

When I first got this assignment, my editor asked me to explore the phenomenon of “dress trashing”: wedding gown vandalism committed by brides who have completed their walks down the aisle but still feel an urge for self expression that wasn’t quenched by choosing china patterns or making their own bouquets. The unmarried, punk-rock side of me immediately became invested in the concept. It had everything; passion, irony and spitting in the face of convention all rolled into a great muddy (or paint-spattered or water-logged) ball of crinoline-lined, feminist performance art. The practical side of me wondered how I was going to pull off writing about this supposed matrimonial mania that was sweeping the nation when I had never heard of it; all the brides I knew had their gowns safely tucked away in mothballs and plastic sheeting. I decided to call a few photographers in town to ask if their lenses had ever captured such displays of post-union pandemonium.

The first photographer I called was a specialist in wedding photography. He said he had heard of the practice of dress trashing and referred me to www.trashthedress.com, a central hub in the online community of women worldwide who have been photographed getting down and dirty after their “I do”s. “It seems kind of like a class thing,” he reasoned. “If you have the money to get married, buy a dress, have a photographer at your wedding and then feel comfortable destroying something really expensive and paying someone else to photograph it ... well, you have to have a certain amount of money to be able to do that.”

My first conversation had given me food for thought, but the woman who answered the phone at the next studio I called provided a more emotional perspective.

“Well,” she gasped when I told her why I was calling. “I never heard of anyone doing that and I ... well, I just don’t know why anyone would want to! I mean, I can’t imagine it. If it was a successful marriage, I just don’t really see how anyone could do such a thing!”

So far I had gotten a lesson in socio-economic disparity and big ol’ dose of traditionalist backlash, but I felt I needed to understand more about the kind of women who would deliberately destroy a symbol of their commitment to their partners. Then I found James McCormick of Studio Coburg. McCormick belongs to a “trash the dress” forum online and tells me the term is widely credited to John Michael Cooper, a Las Vegas wedding photographer who apparently grew weary of idyllic garden shots and convinced a few clients to go slumming in their priceless frocks. But why would a bride acquiesce to such a request? Trashthedress.com answers,

Why? ... Why not? You’ve made a commitment to your husband. He’s your one and only true love, right? Then you’ll never need the dress again. And no, your daughter won’t wear it in 20-30 years. So you have two choices:

- 1) Suffocate it in plastic and throw it in a closet
- 2) Show your husband how committed you are by trashing the dress, and get some great fun pictures while you do it!

So, that sounds fine (if a little hetero-centered; no evidence that anyone expects lesbian or gay dress-trashing arose in my internet research) but the pictures the site featured were all brides sitting in the crook of a tree or lying in a field or (gasp!) standing on some railroad tracks. Hardly the mud-slinging, Texas Chainsaw Massacre re-enactment images I was expecting. The coolest photos were of women who had jumped into water and were sinking as their dresses billowed around them. There is a very Ophelia-like vibe to those pictures and a sense that the material is truly being sacrificed, not just being snagged by bark. Still, the whole thing had a very “Aren’t we quirky and fun!” kind of feel. Not really the po-mo experimental art scene I was expecting. But McCormick’s tempered perspective provided me with a dose of pragmatic appreciation.

“We don’t go all out like some of these guys,” he said, acknowledging the grungier side of dress trashing. “We’re out to capture some images with some good impact that tell a story about how people feel about each other without worrying what the dress will look like at the end of the day.”

I decided to put strict journalistic practices aside and set out to see if I could get one of my friends to do an all-out “trash the dress” photo shoot, just to see what the experience was like, up close and personal. I broadcast an e-mail to about 60 local women (maybe half of whom are married) and got three responses. One said, “Sorry, I already torched mine!” One said she wanted to do it but discovered her dress no longer fit. A week went by and I was starting to feel desperate. Then my friend Jen responded. Her e-mail simply said, “I hate my wedding dress for so many reasons.”

Jen and I set up a photo shoot with our mutual friend and local photographer Angie Ponso. At her suggestion, we decided to shoot outdoors and picture Jen rolling down a hill. Then we’d go in search of some mud to really finish the job right. While we were arranging Jen and her dress for their last close-up together, she explained to us why she had decided to sacrifice her gown. It turns out that happily married Jen had received the material for her dress from her grandmother, a brilliant seamstress. Her grandmother died before she could make Jen’s wedding dress, and the seamstress she hired “pretty much screwed up everything about it.”

“Look at this thing, it’s a Karen Carpenter special!” she moaned. With her husband on board, Jen was ready to make a statement wearing a gown that had never really represented what she wanted to celebrate about her grandmother or her marriage.

I was nervous the day of the shoot. What sounded like a good idea in theory was starting to feel like it could be awkward. What was I doing, chucking my friend down a hill and taking pictures of it? But once we got to the location, Jen took over. She rolled, she frolicked, she posed. “I’m so happy! I’m so in love!” she called out laughing to the world, mud spattering her cheeks and hair. It was hilarious. And cathartic. It took about half an hour. And then Jen and her dress parted ways forever.

Ultimately, the concept of “trashing the dress” manifests itself in as many different ways as there are different brides who decide to walk down the aisle. Some get their hems dirty, some douse their gowns in gasoline and light a match. Still, while these pictures have the potential to be art, they are profoundly personal. Projecting a critique of marriage or some kind of widespread undercurrent of rebellion onto this practice isn’t really accurate, as I discovered. But it is certainly valuable to juxtapose the beauty of deconstruction to the beauty of creation. And it never hurts to ponder cultural symbolism for a few weeks.

