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77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

Caught on Tape

The first Duct Tape Festival displays the many uses of adhesive strips of rubber, cloth, and plastic. Bowling, anyone?

By Silke Tudor

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Minnesota Chrome, Roadie's Roll, Canoeist's Companion, 200 MPH Tape, First-Aid Roll-Up, Gaffer's Tape, 1,000-Mile Tape, Hiker's Helper, Missile Tape, or the Ultimate Power Tool -- no matter what you call it, duct tape is, in my opinion, among the paramount inventions of modern man. A preternatural union of rubber, cloth, and plastic that sticks like cement, rips like paper, and protects like aluminum siding, it can be used to bind wounds, prevent chafing, repair canoes, tailor pant legs, truss alligator jaws, and secure 10-speed bicycles to the front of your Volkswagen van. But that's not all. According to Tim Nyberg and Jim Berg, better known as the Duct Tape Guys, authors of the best-selling duct-tape series, including *Duct Shui: A New Tape on an Ancient Philosophy*, the magical sticky stuff is great for rustproofing cars against fierce Minnesota winters and freshening cocktails during blistering summers. (Apparently wrapping ice cubes in duct tape will prevent your favorite libation from becoming diluted by pesky H2O.)

"Duck tape," as it was originally known, was invented for the U.S. military to keep moisture out of ammunition cases during World War II. After the war, a booming housing industry discovered new uses for the surplus, applying it to heating and air conditioning ducts; soon after, common silver-gray "duct tape" was produced. (To be technically classified as "duct tape," the substance must meet certain heat requirements, but both "duct" and "duck" are correct designations for most tape.)

Of course, military use has not faded. According to firsthand reports posted on the Duct Tape Guys' colossal duct tape-devoted Web site, armed forces worldwide use "ordinance tape" and "gun tape" (simple duck tape with more manly monikers) for such things as securing fuse wires to missiles, arresting leaks in submarine hulls, repairing parachute lines, preventing boot blisters, protecting helicopter blades from sand, and binding haughty midshipmen to air compressors. The Duct Tape Guys have also assembled ample photographic evidence of a new educational motivator known as "Principal Wall Taping," which rewards students for academic successes with lengths of duct tape; the duct tape is then used at the end of the year to encase the school's director and affix him to a wall or ceiling. The trend has become so widespread that the Duct Tape Guys have posted judicious warnings and instructions to prevent asphyxiation and dehydration, along with a testimonial from a physics teacher who had to be rescued by paramedics after passing out while stuck to the wall of his classroom. Happily, there is a lighter, brighter side to duct tape. It has become an artistic medium.

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Over the last decade, hundreds of artists around the world -- most notably Canada's Todd Scott, Nevada City's Emilie Autumn, and, recently, Sacramento's Katie McFarlin -- have transformed duct tape into palette, canvas, cloth, and clay, creating unbelievable sculptures, pictures, furniture, and formal wear with the water-resistant durability of heating ducts. Delighted by the unanticipated new market, Manco, manufacturer of Duck Tape brand tape, has released its product in a rainbow of hues, offering variety, as well as cash prizes, to duct-tape art-car creators and rebellious high-school-prom fashion designers. Even Manhattan's Parsons School of Design has fallen for the plebeian appeal of the rediscovered material, devoting its 2001 senior

fashion show to Duck Tape.

Marc Horowitz and Jon Brumit don't really care about all that.

"We thought about 10 people would show up and we would just sit around and barbecue," says Horowitz,

co-curator of the bustling first annual Duct Tape Festival at 21 Grand.

So what was the motivation?

"Well, duct tape is just really great stuff, don't you think?" says Horowitz, recalling a wedding where an overlarge

pair of pants had to be taped to his waist for lack of a belt.

"I'm a hairy bastard," says Horowitz with characteristic freewheeling enthusiasm, "so it really, really hurt, but it worked!"

For the most part, the artwork at the Duct Tape Festival is terrible. And one suspects that Horowitz and Brumit,

the same duo who created the Lombard Street "Bring Your Own Big Wheel Race," may have had a hand in

most of the creations -- two Dixie cups taped together for lovers, a pink porcelain bull with an obviously repaired

horn, a Nativity scene honoring duct tape as Jesus. (In Finland and Sweden, "Jesus Tape" is, in fact, a common

epithet.) But there are a few exceptions: Niffer Desmond's mixed-media book covers, Roman's shimmering

gladiator helmet and small purses, and Sarah Wagner's 1960s dress, shoes, and pillbox hat ensemble, inlaid

with small cowboy-and-Indian dioramas. But the delight of the festival is not in the represented artists as much as

it is in the enthusiasm of the guests.

