

SPLASH

A CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PUBLICATION

OCTOBER 14-20, 2012



**FASHION
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6 DESIGNERS
TO WATCH

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Jim Belushi
is back and in business



Fashion's new wave

Meet the six rising stars of the Fashion Incubator

BY MOLLY EACH

On Oct. 17, six Chicago designers will showcase their work on the largest runway of their careers: under a tent in Millennium Park for Fashion Focus, our city's annual celebration of style. They're the designers-in-residence at the Chicago Fashion Incubator, a collaboration between Macy's and the city that offers local designers (chosen from a pool of 70 applicants) a year of studio access and design supplies, plus the chance to work with retail consultants, boutique buyers, branding experts, marketing professionals and other industry veterans. In its five-year history, the Incubator has mentored nearly 30 Chicago-based designers, including local success stories such as Christina Fan, Agga B and Anna Hovet, and has become a cornerstone of our fashion industry.

Read on for a primer on the six current designers, then head to Fashion Focus to see their designs, plus the work of Incubator alums.

Oct. 17, 7:30 p.m. Millennium Park at E. Randolph. General admission \$35, VIP tickets \$95. Buy at chicagofashionincubator.org



RFD BY RACHEL FRANK

Designer: RACHEL FRANK

The Look: Frank began her career crafting custom dresses. Now that she's making the ready-to-wear transition, she aims to bring the same luxe sensibility to her new collection. Because she's a self-proclaimed "fabric snob," count on pieces that use high-quality silks, hand beading and specialty materials.

Backstory: Though Frank loved design, she never thought she could make a living at it because her clothes were not commercial. "The moment I realized I could actually do it was in 2002, when I discovered Alexander McQueen's work," she says. She's been designing for 10 years — though she began stretching her creative muscles at an early age. "I can remember cutting up my Barbies' dresses to make them 'prettier,'" she says.

Inspiration: "I find inspiration in naturally occurring patterns in nature," she says. "I've done collections inspired by feather patterns, the textures of bark, the movement of water and even topographical maps."

Design Idols: Lanvin, Vera Wang, Gucci and Rodarte resonate strongly with Frank, though Alexander McQueen always will be her ultimate idol. "He was a true innovator, icon and the reason I became a designer," says Frank.

The Incubator: "It's been so helpful with making what was once a dream a reality. I've met amazing people, learned from every one of them, and the friendships with the other girls will be life long," she says.

Shop: Rachelfrankdesign.com

CHRISTINA KARIN



Designer: CHRISTINA MONLEY

The Look: Cocktail attire that's both sexy and sophisticated. "It's defined by classic American glamour, edgy sophistication and an attainable price point," says Monley. Since philanthropy is stylish too, a portion of sales from the line go to organizations that help women and children around the world lead safer lives.

Backstory: After spending a decade in the financial industry, she launched her line in 2011.

Inspiration: "I'm inspired by [the idea of] structure versus freedom, and I take inspiration from things

such as art, architecture, music and history — especially the old Hollywood era," she says.

Design Idols: Monley loves Matthew Williamson, Oscar de la Renta, Yigal Azrouël and Ralph Rucci for their ability to work with both fantasy and reality.

Incubator: "It's been instrumental in providing resources and guidance to help my brand grow. Our program director Amy Olson and director of education Jane Hamill have invaluable experience, and their passion for the industry is evident."

Shop: Christinakarin.com

ELIZABETH SMITH FASHIONS

Designer: LA TONYA WILLIAMS

The Look: Chic tailored blouses for women that boast a little something special — bell sleeves, an exaggerated collar, uniquely placed buttons — resulting in tailored pieces that blend modern twists, menswear simplicity and classic Victorian elements.

Backstory: Williams has been designing for a decade, but four years ago she started following her dream by enrolling in part-time classes at International Academy of Design and Technology. After 10 years in corporate America, she left her job to pursue a career in

fashion.

Inspiration: "I'm inspired by the classic silhouette of the feminine body while instilling the sophistication and elegance possessed by the women in my family," says Williams.

Design Idols: Williams loves Christian Dior and Ralph Lauren because of their classic, feminine designs.

The Incubator: "It's been better than I imagined. For me, it's been able to fill in the missing pieces to the puzzle of the fashion business," she says.

Shop: Esfashions.com



BLANK NATION APPAREL



Designer: BROOKE CONRADY

The Look: This line commands attention with bold patterns and bright colors such as tangerine and fuchsia and rich primary colors. The silhouettes are easy to wear and flattering on a range of body types.

Backstory: Conrady started designing in eighth grade simply because she needed clothes. "I was so tall and thin and nothing fit me. It was horrible because I loved clothing," she says. She attended the Illinois Institute of Art and upon graduating started interning and then working for local line vfish designs.

Inspiration: "I look to every-

day women to inspire me," says Conrady. "I constantly people watch on Michigan Avenue, down in the Loop or walking through Lincoln Park."

Design Idols: Stella McCartney ("My daughter is named after her"), Luca Luca, MaxMara, BCBG and Diane von Furstenburg. "These are brands that have such a consistent aesthetic; they inspire me to have that kind of brand-conscious look each season."

The Incubator: "The other designers in the program are such talented individuals that I constantly feel the heat under my seat to be the best I can."

Shop: Blanknationapparel.com

REBEL WITH A CAUSE



Designer: SARAH CHURCH

The Look: Just like the moniker implies, Church's line has an attitude, with plenty of black, lace and body-contouring silhouettes. But at the same time, it's spiked with sophistication worthy of an elegant cocktail party. "There's a little mystery and a little rebellion, but it's more mature than typical rock and roll gear."

Backstory: Church started designing clothing in high school, and after meeting the owner of Birdellas Emporium ("a freak boutique," she says) she started designing garments and accessories for the store. From there, she enrolled at the Illinois Institute of Art to pursue a career full time.

Inspiration: "I'm mostly inspired by music and architecture, but also life and the people in it."

The Incubator: "It's been a lot of work, but well worth it. I just wish it was a two-year program instead of just one."

Shop: Churchxoxo.com

LAGI NADEAU

Designer: LAGILELEI NADEAU

The Look: Nadeau's ready-to-wear women's pieces are feminine with an edge, crafted with luxe fabrications from mills in Italy and France, but made domestically to ensure spot-on quality and fit.

Backstory: Growing up in Ann Arbor, Mich., Nadeau was always drawing clothing and draping herself in dresses made of bed sheets. She attended the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and worked in fashion there for five years before moving to Chicago to join the Incubator.

Inspiration: She draws ideas from art and architecture, and often turns to a specific piece to influence her collections. "For this season I was inspired by the block painting 'The Waterfall Seen from Kohara' by Okie Hashimoto," says Nadeau.

Design Idols: Nadeau favors Thakoon, Proenza Schouler and Balenciaga.

The Incubator: "I feel like I have created a solid foundation and business structure," she says. "There is also a very strong camaraderie and support system between us designers that will be there even after the Incubator."

Shop: Laginadeau.com

