

The Reach of a Starfish

Gareth Watkins

"It's not just about organising papers and files, but also, and perhaps most importantly, it's about working closely with somebody's thoughts and ideas. Archives are representations of an individual. They tell a story about that person's life and endeavours."¹ - Jennifer Twist, Archivist at Te Papa.

2017 was a Wizard of Oz year for me: I was swept up in a tornado of organisational restructuring and landed quite unexpectedly on the doorstep of Te Papa's Archive. I was there to embark on a six-month project to register and rehouse the Starfish Laurie Foon archive under the tutelage of archivist Jennifer Twist. Starfish was a Wellington-based fashion label launched by Foon in 1993. It had a focus on well-wearing garments, sustainable business practices, and had close ties with community activism.

One of the first things Jennifer organised for me was a coffee catch-up with Laurie Foon, the donor of the collection as well as founder of Starfish. I asked Laurie about her ideas on garment design and she responded by describing fashion designers as storytellers. This struck me, as I had come from a background in radio documentary making and hadn't thought before about fashion as a way of constructing a narrative. Laurie talked about how she used a unique narrative to anchor each fashion collection throughout its 14-month life cycle: from concept to end-of-season sale. It informed the fabric choices, garment design, and marketing. The narratives ranged from global issues to very personal memories. The collection *Garden of Perfect Happiness*, for example, was inspired by Laurie's great grandfather William Yan-Foon. William came to New Zealand as a young man in the 1890s from China and worked as a market gardener. In 1898 he became a naturalised New Zealander, possibly the first person of Chinese extraction living in Petone to do this. As an introduction to the collection Laurie wrote: "I often wonder what it would have been like for him to be in a new country with a culture so different from his own, unable to speak the language [...] My great auntie tells of seeing him as she used to wheel her pram, always in his vegetable garden in Petone. I guess that the garden for him would have

been his Garden of Perfect Happiness.”²

Laurie also talked to me and Jennifer about how she wanted designs and fabrics that could “illustrate who we are”³ while reacting to overseas trends. She talked about bringing fashion back home, of designing clothing that celebrated what Wellington was about and that could “travel the distance of a day”⁴ – a challenge if you’re familiar with Wellington’s weather.

Laurie’s interest in fashion design was evident from an early age. The earliest item in the Starfish collection is her teenage scrapbook from 1978 which contains a mixture of magazine cuttings showcasing winter fashion trends - including images of shocking-pink jumpsuits. Her first job was working for a local suit and tailoring business. Then in the early 1980s she worked for Zimmies Fashion Boutique and by 1986 she had become a women’s fashion sales representative. In 1988 Laurie went overseas with her sister Miriam to travel around the United Kingdom and Europe. She managed a fashion boutique in Portugal, as well as printing and wholesaling her own t-shirts. In the United Kingdom she became the assistant store manager of Jigsaw fashion in London.⁵ While in London, too, she saw extreme wealth existing alongside homelessness, which led her to question some of the prevailing values at the time in the beauty and fashion industries. It’s here that she also came across the Body Shop’s influential founder Anita Roddick, hearing the phrase for the first time “reduce, reuse, recycle”.⁶

Back in Wellington, Laurie opened her first clothing boutique in 1991 with just \$133 capital. It was called Jive Junkies and was located in Wakefield Market. The store focused on re-creating and re-fashioning vintage clothing. Within two years Laurie had established Starfish as a designer boutique brand and retail concept. Its core market was women aged between 25 and 35. The flagship Starfish Willis Street store opened on 3 March 1993. By early 1996 Laurie had set long-term plans for the business which included expansion into the wholesale market and more designer boutiques throughout New Zealand. The following year Starfish produced its first fashion collection and from 1997-2013 a total of 45 unique fashion collections were produced.

At its peak, the Starfish team were designing and manufacturing four collections per year. I say team, because Starfish was very much a team effort. Laurie collaborated closely with, among others, designers Carleen Schollum, Fran Hornsby and Barry Betham, textile designers Avis Higgs and Greta Menzies, and artists such as Rebecca ter Borg. The design team drew inspiration from a wide range of subjects: whether it was taking

Starfish

Detail of Starfish logo from Starfish small business presentation, 2007-2008, Laurie Foon. Te Papa. Reference CA001206/001/0042.



[Female model posing with a starfish prop and netting], 1993, Helena Hughes. Te Papa Reference CA001203/002/0001/0001.

inspiration from painter Rita Angus, or celebrating individuals such as Nancy Wake (The White Mouse) who fought with the French Resistance in World War Two, or creating a response in clothing to Y2K millennium fears. The collections were also inspired by local community issues. For example, the marketing images for the *Urban Progression* collection in 1998 were shot along the proposed route of Wellington's hotly debated inner-city bypass, using locals to model the garments. More visible community activism followed, with the design and production of the *By-Pass My Ass* t-shirt, the *Save Our Streets* and *I Love Te Aro* t-shirts, and the *Joyride* fashion collection in 2005 which advocated for the greater use of public transport. Starfish's support of the local community was also shown in its commitment to, whenever possible, manufacture garments locally and source sustainable fabrics. These were core business values that were visible right from the beginning of the fashion label.

