East Bay Express

NEWS » FEATURE November 12, 2008

The Rise of Slow Fashion

The Bay Area fashion scene has long been outshined by New York and LA. Now, a group of independent fashion supporters is trying to take the lead in sustainable fashion. Can they succeed?

By Kathleen Richards

Jennifer Lynne grew up in an extraordinarily artistic household, so it wasn't surprising that she chose fashion design as her career. Raised in St. Petersburg, Florida, Lynne designed and sold her first item — a reversible off-shoulder shirt — to a friend in eighth grade. She eventually went to fashion school in New York, where big-name designers like Anna Sui would speak to her class about the rigors of making it in the notoriously cutthroat fashion industry. But, unlike most of her peers, Lynne wanted to set out on her own.

After relocating to San Francisco six years ago, Lynne decided to start her own line. She chose lingerie because she wanted to do something completely different. Her first collection of Porcelynne lingerie was ambitious: about ten or twelve designs, all silk and hand-painted. But it also was a total failure; she didn't sell one piece and ended up losing about $25,000.

It could easily have ended her career. But instead, Lynne went back to the drawing board. She chose a single design — a lace-up boy-short — in lace fabric. She sold her product through trunk shows, at co-op stores like RAG in San Francisco, and at bazaar-like shopping events such as Chillin'. Little by little, as she learned more about the business and developed a clientele, her collection expanded to include yoga pants, stretchy camisoles, thong underwear, and a new line of underwear in bamboo fabric. Now, Lynne, who

recently relocated her studio to Oakland's Chinatown, finally has something resembling a viable business.

"I honestly think that this is the best time to be a designer, because the big companies aren't doing that great and people are shopping local," said Lynne, a five-foot-ten-inch blond with Betty Page bangs. "I don't think I would be surviving if it wasn't for the local support."

Like many Bay Area designers, Lynne is finding success doing small runs and using green, eco-friendly materials. It's a concept that's been around for a while but is now exploding in the Bay Area, where eco-consciousness is no longer a trend but a way of life, and where independent-minded entrepreneurs have more cachet than trendy global brands.

It's also a shift that could spell major changes for the Bay Area's position in the fashion world. San Francisco's fashion scene has long been overshadowed by New York and Los Angeles, and attempts to legitimize the region as a fashion center have been slow-going, especially after the cancellation of San Francisco Fashion Week this year. But now, an active group of designers and supporters of local, sustainable fashion are hoping to coalesce this disjointed scene into something cohesive and cutting-edge that could not only put the Bay Area on the fashion map, but help it lead the way in the burgeoning world of slow fashion.

If only it were as easy as it sounds.

When San Francisco Fashion Week was canceled this year due to financial reasons, many viewed it as a step back for a fashion scene that has struggled to assert itself.

Although the Bay Area has never come close to rivaling New York or Los Angeles, it does have its share of industry standards. Levi's, Gap, and the

children's company Gymboree all are based locally, as are respected fashion programs such as the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising and the Academy of Art University.

A big part of the problem is the lack of resources here — such as production factories and fashion weeks that attract buyers. "That's the big downfall," said Desiree Salas, an Oakland fashion designer who's been in the business for thirteen years. The absence of resources, coupled with the high cost of living here, explains why many Bay Area designers feel they need to move out of the area to achieve success. Erin Featherston and Alexander Wang, who both relocated to New York, are now household names in the industry. Only a few, like Erica Tanov, stayed in the area and still managed to establish a reputation.

Another contributing factor is the style preference of local consumers. Bay Area folk are notoriously casual, which is why stores such as REI, Title Nine, and the yoga-clothing line Lululemon seem to be just as popular — if not more so — than, say, Barney's or Saks Fifth Avenue.

Yet the same qualities that make the Bay Area tough for the fashion industry also help make it a haven for the independent design scene. "What I've found is that the uniqueness of the Bay Area allows artists to be extremely creative here outside of the fashion market," explained Cicely Sweed, curator of public programs at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, who's been working in fashion for sixteen years.

