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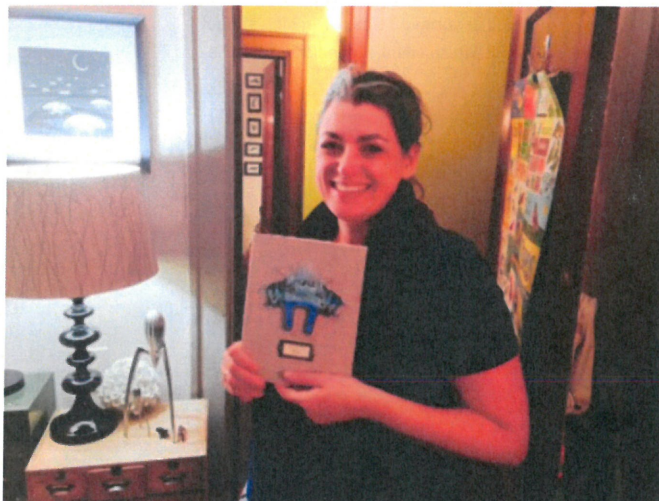
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October 14, 2013

## American Made Series: Pillbug Designs

By [Alex Sanidad](#)

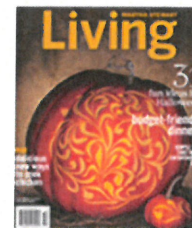


Designer Missy Orge of Pillbug Designs with a freshly-stitched pair of Blue Jay birdpants.

About five years ago, Michigan girl Missy Orge observed a flock of birds standing in the snow. "It struck me how cold their legs must get," she says. "Tiny, bony legs and those fat, little bodies." When she couldn't stop thinking about it, Orge hit the sewing machine and produced a pair of green flowered pants ("They were pretty ostentatious,") with Dark-eyed Juncos in mind. "They feed on the ground and dig around in the snow," she explains, "so their legs looked the coldest."

Several years and dozens of birdpants later, Orge has an Etsy store and a number of art shows under her belt. "I donated some items to charity auctions and was kind of surprised at the interest in my pieces," Orge says. Today, prices for Orge's work start at \$75, and include a frame fashioned by her husband Mike Grigg.

Pillbug Designs was also a nominee for this year's Audience Choice category of American Made.



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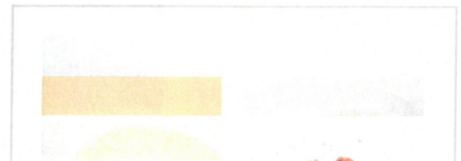
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Orge's birdpants are "ornithologically correct," meaning that they're as large as the bird they're meant to fit. Here, she measures the inseam of a Blue Jay.

**You didn't go to art or design school. Where and when did you learn to do what you do now?**

When I was in 6th grade, my mom taught me the basics of machine sewing. I loved to make tiny things, and narrowly escaped injury several times while sewing tiny hems and seams. My machine had only straight and zigzag stitches, and I experimented with all sorts of made-up techniques to get the results from a fancier machine. My tendency to take shortcuts led to some tragic mistakes that I have cleverly renamed "techniques." I tried my hand at some art classes in high school and in college—mostly ceramics and 3D work, which I think helped demystify the artistic process.



Since quilter's cotton fabrics hold small seams well and can take a lot of stitching, they're Orge's go-to material.

**What materials do you work with?**

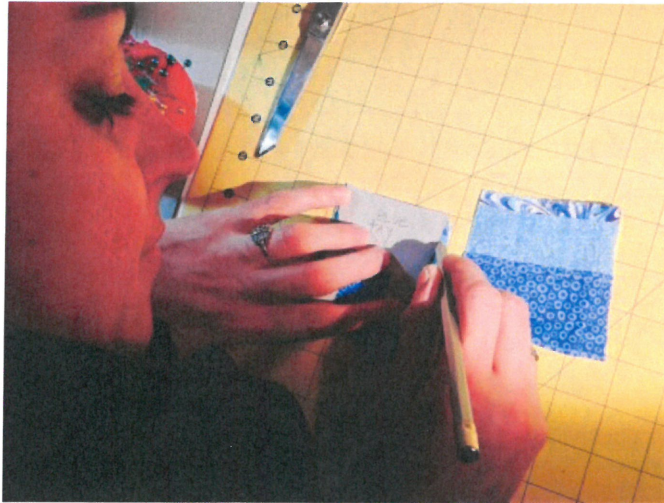
Most birdpants have a base of cotton quilter's fabrics. They hold small seams well and can take a lot of stitching. I add things on top and just keep going until it looks like the bird. Beading, embroidery, paint, feathers and sparkly bits are often included. It's surprisingly hard to find things small enough to work for tiny pants.

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**martha  
stewart**

MARTHA STEWART  
**AMERICAN MADE**





*Once the fabric is prepared, Orge traces on the birdpants pattern.*

**On your website you say, "I used to think that a good artist should be able to see a bowl of fruit and paint it exactly as it looks, and I don't know why it took me so long to realize (1) that not everyone sees the same thing when they look at the fruit, and (2) you can paint the fruit however the hell you want." When did you have your epiphany, and why? Does this mean that you used to be quite serious when it came to art?**

I've always been labeled as "creative" and I love making things for people, but I never considered it "art". Art was something that involved serious, intimidating people with skills honed over many years in some magic place that would surely sound the amateur alarm if I tried to enter. I had an epiphany when I was accepted into the Ann Arbor Art Fair. My work hadn't changed but a jury had elevated me to a place that used to intimidate me so much. And when complete strangers began buying my pieces, and the reaction in general was so overwhelmingly positive, I realized that art can be funny and cheerful and nonsensical. It doesn't have to make a statement or break your heart or change your mind.



*Slitching tiny pants!*

**When did you start branching out into clothes for other animals? What was the first non-bird piece you made?**

I'd been making birdpants for about 2 years when my mind started drifting toward other animals who had been left out in the cold. The first non-bird piece I made was a pair of green pleather swim trunks for a frog.

I spent last Thanksgiving on a snowy island in Lake Huron. We were getting wood for the fireplace and I saw a mouse run out from the woodpile. I felt a little guilty for displacing him and thought he might have a better go of it if only he had a cozy parka. I found an old blanket and went to work on a mousecoat. Spiders have always creeped me out a bit and I thought I'd give them a friendly makeover – we all put our socks on one foot at a time, even tarantulas.



*Intricate details are added once the pants have been sewn.*



*Orge's husband Mike Grigg builds a custom frame for each piece.*





*Et voila! Pants fit for a Blue Jay.*



*My editor's pick for the stylish rodent is this sheepskin-inspired coat from Pillbug Designs*



Spider enthusiasts will be glad to know that Orge also makes tarantula socks.



Bird socks are also available to compliment those pants.

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