



MAX JENNY

The accent of the Swedish dark moody

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jewellery **Baumgarten Di Marco**
shoes **Miista**

In August 2019 (due to poor finances) Fashion Week Stockholm was unexpectedly cancelled. This did not stop a small group of designers to proceed with an independent planning of their own respective fashion shows. Among them was Maxjenny, who showcased her new collection, designed in collaboration with artist Oliw87, at the prestigious Stockholm Auction House, which also happens to be the world's oldest auction house. The colourful collection demonstrated the designer's and the artist's shared understanding of creative expression, while the show itself was a manifestation of how creativity can overcome external challenges.

Even though Stockholm is not only the capital of Sweden but also the centre of the Swedish fashion industry, Maxjenny has instead chosen to live in Copenhagen. From an international viewpoint, the Scandinavian peninsula is a rather homogenous place, where minimalist design, monochrome fashion and sleek architecture join together Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. In reality, the countries have a rather complicated history. At times, they have merged their economies in political unions, while at other times they have been at war with one another. The languages are related – Danes often understand Swedes, and Swedes often can understand Norwegian (while no one outside of Finland can really speak the language) – but culturally, the countries are quite different, and under the surface, there are strong tensions. In an interview, Maxjenny explains how she fits into this complex geographical and cultural landscape: "I grew up in Österlen, and we perceive Copenhagen to be the true capital of Scania. Also, Stockholm is actually quite far from the south of Sweden, and so it wasn't so strange, if you think about it strategically."

Österlen is the eastern part of the landscape Scania, which at times throughout history has been Danish, at times Swedish, but always safeguarding its own distinct regional character. This is reflected in the area's particular accent, which uses Swedish grammar but technically is considered a Danish dialect. In Scania, Österlen in particular is known for its serene landscapes and beautiful scenery, as well as its recent development into a creative site for people interested in arts and crafts and living life at a slower pace. Maxjenny continues to explain:





"I grew up in a very artsy fashion family, where fashion was considered to be part of a larger cultural context of art and drama. From a very early age I was surrounded by patterns, notebooks and roles of fabric. For me, working with fashion was simply a part of my natural environment, and I have always considered design to be a hybrid of art and fashion. Being creative is, for me at least, something very 'normal', and sometimes I don't even understand how other people can breathe or feel true happiness without having art present in their lives. I remember when I was growing up, I thought that our neighbours across the road were a bit strange because they were so ordinary – they lived in ordinary houses, had two cars and had regular jobs and all that. They had new dishwashers in their kitchen, mass-produced posters on the wall and bought their food at the supermarket. My family, on the other hand, lived in an enormous house – our kitchen was 100 square metres and you could even ride your bike indoors. We ate smelly, Danish cheese and made our own jams. Once my mother traded clothes for carrots, and I ate so many carrots that I turned orange! Our house was always full of people coming and going, fashion shoots taking place, meetings with agents or construction workers putting up something or other, assistants, people visiting from abroad or someone planning an art show... everyone was always on their way somewhere. And my mom adjusted the walls based on the size of the artworks, not the other way around. This is also where my creative driving force comes from: I want to show the world what I do. I want to shout it from the rooftops. It's not weirder or more complicated than that."

When Maxjenny is describing her childhood and cultural heritage, the background of her maximalist design and consistent use of colour becomes apparent: there is a clear interconnection between her view of the world as it is communicated in her aesthetics and the artistic environment her parents offered her as a child. But even though she has always been a creative person, it was not obvious that she would work in fashion. Having pursued an education in furniture design, she became interested in also designing garments. Both furniture and garments use the body as their starting point: the shape of a chair follows the experience of what is the most comfortable position to sit in, in the same way that a garment needs to consider the embodied reality of the wearer. But there are also noticeable differences: while furniture is used to decorate our homes, and are thus

more private than our clothes, garments are worn not only for function but also to make us presentable to the world around us: even before we speak, what we wear has communicated to the people around us who we think we are and who we would like to be.

The Maxjenny garments make a bold statement. In particular the coats and ponchos have become a trademark of the brand, making the Maxjenny design instantly recognizable. When asked who her customer is, Maxjenny says that, "they are confident women not afraid of speaking up or to be noticed and who can take a compliment. Lifestyle-wise, they include everyone from trade and industry people to celebrities to women who spend their days in the quiet countryside. Of course, it really helped that the Swedish crown princess has been seen in my design, not only once but several times. She has always looked top notch and her appearance is so international. My ambition is to give power and confidence to my clients. They are often under scrutiny and my design can give a sense of strength and added self-esteem. I also want to show the world that Scandinavian design can be colourful, luxurious and extravagant at the same time that it's sustainable and functional."