Increasingly, that independent spirit has lent itself to the emerging green fashion biz. Indie designers here don't have to produce on such a large scale, says Sweed. "Probably out of necessity and resources, they have come up with these more sustainable practices and are now setting a precedent for the nation and the world for what the sustainable practice looks like," she said.

After all, conscientious consumers no longer just want to buy something locally made, but also want more detailed information on how a product comes to be.

"The consumer almost wants a personal relationship," said Salas, referring to her face-to-face talks with customers when she sells her cotton wrap dresses at trunk shows. Among their questions: Where is it produced? Who's sewing it? Can they get something specially made?

It's a phenomenon that seems to be centered in — but certainly not limited to — the Bay Area. "When we go to ... these big trade shows, a lot of times the buyers that come through don't give a rat's tail who you're giving to, they just wanna know if they put it on a mannequin next week will it sell," mused Erica Varize, who operates her custom-fit boutique, Evarize Fashion Cafe, in West Berkeley, and donates a portion of her sales to a school in Uganda. "Folks out here wanna know, oh, where did you make it, who are you giving back to, who are you loving through your business?"

As a result, some shoppers aren't hitting the malls anymore, or looking to so-called "fast fashion" retailers for their clothes and accessories. And the recession isn't helping matters. Hayward-based Mervyns recently announced it was closing its stores after filing for bankruptcy, and Pleasanton-based Ross Dress for Less also has seen its sales tumble.

"Just from speaking to my friends in retail and the larger department stores and the chains, they're scared," said Kimberly Miller, the San Francisco editor of online shopping guide DailyCandy.com. "It's not just because of the economy. ... For the twentysomething female ... they would much prefer to spend their money on a lesser-known designer. ... In simple terms, in San Francisco it's all about being green and giving back; it's charity, it's your community."

A sense of community was the vibe emanating from the Fruitvale Transit Village one Friday evening in late September. A diverse group of fashionable women and men spilled out onto the sidewalk in East Oakland, while others

sipped wine and listened to the drumming and singing of the Puerto Rican *bomba* dance group, Bomberas de la Bahia, inside an elegant, airy storefront. They were celebrating the grand opening of Made in Oakland (called m.i.o. for short), a new social venture nonprofit aimed at creating living-wage sewing jobs.

It's basically the antithesis of the fluorescent-lit, covered-window sweatshop. Funded by a $700,000 federal grant, the venture — in partnership with the nonprofit community development group the Unity Council — aims to spark a fundamental shift not only in the way fashion is made, but also how it's consumed.

Besides creating sixty to seventy jobs at an Embarcadero Cove facility that was renovated with green building materials, Made in Oakland also hopes to provide a place for independent designers to make samples and patterns, and do small runs. "I found that as an independent designer it was difficult to contract with local manufacturers without having to qualify with a minimum order," said Hiroko Kurihara, Made in Oakland's program manager, who also owns a socially responsible blanket and fashion accessories company. As a result, many designers contract with manufacturers outside of the area, or the country, where labor is cheaper but working standards are lower and shipping costs are higher.

"It seems like a one-stop place," said Desiree Salas, who attended the Made in Oakland opening. "They'll take your concept to production, which designers usually have to do on their own or find separate contractors, which is a lot of work."

To take a design from the drawing board to the hanger starts with the concept or development, then proceeds to sampling, fitting, pre-production, production, and, finally, delivery. The whole process can take about eight months to a year for a small designer. Keeping the pre-production and

production steps in the Bay Area would not only inject dollars into the local economy, it also would diminish the industry's environmental impact.

Kurihara likens this philosophy to the Slow Food movement, which promotes regional diversity, sustainable agriculture, and artisanal foods. Similarly, her vision of slow fashion would take "green" consciousness to a whole new level. Not only would it promote the use of sustainable fabrics and nontoxic dyes, but also seek to transform consumerism into something sustainable and affordable — while still remaining high fashion.

