

Troy Patterson

Hat Tricks

Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* of 1970 hangs on the wall of cultural history as apparel that serves the eye and the mind but not the body. "The suit is meant to be an object which one is precisely not supposed to wear," Beuys once advised his interviewers. With one hand we can point to the work as an exemplar of conceptual art that draws on traditions of crafting fabric. With the other we can point to the products of haute couture—choose an Alexander McQueen fantasia, say—as examples of craft so visionary as to demand the status of transcendent art. And with our hands thus occupied, we must use the head to gesture toward the baseball cap which, however humble, presents an unparalleled instance of applied art put to the service of crafting self-presentation. With the nodding head, we wonder about the forces at work when Clayton Patterson crafts demotic artwork with a demonic edge on the canvas of the cap's folk tradition.

The baseball cap emerged in the U.S. in the middle of the 19th century to preserve the public dignity of gentlemen playing the nascent national pastime. It has evolved, early in the 21st, into a plaything of everyday fashion, with people of all classes wearing it with a variety of logos or none, so that options for self-expression range from rooting with team insignia to sloganeering by way of political statements to swanning about in an unadorned hat that communicates only a belief in basic form. In designing caps with a distinct vocabulary of decoration—the skulls-and-bones, street-art demons and pop fragments and quizzical runes embroidered by his wife, Elsa Rensaa—Patterson (no relation to me) occupies a singular headspace. Though clearly set apart from the fashion industry, he nonetheless stakes a claim as the creator of the first designer-brand baseball cap. Consider his enterprise—Clayton Caps, headquartered at his studio at 161 Essex Street—a practice of outsider art in the rag trade.

This project began in 1986. The timing was fortuitous in that the New York garment industry had recently seen itself trimmed. With so much manufacturing moved overseas, Patterson and Rensaa were able to buy machinery on the cheap at bankruptcy sales. A few years later, the project would have lacked novelty; in 1991, the *New York Times* was able to report the cap's

definitive breakthrough, citing the sartorial triumphs of uptown rap artists, the counterfeiting of Canal Street knockoff artists, and the stratosphere of East 57th Street luxury: "At the Chanel Boutique in Manhattan, baseball caps of quilted black leather are \$810."

A few years earlier, the project would have been unthinkable; the cap had only recently escaped its off-field destiny as the headgear of delinquents and juveniles and juvenile delinquents. In the late 1970s, the cultural marketplace elevated it into the world of democratic style, not least because the explosion of television sports touched off a new era of pro-sport merchandising. But the special energy of Clayton Caps, with their designs evoking the cartoons of Keith Haring and the mysteries of cults, has less in common with the dynamics of fandom than with other caps that ascended around the same time. The most notable subgenre among them was the foam-and-mesh company cap, also known as a gimme cap, because it was and is often doled out, by the likes of John Deere and Caterpillar, as a promotional freebie. Good old boys and blue-collar men proved eager to appropriate logos as statements of group identity and self-identification.

As worn by artists and gallerists and publishers and directors, the Clayton Cap was an emblem of a different sort of grittiness, distinctly post-industrial. The anarchic embroidery spilled all over the front of the crown around to its sides and down the brim to its underside, as if to evoke an overspill of graffiti. Patterson's political activism enhanced the cap's profile and informed its aesthetic, with the rich colors of the threading merging rebellion and joy.

Should we class the cap as art? (That the custom orders are signed by hand indicates a desire for them to be read in that tradition.) Should we cite it as an amazing outlier of casualwear craftwork? (It is practical, after all.) Should we conclude that what is special about the Clayton Cap is its nonchalance in dissolving these distinctions? Protection against the elements, it is elemental in itself, a figure on the urban landscape.