

## On *Shirtstorm* By Pippa Garner



The T-shirt made a kind of social debut in the 1950s, a literal 'coming out' from concealment as an undergarment to attitude-intensive outerwear; a statement of the brooding individualism characterized by actor James Dean. It was often worn with an open jacket and always plain white, devoid of graphics, save an occasional pack of Luckys rolled up in the sleeve and sometimes keepsake military dog tags. Any kind of inscription or image would have seemed *déclassé*, recalling the depression-era sandwich board (a strap-on set of advertising panels by which a hard-up individual could earn a sandwich, by emulating one).

A decade or so later, as advertising became a major industry, the ethics of casual streetwear lost all restraint. (This timeframe also hosted the pop art movement and the advent of aerosol urban scribbling.) Consumers from all strata of society, grunge to glitter, were dressing to address--flashing their lifestyle inclinations with logos, phrases, and images--and the lowly T-shirt became a cultural icon, enriching the lexicon with corporate taunts ('Just Do It'), homey witticisms ('I'm with stupid'), and much more. Inevitably, 'overkill,' the Newtonian spoilsport, blurred the whole spectacle into illegibility. But for future historians, fragments of illustrated clothing salvaged from a 'lifestyle landfill' will intrigue and mystify.

The SHIRTSTORM 'collection' is a composite of this material, enabled by the indefatigable provider eBay: 35,000 listings for pre-owned T-shirts, as of April 1, 2017.