



*Rebirth Garments. Photo by Colectivo Multipolar.*

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# Design and Disability

A landmark exhibition that centres disability as an identity and culture through design opens at V&A Dundee on Friday 5 June.

*Design and Disability* is both a celebration of Disabled-led design and a call for action, showcasing the radical contributions of Disabled, Deaf, and neurodivergent people to contemporary design and culture from 1940s to now.

Around 170 objects will be on display across three sections – Visibility, Creativity and Living – spanning design, art, architecture, fashion and photography. It will show how Disabled people have designed for every aspect of life through their own experience and expertise, tracing the political and social history of design and disability.

Through examples of disability-first practices showcasing the work of Disabled people and collaborators, the exhibition will demonstrate how design can be made more equitable and accessible and aim towards design justice.

*Design and Disability* at V&A Dundee features a range of Scottish design stories, including the University of Dundee-led Hands of X project that explores the design of prosthetic hands, Jamie O'Donnell's work with the Scottish Leather Group to create airline seating that reduces anxiety for neurodivergent people, and the work of designer and artist Kirsty Stevens who uses MRI scans of her brain to create images and patterns following her multiple sclerosis diagnosis.

*Design and Disability* is free at V&A Dundee and runs from 5 June to 4 October 2026.

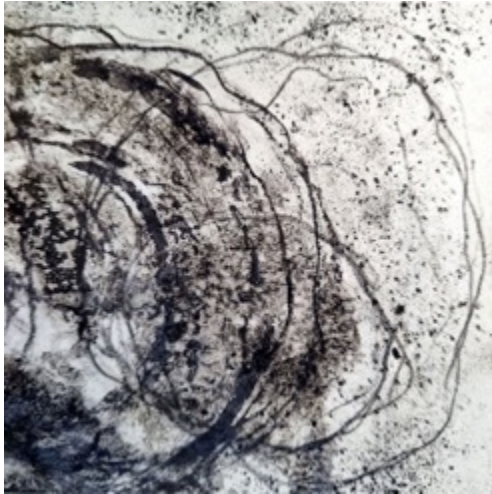
The exhibition was curated by Natalie Kane for V&A South Kensington and May Rosenthal Sloan and Lily Barnes for V&A Dundee. It was first shown at V&A South Kensington from 7 June 2025 to 15 February 2026.

*Design and Disability* at V&A Dundee is supported by The Exhibitions Group and the V&A Foundation.

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## Key objects – new for V&A Dundee



### ***Findings Triptych: Scattered, Inflammatory, Confluent***

Faced with the often-incomprehensible language of medical reports, artist and designer Kirsty Stevens developed a creative method of understanding what was happening inside her own body after a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

These layered drawings are interpretations of her brain scans.

Kirsty uses her creative practice to visualise the outwardly invisible impact of the condition on her brain, allowing her to make some sense of a process that is otherwise difficult to predict.



### **Sensory leather airline seat (2026)**

Air travel can be a sensorily overwhelming experience. Tayport-born Jamie O'Donnell has been rethinking aircraft seat covers with this in mind.

His designs use innovative textural leatherwork techniques to provide sensory feedback and come in a range of calming colours. Jamie suggests that leather lends itself to accessible design, its association with luxury helping to provide a sense of dignity.



### ***Wake Wake Island (2024)***

For disabled people who are adopted, access to important medical information is often withheld as biological ties are severed and birth certificates are amended.

Flannery O’kafka created this book to describe searching for their birth family as an adopted person in a marginalised body.

The tactile prints show abstract snapshots, hinting at the difficulty of not seeing one’s likeness in family photo albums. The title refers to O’kafka’s (fictional) birthplace, marked in the 1976 Ohio birth index records as ‘Wake Wake Island’, a code phrase meaning ‘adopted out of state’.



### **Sonic Cucumbers (2014)**

These otherworldly glass objects are musical instruments. They can be experienced both sonically and also by feeling the reverberations of the tiny glass beads inside them, opening up questions about how people experience sound and music using multiple senses.

Made by Scotland-based artist Carrie Fertig, they were co-designed with Dangerous Signs performers based at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York.



### **Gaada**

Founded in 2018, Gaada is an artist-led organisation that runs Toogs Artist Workshop, an inclusive arts space in Shetland. They are dedicated to becoming as accessible as possible and have developed in response to their community's diverse needs.

Though their members have sometimes never made art before visiting, Gaada is not built around a strict teaching programme. Instead, members are encouraged to use the workshop's facilities to create whatever art is meaningful and relevant to them. Many of Gaada's members are Disabled, and some choose to incorporate their lived experience of disability into their art.