The 2000s were a high point, with Starfish stores opening in Christchurch and Auckland, and showings at Australian Fashion Week. In 2003 Laurie established another fashion label, a luxury brand called LAURIE FOON. Both it and the Starfish label were wholesaling to over 30 outlets throughout New Zealand and Australia. In 2007 Starfish produced its first fully eco-friendly collection *Three Days in Golden Valley*. That same year Laurie won a Sustainable Business Network award which was the first time a fashion designer had won. Laurie told the *Wellingtonian* newspaper: "The most important thing is that clothes are made well and made to last. It's the cheap throwaway clothes that are doing the most damage."⁷ It's worth noting, too, that Laurie's commitment to sustainability continues today; both through her work at the Sustainable Business Network and in her personal life. An article in the *Dominion Post* from June 2017 noted that her four-person household generated just a single shopping bag worth of rubbish per week.⁸

At the same time that Laurie and Starfish were being widely applauded for sustainable business practices, dramatic changes were taking place around them that would begin to shrink the local clothing industry. Clothing manufacturing was moving off-shore, consumers were shopping more online and there was an influx of cheap clothing imports. An internal Starfish document from 2007 noted that "Many of our factories have lost 45% of their business to China. Some factories have gone from putting through 5000 units a week to 3000 units on a good week. Staff are leaving the industry for more reliable jobs where they are guaranteed full time work. Machining is also becoming a dying art, where in some factories the youngest staff member is 45."⁹ The document went on to

note that in 1992, a local manufacturer had 180 staff but by 2007 they had only 30 people employed.

A couple of years later in 2009, the LAURIE FOON luxury label ended, and then in February 2011 the Christchurch earthquake forced the closure of Starfish Christchurch. At the time the retail store brought in a third of Starfish's income. The store was so badly damaged that it had to close immediately with staff being laid off a few weeks later. The emotional and financial toll was enormous. The hardships for Laurie and Starfish culminated in mid-2013 when the business was placed into liquidation. A *Dominion Post* report at the time quoted fellow designer Robyn Mathieson as saying, "[i]t's tougher than it's ever been. The issues that face us when we make locally is that we compete with Asian imports and online selling."¹⁰ Starfish wasn't the only business casualty. A year earlier fashion designer Alexandra Owen closed her Wellington store. She told the *Dominion Post* "[i]t's been a challenge to make locally at a price that is competitive by the time it hits retail. There's been a gutting of the independent boutique brands in the middle of the scale."¹¹

Hearing that Starfish was in difficulty, Claire Regnault, Senior Curator New Zealand History and Culture at Te Papa, began discussions with Laurie about obtaining garments that were representative of the Starfish aesthetic, as well as the business archive. The archive that Te Papa received was large and multi-layered. It documented Laurie's progress and success as a fashion designer, as well as giving an insight into the ebb and flow of the local clothing industry. It noted the changes in technology used for the design, manufacture, marketing, and sale of garments. It showed collaborations, inspirations and activism, and it contextualised and complemented the LAURIE FOON and Starfish garments that Te Papa already had in its collection. The archive arrived at Te Papa in twenty-four boxes in mid-2013. It had already been broadly sorted into workbooks, business records, media coverage and magazine publications, photographs and posters, images, audio and video and a lot of printed ephemera promoting the fashion collections. The archive was assessed by the curatorial team and a proposal drawn up for the registration, rehousing, and description of the collection. The proposal worked its way through the approval process, and I came on board in January 2017.

My first task was to arrange and register items relating to the 45 individual fashion collections. One of the really exciting things about the archive is that you can chart the development of many of the garments from their initial sketches and fabric swatches through to their

eventual marketing and sale. For instance, the design workbooks for each collection contain a rich variety of materials: fabrics, buttons, threads, photographs, photocopies, sketches in ink and pencil and handwritten notes. The collection also contained thousands of marketing images, including photographs of garments on mannequins, modelling shoots and runway shows. The first digital images in the collection come from 2004. Prior to this, the fashion images were shot on medium format or 35mm film. There are hundreds of physical film frames that haven't yet been digitised, and it will be fascinating in the future to be able to compare adjacent frames to see what influenced Laurie in the selection of shots that were ultimately used in the marketing material. Interestingly, where a fashion collection was shot in digital, only the final selection of images are present in the collection – so researchers miss out on some aspects of Laurie's selection process.