Among Made in Oakland's other plans are to presort their waste products and have them reconstituted into new fibers and fabrics, which will become the basis of Made in Oakland's own product line. They're also looking at getting sewing machines that allow a sewer to stand, which are more ergonomically correct for the operator. Yoga will be part of the daily routine for the employees, Kurihara said, and Made in Oakland's location at the Fruitvale BART station will encourage public transportation.

But for slow fashion to truly have an impact, Kurihara knows it needs to be both accessible and competitive. "Do you spend $5 on a canvas bag that will fall apart, or $20 on a bag that will last?" Kurihara questioned. "As an industry we really have to address that. Otherwise it doesn't make much of an impact if only 1 or 2 percent of the population can afford the totally green option." How to solve that? Kurihara says they're considering allowing customers to lease-to-own Made in Oakland clothing items in much the same way that people now lease luxury automobiles.

Local entrepreneurs see Kurihara's venture serving another higher purpose. "I think what she's going to do is boost East Bay morale," said Salas, who now gets her sewing done in Alameda and plans to use Made in Oakland's services as well.

Made in Oakland's launch is just one of the many things helping to make the

East Bay a more hospitable place for fashion. The area also has become fertile ground for indie designers and boutiques, thanks in large part to cheaper rent than San Francisco.

There's the eco-boutique Atomic Garden in Oakland and the Berkeley store Magnet, which carries indie designers and is part of the East Bay Style Collective. Oakland designer Amy Cools maintains an online list of designers, stores, events, and web sites dedicated to indie fashion called Afterglow's Guide to California Independent Shopping (ACClothingandBags.com/guideCAindie.html). Erin Kilmer Neel runs the shopping portal OaklandUnwrapped.com and launched the Oakland Indie Awards last year. Blog Fashion Forward – East Bay (FashionForwardEB.blogspot.com) promotes local businesses and events, paying special attention to vintage stores. Oakland jewelry designer Melissa Joy Manning and Cari Borja in Berkeley are blowing away the notion of the casual, unstylish East Bay.

"I am so thrilled by the energy in Oakland right now," said Kurihara. "I think it's finally hitting its stride. I almost don't want people to know about it."

Not that there isn't plenty of activity on the other side of the bay. There are eco-boutiques like Ladita and Clary Sage Organics; regular shopping events like Chillin' and Appel and Frank; blogs like SFIndieFashion.com devoted to indie shopping; sustainable fashion classes offered at CCA; the Fashion Industry Network at the SF Renaissance Entrepreneur Center that offers courses in helping indie designers (and which recently offered a class in the East Bay). There's also the Perma Couture Institute, which promotes sustainable textile and clothing manufacturing. DailyCandy's Kimberly Miller estimates that about 30 percent of the site's content now covers eco-friendly businesses.

All this is changing how the local fashion industry positions itself. The

Innovative Fashion Council of San Francisco, which started with the purpose of creating a fashion district in the city, has since refocused on making it a green district. "My gut instinct was that we should focus on sustainability because that's our future," said Yetunde Schuhmann, the council's founder and executive director. The nonprofit holds regular networking events with guest speakers on topics like sustainable textiles and using plant-based nontoxic dyes.

With all this surging interest in indie fashion, Oaklander Letitia Ntofon decided to gather as much info as she could into a forthcoming book called *The Bay Area Guide to Independent Fashion*. "I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that people have woke up to the whole 'we don't want to do this corporate thing,'" said Ntofon, who used to own the Ghetto Flowers boutique in East Oakland. "We don't want to work for anybody; we want to work for ourselves."

But while there's no denying the enthusiasm around independent and eco-fashion in the Bay Area, herding all of that energy into a strong, unified movement is still an ambitious endeavor. Perhaps the biggest challenge? Most indie designers don't last very long.

Most people think of hemp clothing as hippie-dippy burlap sacks. Crystal Sylver wanted to change that notion.

So three years ago, the Oakland resident started a line of hemp and organic cotton wear called Funk Divine. Her collection consists of well-tailored T-shirts, hoodies, tops, and dresses logoed with a bold scarab design, which she says represents life and renewal. "The idea behind it was to create fashionable, more design-oriented hemp organic stuff because I think most of it is really plain," she said. "Most of it is hippie stuff. Most of it *is* unfashionable clothing."

