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Can coronavirus stop a fashion show? Not for these Orange County students

Community college contest stressed recycled materials. It produced a winner who finds beauty in sustainability.



Saddleback College fashion design student Maya Horikawa in Dana Point on Wednesday, May 27, 2020 wears a dress she designed and made from recycled materials. Horikawa's design, which won 1st place in a competition, was inspired by the immortal jellyfish. It is made from plastic bottles, plastic netting used to package vegetables and fruits. She added a crown made from an old Christmas ornament. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **TERESA WALKER** | thwalker@scng.com | Orange County Register

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Peel back the layers of death and disruption caused by the [coronavirus](#) pandemic and you'll find some threads of hope.

In a way, that's what a recent fashion competition for Orange County community college students was about: resilience, ingenuity, re-invention.

It's certainly what the winner is all about.

Maya Horikawa spent most of her life studying to be a concert violinist. But now, in her 30s, she's chasing a career in the world of fashion. She's been at Saddleback College for about a year to learn some basics, such as sewing.

For Horikawa, the key to the contest wasn't the \$400 prize. Instead, she saw the competition as a way to explore her ideas about design and sustainability.

That's because the contest had a key rule — every bit of fashion had to be made out of recycled material.

"The concept was what I found exciting," Horikawa said.

"It was stressful," she added. "But I had a finished product at the end."

Horikawa's dress, "Immortal Jellyfish," was inspired by the ocean near her Dana Point home, and by a creature that captured her imagination. She made it by hand sewing cut-up pieces of plastic produce bags and water bottles. The process took about 30 hours.

"I have worn this dress several times and it doesn't break," she said, laughing. "It is literally something that you wouldn't throw away. It's made that well."

Not wasted effort

Here's the backstory: Earlier this year Huntington Beach artist and jewelry designer Judith Hendler was helping the Huntington Beach Art Center with an exhibition to be part of the center's 2020 25th anniversary celebration. The display would showcase the work of local community college art students in several mediums, including fashion, ceramics and glasswork.

But in mid-March, Art Center, like other businesses not deemed essential, was forced to close its doors as part of the the state-ordered COVID-19 lockdown. The exhibit that was planned to run from late April into June was delayed.

Still, Hendler, whose interest in supporting young people has included [a fundraiser for homeless youth that involved making collages](#), did not want to let down the fashion design students, most of whom were already busy with their creations when the shutdown hit. She devised a pandemic-friendly version of the competition, and kicked in the cash prizes herself.

So, working with Kate Hoffman, Art Center's executive director, and Lauren Becker, fashion program coordinator at Orange Coast College, Hendler forged ahead. She set up an online Zoom presentation for the students, which took place earlier this month, before their finals began.

In all, the competition drew 16 students from five local community colleges — Saddleback, Orange Coast, Santa Ana, Fullerton and Long Beach.

"I just felt so badly for them because they put in all this work," said Hendler, who is in her 70s.

"Anybody that sews from scratch knows it's difficult to put together a garment."

From blogging to sewing

Hendler based the competition's enviro-friendly rules on her own experience in high-end fashion, which began in the 1970s when she crafted necklaces, earrings and bracelets from scraps of aircraft acrylic. Those recycled creations sold in Saks Fifth Avenue and other high-end stores, accessorized models in Vogue and Elle, and added to the power persona of actress Joan Collins on the 1980s nighttime soap hit "Dynasty."

But it wasn't just Hendler's experience in fashion that guided the competition.

Becker, coordinating with other teachers, instructed the students to create garments that could go well with one of three necklaces designed by Hendler at different points in her career. The students had to title their entry, list the materials used, describe how they made it, and photograph it being modeled by themselves or on a dress form. And — most crucially — they had to rely on recycled materials.

The rules were a perfect fit for Horikawa.

She was announced as the winner in a May 14 Zoom gathering hosted by Hendler and Becker. Second place, and \$325, went to Imane Gehring of Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa; Isabel Neeley, also attending Orange Coast, earned \$175 for third place.

Hendler said only a couple of students, Horikawa being one of them, “took a deep breath” and chose to design their garment around a self-described “jaw-dropping” clear crystal necklace Hendler created five years ago. The necklace weighs about 5 pounds.