Maxjenny's inclusive description of her consumer base is connected to how she plans her collections. When modern fashion was first introduced in the mid-1800s, the idea was that seasonal collections should be distinguishable from one another. This way, the fashion-conscious consumer would be seduced into regularly buying new things, as the "new" was designed to contrast the "old". Soon, this trend-drive business model had influenced everything from the launch of soft drinks to the car industry, and the era of wasteful consumption – also known as the twentieth century – had been defined. Today, however, we know that production needs to respect planetary boundaries. If we don't fundamentally change the ways in which we consume, we will soon run out of resources to use. For this reason, Maxjenny's seasonal collections don't contrast one another as much as they complement:

"I produce locally both in Denmark and in Lithuania. My whole family is involved in the process. We discuss things a lot, and together we find solutions to most of my business problems. For example, in order to avoid sitting on too





much stock at any given time, I produce in an even rhythm and also with models that you can use for a long time, surpassing seasonal trends. I would say that I flirt a bit with demi-couture and engage in a more classical take on fashion, albeit in contemporary packaging. I don't produce large collections, but prefer instead to release prints when the timing feels right. I decide my own pace."

Possibly one of the least interesting questions for creative individuals to answer in interview situations is where they find their inspiration. Even though creative work needs to be explorative and driven by curiosity, it is also a business, taking place within an industry that is based in a rather conventional economic model. The idea that creative work exists in another world, far from where ordinary people live their lives, is part of the myth of the artistic genius almost in direct contact with higher dimensions from which inspiration is provided. Even so, and with this in mind, I nevertheless decided to pose this worn-out question to Maxjenny, perhaps more to find out how she views the concept of "inspiration" than anything else:

"I find inspiration everywhere and nowhere. To be frank, I don't believe in "finding" inspiration, I work with colours and prints all the time and this allows me to have a more artistic attitude all day, every day. On the contrary, it's impossible for me to not develop new ideas when working like this. But, I also get extremely happy from surrounding myself with colour. I love what colour can express. Colours are fascinating and tell so many different stories and therefore, colours are an infinite source of inspiration to me, almost like a raw material that keeps developing and changing. But I'm also inspired by the place where I live, by all the people in Copenhagen that I see around me, dropping off their kids at day care and at school in the morning, riding their bikes around town. I love going to art openings and visiting art galleries, I go regularly to Berlin Art Weekend and Week. It's also about a certain way of seeing, I think: I tend to register lots of strange things, like striped fences in the middle of nowhere, super cool shoes that someone in the street is wearing, the weird aesthetics of many hairdresser salons – life is like a theatre, but instead of people playing a part they're really just being themselves. So, I don't need a lot of fuel, life is inspiring as it is."

Being in charge of one's own business can in many ways a positive experience. It comes with a unique sense of freedom: no superiors sending boring e-mails, no mandatory Monday meetings with co-workers or restricting office dress code. On the other hand, being completely in charge of one's own financial situation can also be straining, and many people who run their own businesses mention the difficulty in enforcing boundaries between professional and personal life. I ask Maxjenny to talk a bit about how she experiences the division between work and free time:

"I don't think you can completely shut off when working like this, but rather, I think of it as gradually turning down the creative energy. Creativity is such a big part of who I am, but of course I don't want to talk about my projects all the time! I study my surroundings a lot, I watch and notice what is happening around me. Also, I have a rule that I don't work evenings or weekends unless it's something very specific that demands my attention. I think it's good to not only express creativity, but also to be inspired by the creativity of others, so that there is a kind of balance to it. I'm an early riser and a doer, so I prefer to work intensely early in the day, allowing me to relax later. I'm quite pragmatic and so I really see the need to plan my events and to be disciplined. Definitely, this is not a lifestyle that suits everyone. But, nowadays it's completely out-dated to work around the clock. You have to allow yourself to be lazy and do nothing. I run early in the morning, fresh air is good for your mind and makes your thoughts more lucid. Staying in shape – mentally, physically, in your relations, in your design – is good no matter how you look at it."

To summarize one's work is always difficult, not least while you are in the middle of a successful career. Nevertheless, Maxjenny has no problems putting into words what she wants others to know about her and her business:

"I am very happy that I can do what I do, and grateful for all the people that I work with, as well as for all my customers. What they don't always know is that I listen to what they want, and then I develop new items behind the curtains that I include in my new collections. I evolve, both as a person and as a designer, by being attentive to the needs of others. So far so good!"