Like many young designers, Sylver had plenty of passion, but frankly didn't know what she was doing, and her dream turned costly. "When I first started,

my vision was really big, like I wanted it to be all over the United States and international," said Sylver, who went to junior college where she studied drawing and painting. "I really wanted to create hemp awareness." She ran up $50,000 in credit card debt, and had another $50,000 in loans. "I mean part of it is because I didn't know anything about what I was doing," she admitted. "I made a lot of mistakes. I made three lines. The first line was garbage."

Sylver eschews the method of buying pre-made shirts and just having them screen-printed. But it was hard to find the right manufacturers and sewers, she said. And eco-consciousness is costly. Hemp fabric costs about $10 a yard and has to be imported from China, which costs hundreds of dollars to ship. After the fabric is sent to a dye house in LA, she cuts the fabric herself, then takes it to a manufacturer where they sew it. Not including shipping, Sylver estimates the base cost to her at between $20 and $25. To make a profit, she has to mark them up. And not many people want to fork over $80 for a T-shirt these days — even if it is totally unique, well-made, and eco-friendly.

Because Sylver is so far in debt, she's not making any profit right now. So she recently decided to branch out from hemp, and will launch a new non-organic cotton line that she says will be one-tenth as expensive to make.

"I've been doing this for three years and I just got into a showroom," Sylver lamented. "It takes a while to get some recognition. Part of me thinks, how am I going to do this? A part of me feels like it's so easy to give up. I understand why a lot of people give up. I know it's going to take years to be successful, not having to work all these other jobs. So that's what people have to hold onto — what they see, their vision, no matter what."

It's entirely possible that Sylver will make it. But the odds are against her. Early burnout is incredibly common among young designers. That's one reason why Jennifer Lynne and fellow designer Misty Rose decided they wanted to help budding upstarts. Last year they launched the East Bay Fashion Resource in

order to teach designers the fundamentals of the fashion business.

When she first started her Porcelynne line six years ago, Lynne says she knew about twenty designers. Today, only five are still in business. "Even ones that started two years ago aren't around," she said. "Designers get into it because they want to do it, but they don't know the business side." Many have the naive concept that "if you make it they will buy it," but that doesn't really happen, she says.

Lynne and Rose started offering three three-hour-long seminars at Lynne's studio in downtown Oakland this fall. They start with developing a designer's vision, figuring out who are their customers and what the market is. They recommend keeping it small at first — three to five pieces for one's initial collection. From there, they cover production, marketing, and sales. ("PMS," as Lynne fondly calls it. "It can be a pain.") That means figuring out how to deal with patternmakers and sewers, coming up with a plan and sticking to it. Other topics include how to green your business, how to put together line sheets (which details all the pertinent info on a product for potential buyers), marketing and PR (including blogging and search-engine optimization), avenues for sales (trade shows, mailing lists, stores, consignment), and finally starting the business (including choosing which type of entity to file as, copyrights, patents, building a business plan, getting funding, and figuring out financial projections).

The demand for this type of training is growing, Lynne believes, because fashion schools don't train their students to start their own businesses, but rather to work for big companies. And more and more people want to get into the industry.

Lynne credits shows like *Project Runway* and the slumped economy for motivating young fashionistas into wanting to start their own lines. Lynne says the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, where she teaches

part-time, had its highest enrollment ever last year — about 1,000 students compared to the usual 700 to 800.

The channels for selling your stuff also have become a lot more accessible. Boutiques like RAG Co-op and Secession Art & Design solely spotlight indie designers. E-commerce sites such as Etsy expose anybody to a worldwide customer base. And events like Indie Mart, Capsule Design Fair, Chillin', and even the music festival Noise Pop combine drinks, DJs, bands, art, and shopping into a social event where shoppers don't mind plunking down a $5 entrance fee to buy a piece of jewelry or screen-printed T-shirt while schmoozing and sipping cocktails. Most of the stuff is very reasonably priced, and far more unique than anything you'd find at Macy's.

