Shirt by Rural Rooster
Available at Parts and Labour

ARTFUL TEES

By Rachel Youens

A screen printed shirt is not merely clothing, it's a piece of wearable art. In the past five years a whole culture has built around screen printed shirts, giving way to companies like American Apparel (who have just opened a mini store inside Factory People) that produce soft, smooth cotton material; the ideal canvas for printing. And stores like Factory People who tie screen printing to its rock roots and promise customers an exclusive design they aren't likely to see on anyone else.

Screen printing's rock'n'roll vibe comes from its legacy as the medium for printing concert posters. Musicians in the 60s and 70s used the method to cheaply print short runs of colorful posters. Artist Andy Warhol's album covers for bands such as the Rolling Stones and The Velvet Underground made screen print style popular and an icon for rock. But as the era of Kinkos arrived, screen printing became outdated. The process is now regarded as art, it has DIY appeal and the limited runs make the prints highly collectable.

Today screen printing has carried over to the world of fashion, allowing anyone to make a professional product that in the comfort of their own home. That said it does require some equipment, time and know-how. It's an inexact science where most printers usually end up throwing out dozens of shirts and ruining many screens before they get it right.

The process starts by separating the colors of a design, then printing each layer of color on a separate sheet of transparency paper. Each sheet is then placed on a screen, much like a window screen but with a tighter weave, that has been covered in liquid photo emulsion. When light hits the screen and transparency any exposed emulsion turns into a hard plastic and any hidden by darks parts on the transparency remains liquid and is washed away with water. The screen is then placed on the shirt and ink is pressed onto the screen, the ink bleeds through the open parts and is blocked by the hard plastic sections creating the print.

Austin has a strong screen printing community, the annual Flatstock poster convention is held here every March and printers sell their work at local boutiques. In a world where "made in china" is emblazoned on nearly every good we buy, it's nice to find something that was made in a studio right here in Austin. ★

Shirt by Rural Rooster
Available at Parts and Labour

Bill Murray
Available at Reckon

Hunter S. Thompson
Available at Reckon

Shirt by Rural Rooster
Available at Parts and Labour

Shirt by Snook11
Available at snook11.com

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