

# DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
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## Rowena Whey

*Patterns for All Bodies: Repatterning the Collection of Canadian Dress at Agnes*

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### SPEAKERS

Rowena Whey

### KEYWORDS

Drag, Kingston artist, fashion history, Collection of Canadian Dress

### TRANSCRIPT

**Rowena Whey:** When I was first invited to be a part of this project, I actually got to go on a tour of the archive in the storage area. I got to see all of the dresses. The Day Dress was the one that I did not get to see, but I was told that it was going to be mounted and photographed shortly. And when I saw the photos of this dress, I immediately thought, "How do I dragify this? This is already drag." This dress is grandiose with double sleeves, lace trim, a double skirt that billows out away from the body. It has, like, sleeves that button up and down so you can get in and out because it's meant to be fitted to a tee to your body. It is regal. It is meant to be seen. And I was looking at it, and I was like, "1) I must wear this, and 2) how do I make this more drag than it already is?" And so, I was really excited to take on that challenge, and also to take on a little piece of Kingston's history, because this dress was worn in Kingston back in the 1800s.

So, most people think of drag as bigger and better and grander, but what I did instead was I wanted to simplify the dress itself, because the dress—the original dress—is a bevy of roses all across the pattern. And I wanted to take the concept of a rose, make the dress look like a concept of a rose, but then bring roses back into my performance. So, I actually, with our designers, we decided to trim down the dress. So, we removed the lace. We removed the patterns. And instead, we got those colours, so a lovely green sateen and red sateen to match. And then we brought those ideas, those large drag elements back in through other elements of drag, things like a massive, massive collar of jewels and earrings and nails and rings, and to bring the drag back in through that element.

My finished day dress is spectacular. From the perfectly trimmed-in waist—without a corset, it just fits me perfectly—to the beautiful sheen that it has when it catches the light, the grand sleeves that are puffed up beyond all belief. I love this outfit and I love being a part of seeing it being made. But also, being a part of this final outfit, and getting to contribute my own little flair with adding some more drag elements like sequins to it has really allowed me to express my drag and the concept of my performance, which is this woman walking around town and just smelling the roses and slowly adding them to her dress.

The approach that I took to accessorizing the day dress was to add all of those drag elements that we took away from the original dress, but in a more traditional glamorous drag way. And there's

nothing about drag that's traditional. So, I contacted some drag designers in order to have some custom nails made to match the fabric of the dress. So, if you have a look at the photos, you'll see that the green of the nails and the red of the nails is identical to that of the fabric of the dress, even with a few little rose embellishments. The jewels I had made from a friend of mine out in Edmonton and she created a custom full set, a necklace that's larger than anything you could possibly wear in your day-to-day life, earrings, and rings. And then of course I styled the wig, which also comes from a local Canadian wig stylist, but I added little rosettes in the hair in order to mimic the roses that are happening in the dress.

So, my performance is, because it's restrictive, I'm going to be doing a more dramatic drag performance, conceptualizing roses in a very modern sense. So, taking roses in our current pop culture and bringing that to life and bringing to life just that woman who might just be a little bit too obsessed with beauty and bringing that to you on stage.

For me, it really was just the thought of a day in the life of a woman walking out in this dress covered in roses and showing off for everybody. And that's what drag is. Drag is showing off for a crowd of people who want to see you and you want to be seen. Otherwise, why would you spend hours getting ready? And this dress takes hours to get into. This dress is not mobile. You cannot move in it. But, it is an idea of showing the world who you want to be while you're walking down the street. And I wanted to bring that to life in my performance and in my recreation of this dress.