"Duct tape, how do I love thee?" muses Garth Treagar as two women walk by in duct-tape halter tops. "Let me

count the ways."

At a long table littered with magazines, junk, and duct tape, where everyone is invited to make his own piece of

duct tape art, Jason Noutlis quietly admits to duct-taping diapers onto his baby when his wife's away.

"It's so much faster than pins," Noutlis explains before his wife returns with drinks. "I use duct tape for

everything. My wife laughs at me. As if duct tape wasn't a perfectly valid method of repair."

"There's something goofy about duct tape," says 22-year-old Shasta. "If you see something with duct tape, it's

automatically funny. It's like using chewing gum."

Outside, 29-year-old Patrick Donahue and 27-year-old Jamie Sherman arrive in a flurry of multicolored plastic grocery bags and balloons. The bags, which have been taped together to form a hollow, fluttering column, are supposed to be lifted by the helium balloons, but there are problems: The duct tape is too heavy, the base is too flimsy, the balloons threaten to escape. Donahue and Sherman are determined. They call for more duct tape, make adjustments, sweat, curse, smoke, pout, until, finally, Donahue climbs a telephone pole and drapes their creation over a parking sign. The crowd applauds. Sporting a leather jacket bearing the duct tape message "Part Time Punks," 21 Grand Programming Director Sarah Lockhart announces the first contestant in the inaugural annual Duct-Tape Bowling Challenge. The crowd lines up on the sloping sidewalk-cum-bowling lane and eyes the durable glass bottles wrapped in duct tape -- an old camper's trick. The contestant, not compensating for the grade of lane, throws a gutter ball -- literally. But Donahue gets a strike. The crowd roars. "We thought this [Duct Tape Festival] might be some kind of a joke," says Donahue. "Like we'd show up with our piece, and they'd say, 'You're on Candid Camera,' or something. But then we thought, 'What if it's real? Wouldn't it be cool if there were other people interested in duct tape like us?' This is pretty cool." After the bottles have been reduced to glass confetti held in sagging bottle form by duct tape, the crowd moves back inside, where Brumit and Horowitz demonstrate their instant duct tape hair-removal system and personality improver (a simple strip of duct applied to arm or mouth). Then comes the duct tape fashion show: Mary Elizabeth appears in a six-color vest created mere hours before the event; Marika Benko shows off a silver-and-black art deco-inspired Viking queen dress, designed and created by her beau, Cliff Hersh; Sarah Wagner is lifted onstage in her straight dress to win our hearts with an a cappella version of Hank Williams' "Settin' the Woods on Fire"; last, Erin Palmquist takes the stage, offering a steamy, hip-grinding dance routine

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worthy of her thigh-high duct-tape boots, miniskirt, and halter top designed by Roman. "He's the Armani of duct tape," says Horowitz. "I first got interested in duct tape after a friend told me he made a wallet using nothing else," says Roman, a sometime house-painter in a blue tuxedo jacket, duct-tape bow tie, and eyeglasses. "Then, one night while I was tweaking, I decided to make a skirt by wrapping duct tape around my body. Unfortunately -- or fortunately -- you can't make duct tape clothes on yourself because it wrinkles if you move, so I went looking for models. "I wrapped every woman that could be [wrapped] in the town where I used to live, [then] I moved to the Bay Area to look for [other interested parties]. I found tonight's model tending bar where I went expecting someone else. She just volunteered, and she's the best I've ever had."

While Roman's motives are, he admits, not entirely beyond scrutiny, his work is. Duct tape is the only material he will use, apart from grommets and the stiletto heels of his shoes. Even the slender, leg-length black laces running down the back of Palmquist's boots are 100 percent duct tape.

"I am a purist," sniffs Roman. "Not like that high school girl in Sacramento. I won't use anything but duct tape."

He hands me a duct tape business card and returns to his admiration of a demure 25-year-old spectator named

Sarah Sherman. The silver-and-black astro-à-go-go minidress that she wears is easily the most elegant,

interesting, and well-executed garment at the festival, and it is just one of dozens from her personal wardrobe.

"I just do it for fun," says Sherman as Horowitz tries to bowl with a plank taped down the front of his chest. "Duct tape is fun."