“It is totally outrageous,” Hendler said of the chandelier-like piece of jewelry known as “Cascadia.”

As a fashion design major, Horikawa hopes to make a mark on a multi-billion dollar industry that she views as overly wasteful. She is critical of what she considers unethical mass production in factories, and a wear-it-once-and-throw-it-away mentality of many consumers. Too many stores, she said, are filled with what Horikawa describes as “random, trashy clothes.”

A few years before heading back to school, and while she still earned a living as a freelance violinist, Horikawa [began writing about clothing in her blog](#), Talk Fashion. She loved to incorporate historical research in her posts.

By 2016 the blog was popular enough that she was invited to New York Fashion Week. That experience, she said, was both disappointing and life changing.

Instead of critiquing fashion, she left thinking: “Why don’t I actually learn how to make real clothes?”

As a violinist, Horikawa played in orchestras, taught lessons and did other freelance work. But she had always loved fashion as a hobby. Then, as she recovered from a back injury — and felt some burnout on violin, which she’d been focused on since early childhood — she felt an urge for change.

Today, she still teaches violin (on Zoom right now) for money, but her thrust is fashion.

“You only live once,” said Horikawa’s mother. “She’s happy.”

Exhibit to be rescheduled

The plastic netting Horikawa sewed into a dress came from packaging used by Trader Joe’s and Costco for vegetables and fruits. She collects the bags specifically to use on projects. She noted how the orange netting on her dress once held onions, the green signified avocados and the yellow held contained garlic. A hoop skirt style accessory consists of Arrowhead bottles and caps.

Second-place finisher Gehring used leftover yarn and old denim jeans. Neely called her third-place creation “Tablecloth Chic.” A jacket made by Simon Yuan is titled “Armor of God” and incorporates 10 different materials, including parts of suitcases, Gucci gift box ribbon, a laptop bag and car seat covering.

The public will get a chance to see those creations and more when Huntington Beach Art Center holds its first virtual exhibit. The center [announced on its website](#) Friday, May 29, that it is planning to feature the work of community college design arts students when it debuts “Envisioning the Future of Design” sometime in the next couple of weeks.

Hendler, who is giving \$25 each to all of the students who entered the fashion contest, is eager for their work to get exposure.

“The heartblood of any community,” she said, “is the young people coming up.”

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Theresa Walker | Reporter

Theresa Walker is a Southern California native who has been a staff writer at The Orange County Register since 1992. She specializes in human interest stories and social issues, such as homelessness. She also covers nonprofits and philanthropy in Orange County. She loves telling stories about ordinary people who do the extraordinary in their communities.