## Key objects – from original V&A South Kensington exhibition



### **‘Disabled People Fight Back’ banner (2014-15)**

The slogan ‘nothing about us without us’ has become an iconic phrase in many protest movements. This banner was created as part of the ‘Disbanners’ collaborative project between the People’s History Museum and Full Circle Arts.

Banner maker Ed Hall worked with Disabled people across the north-west of England to design signs confronting the impact of the government’s austerity programme on disabled communities. Its visual style draws on classic Trade Union signs and evokes disability history’s rich tradition of using banners for creative activism.



### **Hands of X (2016-2020)**

What if a prosthetic hand could be unapologetically artificial but also stylish and understated? What if you could browse a nuanced palette of materials, in a non-medicalised consultation, like choosing a pair of glasses?

The University of Dundee-led project Hands of X invites prosthetics wearers with a limb difference or an amputation to design collaboratively with prosthetists. Wearers are envisaged as curators of their designs, gaining more of a feeling of ownership and connection with their prosthesis.



***First Swim after Rebirth (2018)***

Photography can be a means to capture and process emotions that are difficult to put into words. This joyous self-portrait was taken by Marvel Harris following gender affirming surgery.

As an autistic person who has dealt with issues of self-acceptance, wellbeing and gender identity, Harris uses photography to connect with the world and create their own visual language and expression.



### ***Davina Starr (2020)***

Davina Starr is a core member of Drag Syndrome, a 'fierce and fantastic' collective of drag performers with Down's syndrome.

Through sassy and bold performances, the troupe knock down pre-conceived ideas of disability, sexuality and gender.

This photograph was taken in 2020 by long-time collaborator Scallywag Fox, who has performed for the group for several years.



### **'Piss on Pity' T-shirt (1992)**

The iconic slogan 'Piss on Pity' comes from the 1990 protest at ITV's charity 'Telethon' fundraisers. It was coined by organisers Alan Holdsworth and Barbara Lisicki, who together with activist Sue Elsegood formed DAN (Disabled People's Direct-Action Network).

The irreverent phrase firmly rejected the demeaning depiction of Disabled people in the media and beyond as objects of charity, rather than equals. Only 100 of these T-shirts were made for the first event, but they have gone on to inspire disability activist and art movements for years.



### **‘The best lovers are good with their hands’ poster (1987)**

This tongue-in-cheek poster was part of a campaign by the British Deaf Association and grassroots organisation AIDS Ahead. Their mission was to give equal access to information about sexual health-related issues to Deaf people, in part by communicating via British Sign Language (BSL).

It combines humour, sexuality and queer undertones to grab attention and cut through the stigma around HIV/AIDS. The message, expressed in fingerspelling, is to ‘use a condom’.



***Squeeze Chair (1997)***

This chair was developed by artist Wendy Jacob with the autistic animal scientist and agriculturalist Temple Grandin, inventor of the 'Hug Machine'.

It embraces the sitter between two red mohair arms, providing comforting sensory feedback for those who appreciate deep pressure stimulation. Its luxurious form subverts conventional pared-back medical aesthetics.



### **Jaipur Foot Project (2014)**

The Jaipur Foot Project makes free prosthetic legs, feet and arms for millions of people across India, many of whom were disabled by landmines, war, illnesses like polio, or railway accidents. Each rubber-based prosthetic costs around £80 to make and is water-resistant and sturdy, with parts that are cheap and easy to replace.

Designs allow for squatting, sitting cross-legged, and going barefoot – all common practices in Indian society – and skilled technicians can fit and assemble a lower limb prosthetic in a matter of days.



### ***Jewellery Becomes Law (2023)***

This sculptural garment, created from Ntiense Eno-Amooquaye's illustrations and kaleidoscope printed textiles, is intended to change the shape of the wearer's body as a performance piece.

It originated through research into historic costume and avant-garde couture undertaken by the artist at the London-based collective IntoArt, which

foregrounds rigorous arts education in a supportive environment. Inspired by fantastical narratives, Ntiense sees this work as a portal of transformation, embedding it within layers of the artist's worldbuilding.



### **Maya Scarlette's carnival costume 'The Birth of Venus' (2024)**

A vision in pastels, this costume debuted at Notting Hill Carnival in 2024.

It was created and worn by Maya Scarlette, a fashion designer with ectrodactyly – a limb difference mostly affecting the fingers or toes.

Scarlette was hand-stitched into the costume, a painstaking process that took hours.

The look was inspired by Sandro Botticelli's painting the *Birth of Venus* and depicts the goddess of love balanced on a giant seashell, cresting a wave.

Photograph by Tanasha Chege.



***just one of those things #002 (2021)***

Artist Mari Katayama has worked with creative collaborators to design customised high-heeled shoes for prosthetic legs, as seen in this self-portrait.

