

Tomorrow's Life

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Life

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ARTS BEAUTY TIME OUT DIVERSIONS ON AIR

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You know eco-fashion has become a global trend when luxury goods giant LVMH takes a major stake in Edun, the ethical clothing line set up by rock star Bono and his wife Ali Hewson. Hong Kong has traditionally been stony ground for such initiatives, but a handful of local designers and retailers are embracing green ideals. And with the launch of a sustainable fashion forum today as part of the Fashion Access trade fair, more may take up the cause.

"A lot of designers are more conscious about how they produce their lines and what kind of carbon footprint they're leaving. The eco-market has developed substantially and it is here to stay," says Kanchan Panjabi of Kanch Couture.

The world is becoming more aware that we have a real problem with over-consumption, she says, and it needs to change.

Inspired after taking part in an "eco-chic" initiative last year, for which she recycled denim scrap from a factory, Panjabi based her new collection, due out next month, on old offcuts and fabric waste.

"Eco-friendly and sustainable materials are the wave of the future, but before we start to make more fabric there is so much unused material that should be consumed first," says the designer, who plans to maintain her recycling theme with a denim collection.

At accessories label Dialog, founders Cassandra Postema and Chiu Dong Shing have also made recycling a key feature of their handbag collection. All are decorated with colourful scrap-fabric trim using a technique widely applied in Malaysia, where both lived.

Postema and Chiu have made it a point to obtain the trim from communities identified through church connections around the region, giving providers a small income. In Hong Kong, a group of Pakistani women sew them at home, while girls from an orphanage in Vietnam make them at a neighbouring sewing school. Other operations work with disabled people in Indonesia and on the mainland.

At Diaz Jewellers, Salina and Takashi Fuchigami's modest plans for their business two years ago grew into them specialising in modern, sculptural jewellery using synthetic stones created in labs.

"A simple wish to create a jewellery brand turned into a mission. We started thinking about how to do it right, ethically," says Salina. "It was important to create statement jewellery that actually made a statement. We wanted to raise awareness of issues that the consumer wasn't aware of. There isn't a single consumer product that doesn't have some effect on the environment and it's important to question how much of an impact you are making. We wanted to give people the option of choosing something better."

Every piece is made in Hong Kong and the couple closely monitor conditions in the workshops. Taking their mission one step further, the couple joined forces with One Sky, an NGO that restores areas devastated by indiscriminate mining

in Sierra Leone. A portion of their sales goes directly to the group and the couple also provide customers with regular updates on how the money is being used.

"People buy our jewellery because they want to do something they like the philosophy and agree with our cause," says Fuchigami. "Someone said to me it would be impossible to convince a Hong Kong lady that she didn't need a genuine diamond, but we have."

Ashwin Makhija, director of recently opened jewellers Platinum Heart, has brought environmental considerations into his showroom. The chairs are made from recycled teak, the paint is solvent free and he uses energy-saving LED lights and display cases lined with bamboo, widely regarded as a sustainable material because the plant is fast-growing and does not require fertiliser or pesticides.

Makhija's road to thinking green began as a practical issue.

A lot of designers are more conscious about ... what kind of carbon footprint they're leaving

Kanchan Panjabi, Kanch Couture

Many women are allergic to white gold, which is plated in rhodium. Makhija began to think of how other kinds of gold affected people and the more information he dug up about gold and how it is mined and refined, the more concerned he became. "To create one gold ring you need to displace on average 20 tonnes of earth; then you need to pour in cyanide to separate the gold," he says. "I was shocked at how badly [gold mining] affects the environment, the wildlife, the people and the waterways."

But supplies of responsibly mined and processed gold are hard to come by, so Makhija decided to buy old jewellery from customers and melt it down to create new pieces. About 40 per cent of the gold used in his collections is recycled.

His store also buys its diamonds primarily from mines in Sri Lanka and Canada that work to rejuvenate excavated areas, and the stones are cut in workshops in Antwerp or London, where labour laws are stringent. If the jewellery comes from India, 10 per cent of the profits are returned to the artisans who made it.

"We can't guarantee every diamond to be 100 per cent ethical but we can do as much as we can," Makhija says. Fiona Kotur Marin, founder of Kotur luxury accessories, has also begun using sustainable materials in her designs, for instance, by piecing together scraps of vintage brocade used in a previous collection with snakeskin trim to create a new bag.

"It's double recycling," Marin says. "Sometimes as a designer, the things that limit you also lend the greatest creative challenges. I find that giving something new life, through reuse or reinterpretation, is exciting and actually gives greater dimension to the end product."

While they try to make a difference as responsible global citizens, the designers acknowledge their drive to green operations usually results in compromise.

Eco-friendly material often costs a lot more, so most settle for a mix of different fabrics. "Being a small designer, the quantities needed for my collection are not very large," Panjabi says.

"It's hard to find a supplier who will give you organic [fabrics] in a large range of colours and at an affordable price. It's often hard to find the fabrics with a proper certification." "It's about creating a balance because we still have to compete with other brands out there," Postema says.

"We can't be [totally] ethical, trendy and make a profit at the same time. You have to pick where you can be ethical. You have to have a balance between environmentally friendly and people friendly."

But with most Hongkongers obsessed with labels, the biggest hurdle is changing perceptions of what eco-fashion is and what it stands for.

"It's not a selling point like it is in the States, where you see the rise of the ethical consumer who wants to know more [about how a product is made]. Here it's still a new concept," says knitwear designer Amy Small, who is developing an accessory line using yarn made from soya bean waste. "Unless it's a cool, recognisable label, people don't want to know about it."

However green the credentials, "the product should always speak for itself. We don't want to market it as a 'charity' line," Postema says. "But at the end of the day, every brand should be [socially] responsible. That's the long-term vision."

Designers seek to reduce their carbon footprints with eco-friendly creations, writes **Divia Harilela**

Down to earth



Eco-conscious creations by local designers: handbags by Dialog, cufflinks by Platinum Heart and a ring from Diaz Jewellers, who use only synthetic stones



Salina and Takashi Fuchigami, Cassandra Postema and Chiu Dong Shing

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