But while awareness of eco-fashion has definitely grown lately, it's still many steps lagging behind the organic sustainable food movement. The issues are similar: general ignorance about how clothes end up on the hanger, how people and the environment are exploited in the process, and what sort of impact wearing cotton grown with pesticides might have on your body. "People don't even want hemp or organic in their store because they think it's weird," said Sylver. "Right now it's a very small market. It will be bigger in the future."

So for now it's not realistic for consumers to only buy indie or eco-friendly fashion, says Lorraine Sanders, who runs the blog SFIndieFashion.com. Not only because there aren't enough indie designers out there, but also because of the high turnover rate. "One of the obstacles is that independent designers are by definition independent," she said. "People don't necessarily continue in the indie fashion world for years and years on end."

Thus, building anything definitive around this constantly shifting playing field can be incredibly difficult. That is one reason why Leticia Ntofon's book *The Bay Area Guide to Independent Fashion* is now four years in the making (she's also been busy having babies). "That's been one of the challenges of the book as

we get closer to press — getting up-to-date versions of the product. Some people have closed. ... That was the reality."

It's also why the idea for a Fashion Week in Oakland was scrapped. Earlier this year, the idea was being tossed around between a group of East Bay designers and advocates, who envisioned it as a more indie-oriented alternative to San Francisco Fashion Week that would be sponsored by the city. But Deborah Acosta, who works in the city's community and economic development office, said she decided not to pursue it after learning of the issues with San Francisco's Fashion Week and realizing that it wouldn't be sustainable in Oakland either.

"I feel sometimes that there's so many different scenes within the fashion scene, we've now come [to] a time for the larger fashion community as a whole to have some place for cohesion," said Yerba Buena's Cicely Sweed. "I think really what it's going to take is for different people to step up and to create spaces that can be the foundation for people's businesses."

At least for one day, Sweed's vision recently came to fruition. On a blustery Saturday afternoon in October at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, dozens of vendors set up shop at the Bay Area Guide to Independent Fashion Festival, sort of a pre-launch for Ntofon's book. In addition to vendors, there were runway shows and a panel discussion on fashion and politics.

Though it wasn't billed as a "green" event, by default it pretty much was. There were socks made from regenerated cotton, handbags made out of candy wrappers by juvenile delinquents in Mexico, a vintage Björk T-shirt attached to a vintage dress bottom, an old beach mat made into a visor, and earrings out of fabric scraps.

Sweed and Ntofon's idea of sharing resources and getting the community together seemed to be happening, though the turnout was a bit scant — due no

doubt to the $10 admission price.

At Jennifer Lynne's table, two women perused lace undies and tiny pouches designed like cat heads.

"Where did you get the fabric?" asked Lee Guichan, a San Francisco-based photographer and clothing designer, admiring the patterns.

Lynne explained she had made dresses out of them. "All of these wallets are made out of garments I made a long time ago," she says, proudly.

Guichan's friend, Nicole Eymard, a fashion student at CCA dressed in head-to-toe 1930s vintage, suggests that Lynne accessorize the pouch with a matching headband. "You could sell it for more money," she says.

Then she notices the undies. "You make underwear too?" Eymard asks.

"Yeah," says Lynne.

"It's pretty. Good job!" says Eymard.

The discussion moves toward Eymard's outfit: her turquoise blue flats, mustard-brown tights, matching lace dress, chevron-striped sweater cardigan, and green crocheted hat.

Lynne mentions her sleeping masks are made out of bamboo.

Guichan and Eymard don't buy anything, and decide to check out one of the spontaneous runway shows that have just started. Afterward, Guichan muses about how the Bay Area fashion scene has changed over the years. She says there's a lot more acceptance of creative work, and that she believes that people who make things on their own are contributing to society.

But still, there's clearly a long way to go in changing the public's opinions of

consumption — even at an event celebrating indie fashion. On the other side of the room, a woman was admiring one vendor's jewelry when her daughter, dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt, and UGG boots, approached with a male friend, looking restless.

"Mom, we're gonna leave," she says. "We're going to H&M."