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SUSTAINABILITY

The essential guide to New York's sustainable new guard

New York Fashion Week returned in full cry last week, but some of the most interesting sustainable innovators re-imagined or shunned on-schedule shows in favour of a slower pace and reductions in product volume.

BY BELLA WEBB

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Photo: Jesse Gouveia

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New York Fashion Week was back at full throttle last week, but a number of sustainable brands opted for a more low-key approach, reconsidering their relationship with the official schedule and offering mindful capsules for made-to-order clients. Some were even reluctant to join in the marketing hype or opted out of the event altogether.

These designers are wrestling with several huge questions: what does sustainability actually mean in fashion? How can designers balance growth with environmental and social impact? And where does the fashion calendar fit into the future of fashion? Here, we profile the New York designers leading a new era of sustainable fashion, their approaches to responsible design and their outlooks on how to grow their business without compromising their values.

Angel Chang



Angel Chang operates a “zero carbon” design philosophy, meaning there is no electricity used in production, and clothes are natural and locally made. Photo: Jesse Gouveia

New York designer Angel Chang produces her collections in rural mountain villages in China's Guizhou province, where she first spent six months learning about indigenous practices from local artisans in 2012. Her clothes are produced without electricity and harsh chemicals — as they might have been “before the Industrial Revolution”, she says.

Chang only uses plant-based dyes, working with Shamanistic locals — who believe that every plant has a soul — to gather leaves and petals after they fall naturally and respecting the seasonal cycles to ensure that bark cuttings won't harm trees. Any water involved is later re-used to wash vegetables, so it cannot be contaminated. “Instead of four to six weeks, I wait four to six months for fabric,” says Chang. “Things aren't perfect or machine-made; I can't use stretch, plastic or metals. Everything is done by human hands.”

The one issue in her “zero carbon” design process is the air freight involved in sending clothes to customers, mostly based in the US. The brand works with San Francisco non-profit Climate Neutral to offset the carbon emissions from this, as well as its New York operations.

Chang showed her new collection the day before New York Fashion Week began at Pace Gallery. The show — which Chang says was a call to action for people to reconnect with nature and “re-Indigenise” themselves — traced her journey through building the brand. Moving forward, Chang hopes to scale by replicating the local supply chain with other artisan groups and heritage crafts across the world. “I don't have to build a whole new workshop or team, I'm just uniting people who already work in this way,” she says.

Bode



The new Bode tailor shop in New York's Chinatown. Photo: Courtesy of Bode

CFDA award winner Emily Adams Bode-Aujla has opened a new tailoring shop next door to the Bode flagship in Chinatown. The repair and alterations space restores clothes from Bode or elsewhere, with a specific reverence for heritage crafts and antique materials. Storytelling is central to Bode's sustainability mission, says founder Bode-Aujla. "Many of our textiles draw an emotional response," she explains.

Her personal background is in collecting antiques and vintage. Her expansive archive of materials, buttons and trims is used to execute historically accurate repairs, be it for a 1920s dress or 1940s pair of trousers. "Our goal is for people to invest in these items and cherish them. Needing a repair or alteration doesn't mean you have to let an item go."

Reuse is "foundational" to Bode, she says. As the brand has grown, it has retained a strong upcycling business, with 30-40 per cent of its output being one-of-a-kind garments using antique materials. Where Bode uses new materials, the production process is designed to help generate positive social impact for local communities or invest in heritage such as hand-loomed cotton, which Bode says has a zero-carbon footprint.

Privately owned Bode was one of the first New York brands to apply one-of-a-kind garments to the luxury wholesale model. "The unique point of difference of Bode's modern heirlooms is very appealing to our customers," notes Laura Wiggins, head of

womenswear at Matchesfashion. “They enjoy the sense of discovery and are looking for luxurious pieces that have an interesting provenance.”

Maria McManus



Maria McManus is leaning on third-party certifications to help her navigate an increasingly complex sustainability landscape. Photo: Maria McManus

“Sustainability changes on a weekly or daily basis,” says Maria McManus. In February 2021, McManus was interviewed by *Vogue Business* about recycled cashmere, only to find out from her mill shortly afterwards that there wasn’t enough recycled cashmere and her collection would have to use a mix of recycled and virgin. “I’d just been on record saying how horrible virgin cashmere was,” she says. McManus now spends at least an hour a day researching and relies heavily on certifications such as Responsible Wool Standard and Forest Stewardship Council when choosing new materials.

The brand is trying to tick all the right boxes: bringing factories closer to mills, reusing shipping boxes, adopting recycled plastic keats for department store orders, holding minimal inventory, and insisting on quality and consistent design to promote longevity. McManus is especially concerned about the impact of climate change on the quality and availability of cotton and cashmere. “The carbon footprint from shipping gives me a lot of anxiety,” she says. “And sometimes, factories are not very transparent, which was especially true when we couldn’t visit them during the pandemic.” The company is too small to invest in robust impact measurement — sales are under \$5 million a year — but McManus says this is a priority on her list when she receives next-stage funding.