Katayama launched the *High Heel Project* as a space to ask ‘Is fashion a luxury item? How can we give freedom of choice for everyone?’ The project confronts broader assumptions about what is natural or artificial, and highlights the often limited, functional options offered to prostheses wearers.



### **Xbox Adaptive Controller (2018)**

The Xbox Adaptive Controller was the first of its kind designed to meet the needs of users with a range of physical abilities, manufactured at scale by a leading tech company. It was created in consultation with Disabled games communities, such as AbleGamers and SpecialEffect, who developed the user experience.

Disabled gamers have used their own workarounds to access videogames for a long time, as most controller designs are based on limited assumptions about their users. The Adaptive Controller was designed with customisation and flexibility in mind.



### ***Engineering at Home (2016)***

When Cindy became disabled in her 70s, her life drastically changed.

Everyday tasks became hugely challenging, but her clever yet simple adaptations, like attaching a wall hook to the screw-top lid of a beauty cream pot to open it more easily, gave her more control over her life.

*Engineering at home* is a research project that archives Cindy's designs, which challenge and expand our ideas of engineering.

These hacked prosthetics for eating ultimately became more useful to Cindy than her expensive robotic hand.

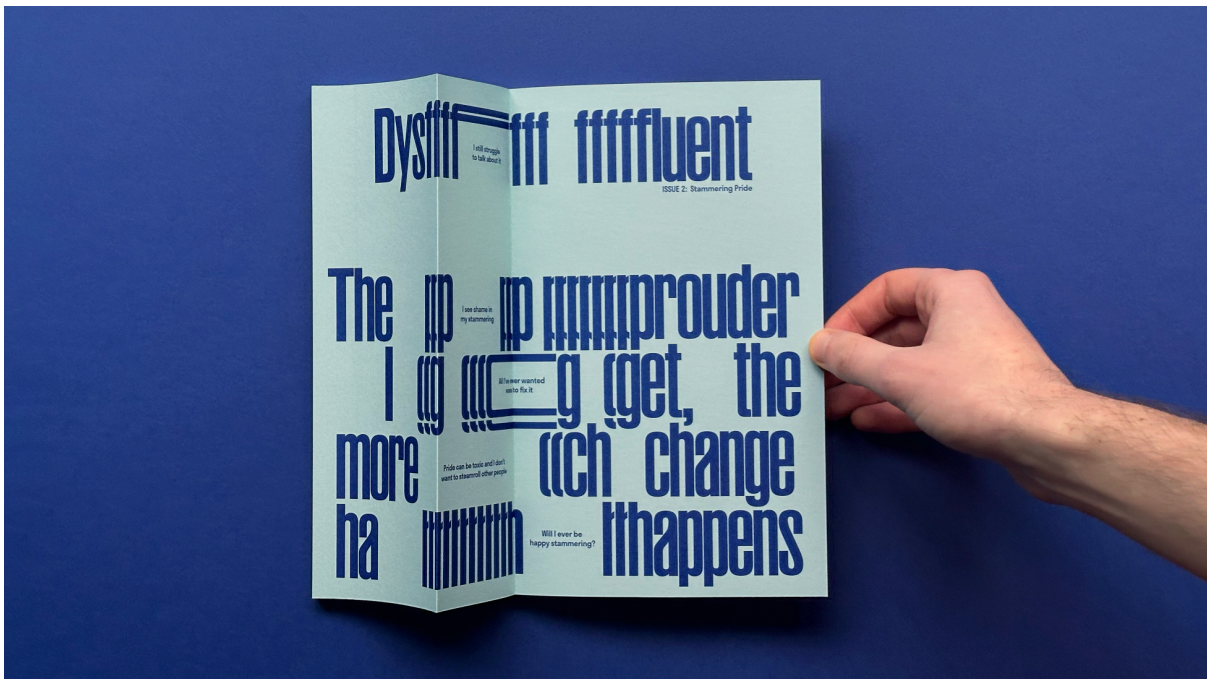


### Rebirth Garments dragon-scale headdress and binder (2024)

Rebirth Garments, founded by designer and activist Sky Cubacub, aims to make the wearer ‘radically visible’ through gender-affirming, adaptive garments.

This dragon-scale headpiece acts as a wearable weighted blanket, calming the person dressed in it while asserting their presence. The binder is both functional and fashion-forward.