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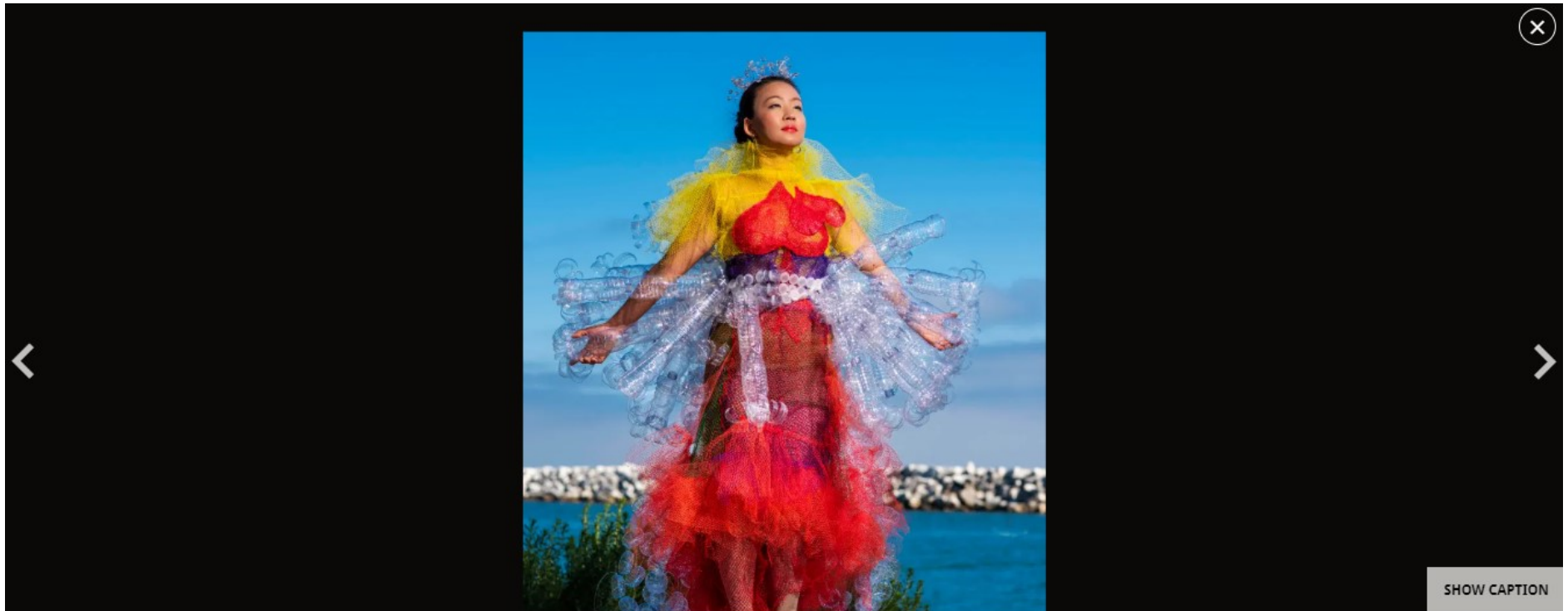
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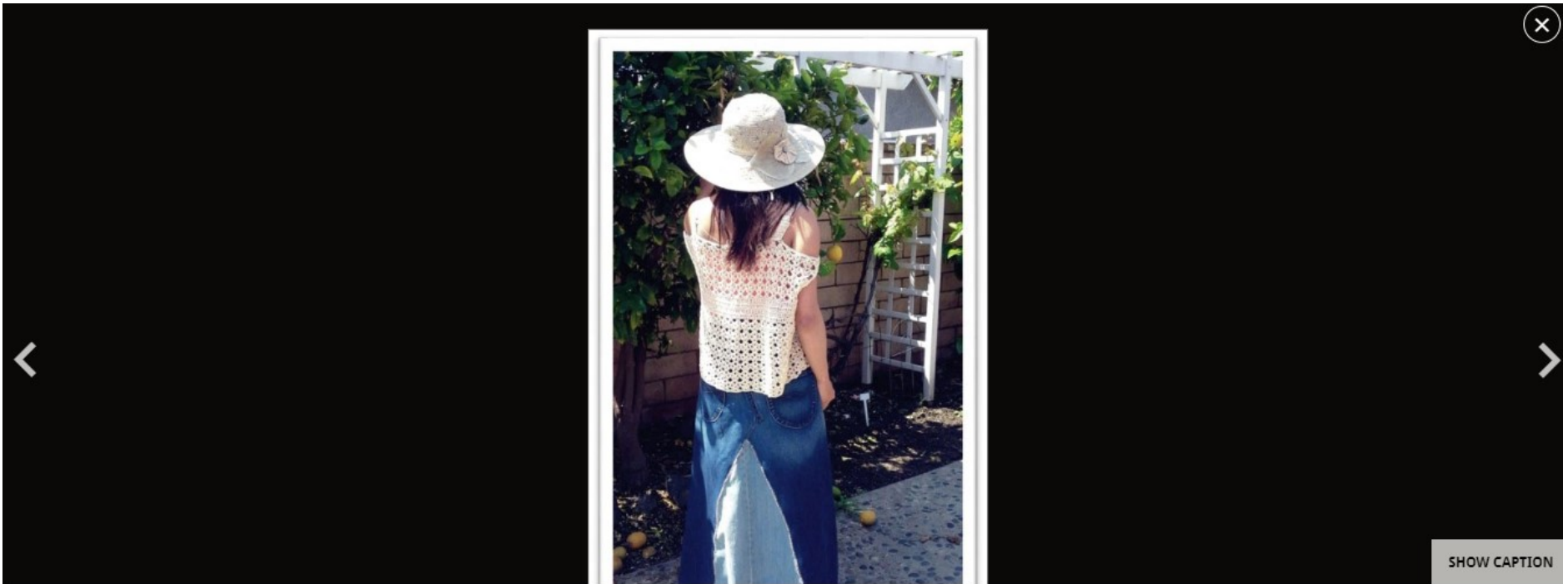
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Huntington Beach artist and jewelry designer Judith Hendler dressed fashionably for a Zoom session with community college students who participated in a clothing design contest based around three necklaces she created. Hendler is shown here wearing a blue crystal necklace chosen by some of the students, who also had to use only recycled materials. The students' work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit for April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Judith Hendler)



