Carlson
Photo by Mark Pynes

(from Gena and Camille). The partners are, to say the least, delighted with their venture. "We're hysterical," says Hutton. "Our process is still crude, but we're learning."

Graphic art on clothes has lately become big business in the fashion world. Designers such as Willie Smith, who recently started his own graffiti art women's T-shirt line, are giving more than lip service to the concept of art-on-clothes. Cole, who is also taking advantage of this rejuvenated form of expression, is quick to defend graphically oriented clothes as more of a lasting trend than a passing fad. "Some of

us are just breaking the ice," she says, adding that she thinks the clothing art concept can only grow.

This positive attitude pervades the company level too — both Cole and Hutton are ecstatic about Gemille's potential. Hutton says the company has met with a kind of success that can only be called magical. "We've done it very conservatively and very carefully. When something is right, good things happen," she says, adding that they've had "a lot of wonderful help from a lot of wonderful people."

Gemille features women's shirts, pants and skirts, and men's and children's clothing. Cole and Hutton purchase plain colored (black, white, pink and silvery gray) articles from a Los Angeles manufacturer and splatter each with different colors of fabric paint, usually no more than two or three colors on each item (although there are some unpainted pieces which are coordinated with or accent the others). Most of the pieces are made from a high quality, interlock fabric — 50 percent cotton and 50 percent polyester. Visors and umbrellas are also featured.

The company prides itself on each of its pieces being a signed original; Cole and Hutton paint every item individually, and each has a unique design. The partners say they work together to come up with their visually intriguing splattered patterns, and to help each other "fix" an item if it looks hopelessly unsalvageable. "Some great things have come from mistakes," says Hutton of their painting adventures.

Hutton points out that most of the Gemille pieces have the unique ability to be worn for both casual and for "really dressy" occasions. She tells a story

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