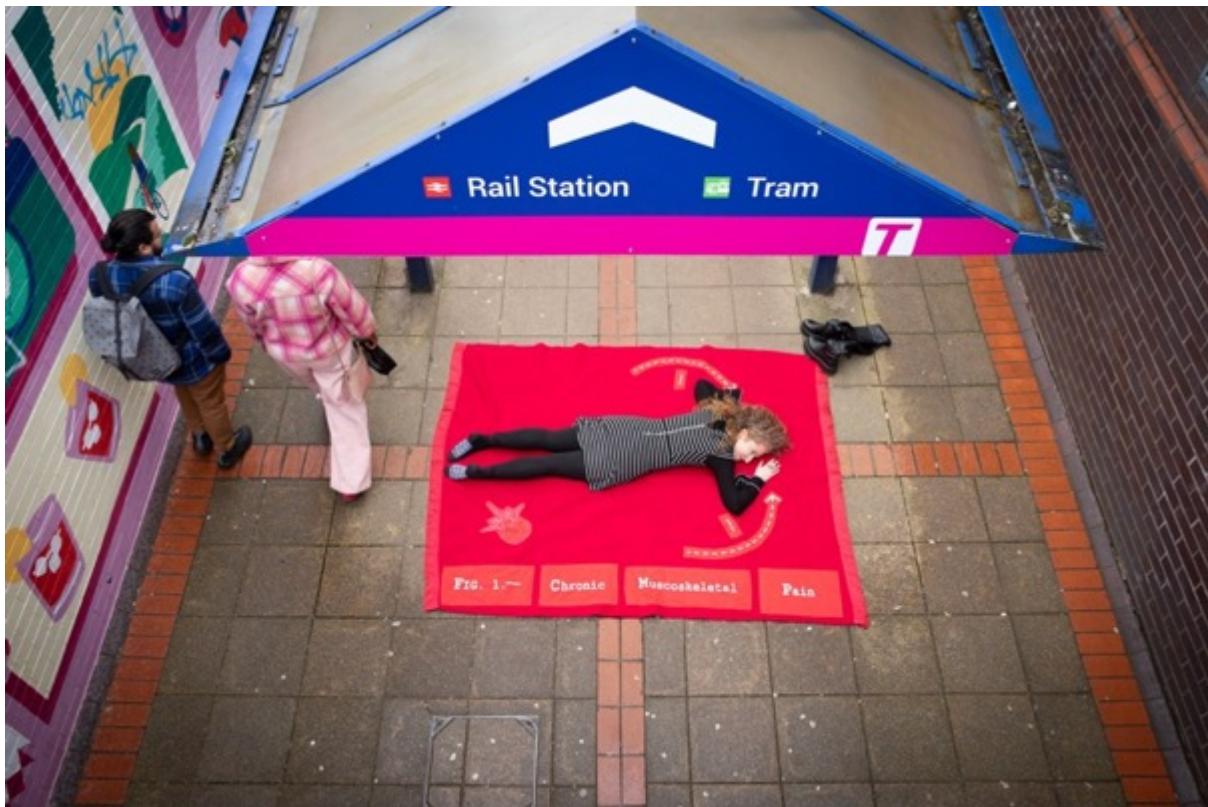
Using bright colours and innovative styles, Cubacub’s designs make Disabled and queer communities impossible to overlook.



### Dysfluent magazine (2023)

*Dysfluent* is a project by Conor Foran that uses graphic design to represent the speech of people who stammer. But more than that, it actively takes pride in stammering, aiming to de-stigmatise it through creative exploration and conversation with people who stammer and their allies.

For his magazine, Foran developed the font *Dysfluent Mono* which gives form to stammering. The title is derived from the word ‘dysfluency’ meaning a disruption to the flow of speech. The typeface repeats or stretches letterforms, giving stammering its own visual identity.



### ***Public S/Pacing (2024)***

This bold, bright blanket and pillow are a reflection on the demands of hyper productivity. They are an invitation to rest whenever and wherever you need.

By celebrating rest, which is so often maligned by societal norms, the blanket highlights how the design of public spaces often fails to include Disabled people. They gently challenge ableist assumptions with care and visibility.

Created by Helen Stratford with contributors and practitioners.

**(Ends)**

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### **V&A Dundee**

V&A Dundee is Scotland's design museum. Designed for everyone – firing imaginations and sparking curiosity in design in Scotland and around the world, from the heart of Dundee's reimagined waterfront.

Conceived as a 21st century museum and designed by Kengo Kuma, V&A Dundee is a place of activity and energy, presenting spectacular exhibitions and a range of vibrant design experiences across our building, plaza and city. V&A Dundee brings design from all over the world to Scotland and gives a new voice and platform to Scottish design and designers.

V&A Dundee is part of the V&A family of museums, supported by Scottish Government and our founding partnership of V&A, Dundee City Council, the University of Dundee, Abertay University and Scottish Enterprise.

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