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Imane Gehring, a student at Orange Coast College, shows a top she crocheted from yarn leftovers. Her skirt was created from old denim jeans. Gehring took second place in a design competition for community college students that required the use of recycled materials. The students' work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit for April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Imane Gehring)



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Imane Gehring, a student at Orange Coast College, shows the back of a top she crocheted from yarn leftovers. Her skirt was created from old denim jeans. Gehring took second place in a design competition for community college students that required the use of recycled materials. The students' work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit for April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Imane Gehring)



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Orange Coast College student Isabel Neeley titled the outfit she made from recycled materials "Tablecloth Chic." Neeley's creation won a third place award in a fashion design competition for community college students. The students' work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit for April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Isabel Neeley)



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This necklace by Huntington Beach artist and designer Judith Hendler was used as inspiration by community college students who participated in a fashion design competition intended as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit, originally planned for April-June. (Courtesy of Judith Hendler)



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This necklace by Huntington Beach artist and designer Judith Hendler was used as inspiration by community college students who participated in a fashion design competition intended as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit, originally planned for April-June. (Courtesy of Judith Hendler)



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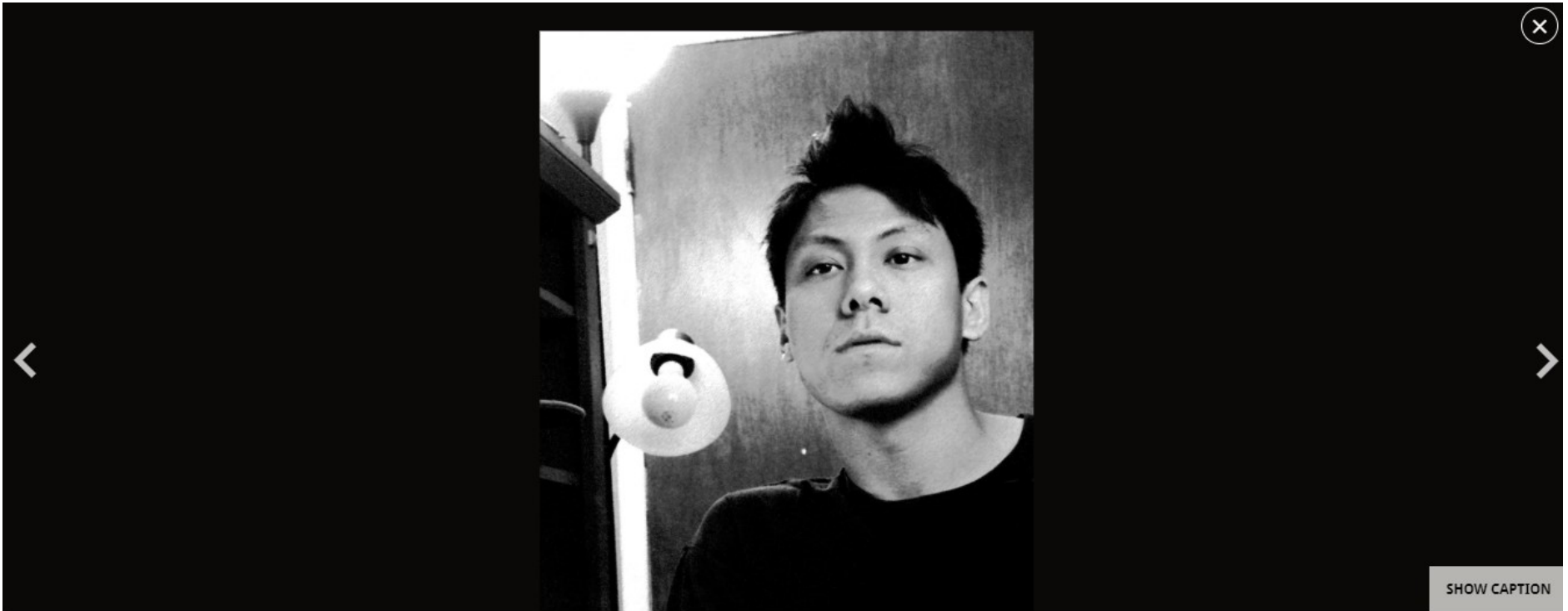
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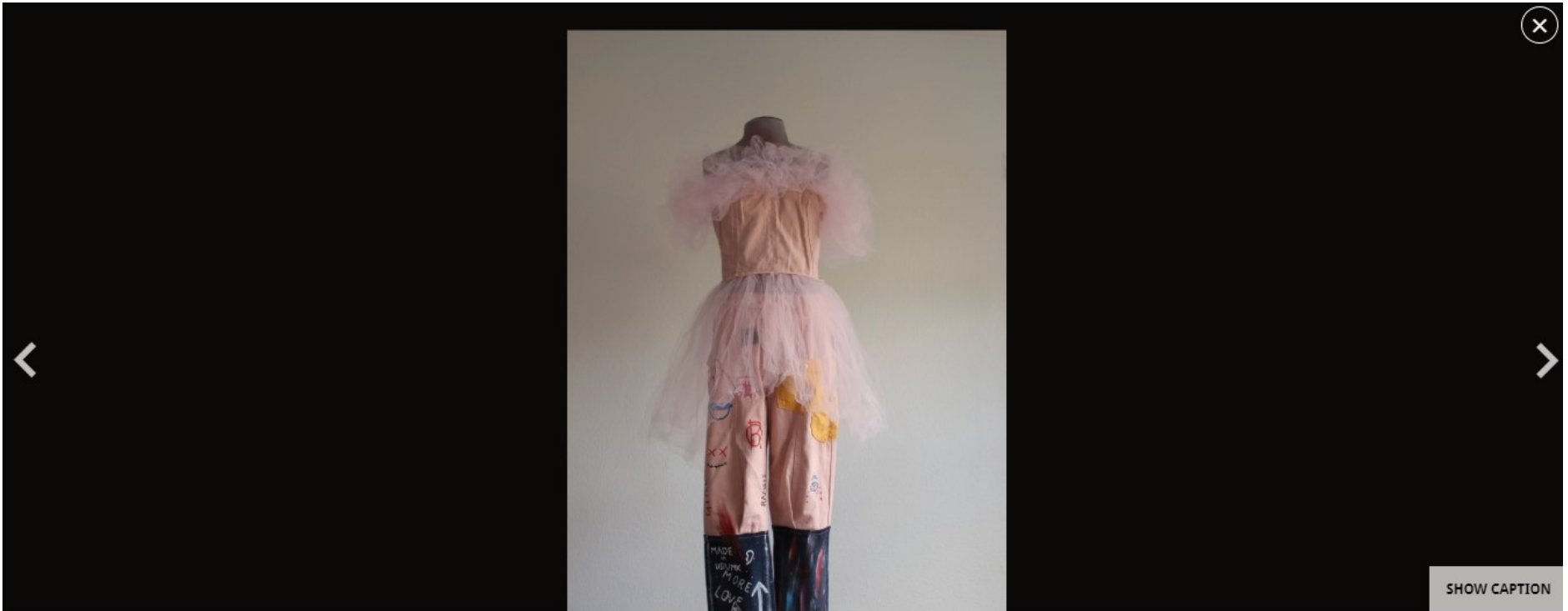
Saddleback College student Simon Yuan created a jacket made from multiple recycled materials, including suitcases, a laptop bag and ribbon from a Gucci box. Yuan submitted the jacket and a dress in a fashion design competition for community college students whose work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit to run April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Simon Yuan)



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Saddleback College student Ramses Osorio made a dress from an old French coat, tulle, pink denim jeans, paint and scraps of fabric as part of a fashion design competition for community college students. The students' work had been planned as part of a 25th anniversary exhibit to run April-June at Huntington Beach Art Center. The coronavirus lockdown has postponed the exhibit. (Courtesy of Ramses Osorio)



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