Her ambitions to scale have shifted as she became more aware of the climate crisis and the need for urgent, systemic change, she says. She doesn’t think that scale and responsibility can coexist. “A few years ago, I wanted to have the biggest, most responsible company. Now, I want to grow sustainably every year, to be able to pay our employees well and be profitable, but I know that you can’t be a big company and be responsible.”

Rentravage



Rentravage combines deadstock materials with upcycled vintage garments. Photo: Rentravage

Upcycling has become more aspirational in major cities in recent years, but Rentravage founder Erin Beatty says there is still work to be done to make it aspirational for consumers outside of fashion capitals. Her ethos with Rentravage is to combine deadstock materials with upcycled vintage garments, using as few new inputs as possible. Some garments are obviously upcycled, leaning into the Frankenstein aesthetic favoured by designers like Connor Ives and ELV Denim.

The brand counts Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman among its stockists and hosted a rooftop presentation during New York Fashion Week. “As soon as we’re big enough or influential enough to go off-schedule and pay for the web marketing to make that direct sales model happen, I happily will,” says Beatty. To make the process easier for buyers, Rentravage has developed key styles that can be made with different deadstock materials, so the colour may change while the silhouette remains the same.

Growth will come from partnering with big brands to upcycle their deadstock, says Beatty. Madewell is first on the list — a collaborative drop of 15-20 upcycled styles will launch at the end of September. One of the challenges is that deadstock materials often come without care labels, meaning brands like Rentravage don't know what material they're using, or how it has been treated.

Mia Vesper



Mia Vesper's brand relies primarily on made-to-order sales, hoping to cut overconsumption. Photo: Mia Vesper

The crowd at Mia Vesper's presentation was as Gen Z as they come, with model Ella Emhoff among those in attendance wearing new designs. Complete with a contortionist, the presentation riffed on the circus that is fashion week. One guest said it put the fun and joy back into sustainable fashion, featuring a collection complete with rainbow brights and shimmering pleats.

"The thing I care about most is making exceptional garments that are incorruptably awesome," says Vesper. "From there, I try to add as many other sustainability metrics as I can." The collection is made in New York, using vintage and deadstock materials as well

as artisan and heritage textiles. The majority of the business is made-to-order, minimising waste.

Like Rentravage, Vesper isn't too controlling about what type of deadstock materials she uses. "It's too difficult to only use sustainable deadstock fabrics," she says. Around 35 per cent of Vesper's garments are one-off upcycled pieces. She works a lot with vintage tapestries, which rarely have enough yardage for more than one pattern.

"Being a small brand, inventory is hard to deal with," says Vesper. "I don't want to make clothes if I don't know for sure that people want them; I don't want to do super sales just to hawk them off on someone." If an item is selling well, she will produce a limited batch upfront. Wholesalers generally prefer this model, she says.

One/Of



One/Of is entirely made-to-order, between an apartment in the Upper East Side and several women-owned factories in the Garment District. Photo: One/Of

For Patricia Voto of One/Of, the challenge of balancing environmental, social and economic sustainability is a major barrier to long-term success. The upcycling brand works primarily with women-owned factories in New York's garment district and is entirely made-to-order. Working from an apartment on the Upper East Side, the brand has gained a growing community of fans, many of whom now place orders without even coming for fittings. About half of sales come from loyal repeat customers, Voto says, who order bespoke looks from new capsules via text message. Voto might even send fabric swatches to their homes so they can create their order. The NYFW presentation was, of necessity, see-now-buy-now.

Looking ahead, One/Of is set on "other avenues to scale", says Voto. She hopes this will include bringing in an in-house team to streamline production and control margins more tightly, and opening a storefront to gain new customers through footfall as well as via social media (currently the main marketing outlet). Slow, bespoke styles will always be the core. "Mass production goes against what we believe in," insists Voto.

Kristin Mallison

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Kristin Mallison upcycles vintage tapestries, needlepoint portraits and even furniture, which she finds on Ebay, Craigslist and Etsy. Photo: Kristin Mallison

Brooklyn-based designer Kristin Mallison has earned a sizeable social media following — 79,300 Instagram followers and counting — for her upcycled tapestry garments. She credits this to being stocked in Lower East Side store Café Forgot. Her kitsch collections often feature tapestry birds or cats, with corsets tied by saccharine pink ribbons and skirts adorned with ornate fringe. Mallison spends “countless hours” scouring Ebay, Craigslist and Etsy for vintage tapestries and discarded furniture to use as raw materials. Her clothes have included upcycled needlepoint portraits, mid-century dining room chairs, and even 1970s carpet suitcases. “Patchwork is a key part of this process because sometimes I’m only able to salvage a few inches of certain fabrics,” she says.

Everything is made in New York by Mallison or her assistant, who meet once a week to exchange bags full of material. They are able to produce 15 to 20 garments per week, and regularly sell out before they can restock. “Keeping the operation small is important to me at this point,” she explains.