The born-digital files originally arrived on 102 CD-ROMs and DVDs. It is the biggest digital collection that Te Papa's Archive has acquired so far, with over 3,100 files. The discs contain mostly digital images, with a sprinkling of videos, sound files and graphics. There are also spreadsheets and documents which give an insight into Starfish's business practices. There are store manuals, lists of suppliers and stockists, production budgets and sales figures. One document in particular made me appreciate the discipline that it must have taken to keep both the business running smoothly and the creativity flowing. It was a calendar titled *Starfish Retail – Seasonal Rhythms*, and listed key annual business dates. For example, in May the Starfish team were buying for summer and then in June they were working on the planning and marketing for the upcoming winter sale. Remember at their peak, the Starfish team were juggling at least four fashion collections at any one time.

There are also early business notebooks in the collection. These not only contain business jottings but also have self-affirmations handwritten by Laurie. The notes suggest the complexities of balancing the personal, the professional, the business and creative sides of developing a fashion label from scratch. As Laurie notes "It's my product. It's my vision. It's my dream. It's my life."¹² I also found it fascinating to read Laurie's business aims in these early notebooks. For example, shortly before Starfish's first fashion collection was released in the summer of 1997/98, Laurie sets out a series of design principles for Starfish including:

- New Zealand designed and manufactured
- Strive for quality

- Contemporary and wearable – in any or many ways
- Push limits of how to wear it
- Ever evolving own style
- Timelessness
- Pieces with personality
- Simple – clean – strong – universal¹³

I wrote about Laurie's notebooks in my online blogs. When I started the project Jennifer and I agreed it would be good for me to blog as I processed the material. The blogs not only surfaced the collection for the public, but also gave an insight into the back-of-house activities at Te Papa. The blogs also opened conversations. I was able to take user comments from the first blog and incorporate them into subsequent ones. I also really appreciated the opportunity of having Laurie read the blogs before they went public. Invariably small corrections were needed, and sometimes the focus of the blog changed. With the demise of Starfish being only four years previously, the blogs brought up a lot of mixed feelings for Laurie. In some ways, as I took my journey of processing and then blogging about Starfish, Laurie took a parallel journey of letting go.

Now six months on from completing my work on the Starfish archive, the feelings that still resonate the strongest for me are the collection's energy, creativity and passion. And these feelings are summed-up for me in a poem that I found in the collection. In 1997, during a trip to New York, and just prior to Starfish's first fashion collection Laurie wrote a poem in one of her business notebooks. It speaks of the energy of New York, but also I think it speaks to me about what I found in Laurie's archive and what I will take away:¹⁴

Here I realise, that if ever you are stagnating in life, here is the place to come

Here is the brain food

Whatever you think, whatever your emotion, whatever your colour, whatever you believe

Whatever you want

Here is the place to understand, here it's alright

BRAIN FOOD

I am alive

I realize it's all OK

You are with me forever

and the world is our home

*To learn, see and experience
 To be is the aim
 And we are
 Be not afraid of any emotion
 Especially not love*

ENDNOTES

1. Gareth Watkins, "The Reach of a Starfish", filmed 22 November 2017 at the National Digital Forum, Te Papa, video, 20:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxN0d8wzYh8>
2. Items relating to *The Garden of Perfect Happiness* (Summer 2008-2009) fashion collection by Starfish, circa 2008, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001200/005/0001).
3. Gareth Watkins, "Telling stories through fashion: A history of eco-friendly Starfish", *Te Papa*, February 28, 2017, <http://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2017/02/28/telling-stories-through-fashion-a-history-of-eco-friendly-starfish/>
4. Gareth Watkins, "Telling stories through fashion: A history of eco-friendly Starfish", *Te Papa*, February 28, 2017, <http://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2017/02/28/telling-stories-through-fashion-a-history-of-eco-friendly-starfish/>
5. Starfish at the Wellington Trade Show; circa 1999, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001202/008/0006).
6. Jim Chipp, "Starfish's different values", *The Wellingtonian*, August 23, 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/local-papers/the-wellingtonian/786105/Starfishs-different-values>
7. Rebecca Thomson, "Designing for the environment", *The Wellingtonian*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/the-wellingtonian/20111020/281659661808435>
8. Sarah Catherall, "Unwrapped reality", *The Dominion Post*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/the-dominion-post/20170617/281762744246264>
9. Items relating to environmental impact and garment manufacturing going offshore, 2006-2007, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001202/001/0008).
10. Kerry McBride, "Imports, internet blow Starfish out of the water", *The Dominion Post*, May 11, 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/business/8659815/Imports-internet-blow-Starfish-out-of-the-water>
11. Carolyn Enting, "Top Wellington designer quits capital", *Stuff*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/fashion/7016047/Top-Wellington-designer-quits-capital>
12. Business notebook, begins with *Liberate*, circa 1997, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001202/003/0001).
13. Design workbook, mixed fashion collections - possibly *Liberation* (Summer 1997-1998) and *Urban Progression* (Winter 1998), circa 1997, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001201/001/0002).
14. Business notebook - gold coloured cover, circa 1997, Laurie Foon. Te Papa (CA001202/002/0001).