Mallison is undecided about how to grow her brand, or if she even wants to. “Focusing on making one really special piece is very exciting, but I always wonder if that's also what's keeping me from growing as a brand. I've recently started to reply to order requests with ‘I'd be happy to make you something similar!’ instead of ‘Sorry, it's already sold’.”

Her made-to-order model isn't a natural fit for fashion week, but Mallison has concerns about the sustainability of creating larger collections. “There's something I like about releasing garments one piece at a time, slowly and carefully all year round, rather than all in one huge burst,” she says. “Fashion weeks serve to create a big media frenzy and get people excited and talking about the brand, but I've found a marketing strategy that works for me and the pace that I like to work at.”

La Réunion



La Réunion founder Sarah Nsikak in one of her signature quilted patchwork dresses. Photos: Anna Ottum, Ethan Hickerson

Nigerian-American designer Sarah Nsikak named her brand La Réunion after an island off the coast of Madagascar, inspired by the vibrant stories of African culture and post-colonialism. Her hand-quilted garments are made in New York using reclaimed and recycled materials sourced from other fashion designers, vintage stores and estate sales.

Nsikak doesn't take part in fashion week, caught between the "merit in creating an artist production" and the "wasteful" practices that often demands. "It would be interesting to see labels celebrate old works and recirculate past collections during fashion week," she says. "Right now, the fashion calendar is all about making more and there needs to be a shift there." Nsikak advocates for regulations as to how much brands are able to produce and limitations on new textiles — there is "more than enough" deadstock, she says.

For La Réunion, the main barrier to scale is time, especially now that Nsikak is navigating motherhood. "There was a point where I was designing 25 dresses per day," she says. "We had a long period of trialling the best process that wouldn't lead to me being burnt out." One solution has been to make custom dresses on previously designed patterns, as a more efficient alternative to totally bespoke pieces. "We want customers to have heirloom pieces that they can treasure for a lifetime and we take the time to give them an experience that honours their trust in us."

Imitation of Christ



Imitation of Christ staged a protest in Brooklyn as part of New York Fashion Week. Photos: Le Yang, courtesy of Imitation of Christ

Rather than staging a fashion show this season, Imitation of Christ (IoC) held a demonstration. Organised with New York Communities for Change, the protest took place in Brooklyn on Saturday afternoon, a rallying cry against further oil pipeline construction titled “Oil is Death”. A fashion show was out of the question. “With everything going on — from heatwaves and droughts to earthquakes and floods – fashion week seems out of touch. It’s time to wake up and do something,” says co-founder Tara Subkoff.

It’s not unusual for the brand to take such a political stance. IoC was founded by art school drop-outs and environmental activists Subkoff and Matt Damhave in 2000 to challenge the relationship between high fashion and sustainability. The brand says it only uses upcycled or recycled materials to make pieces in limited runs. “There is so much

fabric out there, we have absolutely no need to make more.” ”It has a 100 per cent sell-through rate, Subkoff says.

Since relaunching in 2020 after a brief hiatus, IoC has been more focused on expanding. “We have had incredible press support, but getting funding has been a bigger challenge,” Subkoff explains. She is disillusioned with the support available for sustainable businesses. “At this point, I have given up on the lack of vision financiers and big backers have for this industry. I only wish to collaborate with bigger brands to create 100 per cent zero-waste small runs as collaborations.”

Ashlyn



The Ashlyn show opened with a contemporary dance piece. Photo: Ashlyn

Designer Ashlynn Park opened her debut New York Fashion Week show this weekend with a contemporary dance piece, charting her experiences of early motherhood, an emotive start to a striking show. Her brand, Ashlyn, is dedicated to zero waste design. Items are never pre-ordered or mass produced, with many of the garments created from a single piece of fabric using zero-waste pattern-cutting. “Efficiency, education, training and conservation of resources permeate everything we do,” says Park.

The Seoul-born designer is growing her modern-luxe tailoring brand in stages, Park says, being careful to partner with the right people and educate those around her as she scales. One of those partners is Matchesfashion. “Ashlyn gives what would otherwise be waste fabric a new life by using it as the lining or to create structure to her garments,” says head of womenswear Lianne Wiggins. “Customers are interested in the artistry and craftsmanship that goes into this.”

Park, who honed her skills at Yohji Yamamoto and Calvin Klein, prioritises lower-impact natural fibres such as linen, organic cotton and wool. “I believe in investing in what suits you personally and items that will endure,” she says. “As a designer, how can I change the fashion system to reduce its adverse impact on the environment?”

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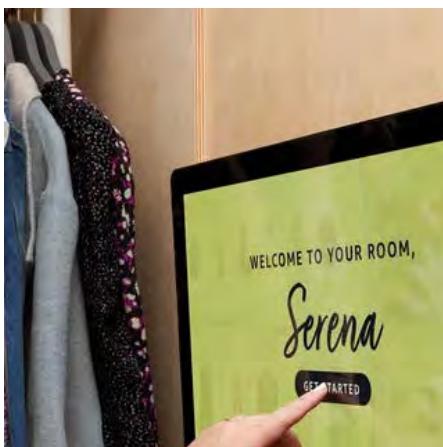
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