

# Fashion Quarterly

## MORAL FIBRE

*Forget those outdated ideas of environmentally friendly clothes as shapeless, unsexy sacks. Some top designers are now using innovative fabrics to create stylish clothes that also boast a social conscience.*

**Words: Jo Bates**

There's a well-worn cliché that eco chic is an oxymoron — one that conjures up images of illfitting beige hemp ensembles, dense with the cloying aroma of incense. Thankfully, that tired cliché is dead.

The new-look eco chic is the thinking person's fashion. Just ask Oscar de la Renta, Giorgio Armani or Karen Walker. The fact is that it's now fashionable to be environmentally aware. As Giorgio Armani said to Stella McCartney in an interview for The Independent: "The best way to make a contribution in fashion is to promote the idea that a fundamental interest in preserving the environment is itself fashionable."

In the name of sustainable fashion, Karen Walker and Oscar de la Renta were among 28 designers who transformed organic wool and cotton, hemp, recycled polyester and a corn-based fibre called Ingeo, with their signature style.

Their designs were for the eco-couture FutureFashion showm, which was held during New York Week last year. The clothes went on to exhibit at Barbeys before being auctioned to raise funds for non-profit eco organization Earth Pledge. Two like-minded Kiwis — Karen Walker and Rebecca Taylor — joined the likes

of Proenza Schouler, Imitation of Christ, Diane von Furstenberg and Thom Browne to draw attention to the environmental burden created by the clothing industry.

And it's a burden that can't be ignored. According to the Sustainable Cotton Project, a non-profit group committed to promoting fair trade and sustainably produced organic cotton clothing, the human and environmental toll it takes to grow and harvest cotton to make just one T-shirt is considerable. An estimated 151g of pesticides and other chemicals are used in the process.

Cotton is the most widely used fibre and provides about half of all global fibre requirements. According to the Pesticide Action Network, it accounts for approximately 22 percent of all agricultural insecticides and 10 percent of pesticides used — costing about \$4 billion annually worldwide.

Environmental pollution and the ensuing human health toll are just part of the problem. The increasing supply and demand for fashion has, sadly done little to improve the livelihood of millions of underprivileged women throughout the world. Linda Broom, Fair Trade promotions coordinator for Qxfam New Zealand, says the working conditions in overseas sweat shops are appalling. “The wages are so low and women are often hired under short-term contracts and there's no real security. They are subject to physical, verbal and sexual abuse at the factories and the health and safety standards are shocking. There have been numerous cases over the last few years where women are locked inside the factories and they can't escape in an emergency, such as a fire. It is a question of public awareness. People just aren't aware of the issues and when you tell them what's happening they are quite shocked.”

Karen Walker is well aware of the environmental and social impact of fashion and it's a subject she's passionate about. At present, she has four new eco-ethical product lines and initiatives in production, which means she can't be specific about the details just yet. Being involved on an international scale with FutureFashion reinforced her commitment to the cause.

“We were so happy to be invited to that event because it's such an important communication to get across to the industry and the public. We did a black prom-style dress from the collection we had at the time but we made it in a crisp, almost satin-looking hemp. I loved having loads of different fabrics out in front of me to choose from that all shared environmental responsibility. They were pretty amazing, I've got to say. Overall the event raised heaps of interest and got lots of coverage, which is a great thing.”

Walker's initiatives are based on fair trade and sustainable practices, including asking questions of her suppliers in terms of the products she buys. “We have a strong awareness and focus on leaving a minimal footprint on the earth in all areas of our work.”

explains Walker. “It is of course a continuous work in progress to improve one’s impact in this area and we’re very excited [about these projects].”

“We are very focused on fair trade, with 97 percent of our product being made in New Zealand, paying first world rates,” she says. “We have a small amount of specialist knitwear we are unable to make in New Zealand that is being made out of Hong Kong, in factories that have been thoroughly researched and have good working environments, childcare facilities, and wages.”

Walker acknowledges that consumers must pay more for eco-ethical fashion, but her hopes are bright for the future. “I think it will become a very big consideration for the consumer in all areas of consumption. I think we [New Zealand] are already catching on and I hope to see it continue to grow.”

Icebreaker is another New Zealand company that takes pride in its responsible and ethical manufacturing practices. Manufacturing partners must meet a long list of criteria, International Standards Organization requirement, and be committed to “social and environmental ethical practices” before they become part of the Icebreaker fold. “The level of interest by customers in the eco-ethical issues is now very large so retailers are finally paying attention,” says Jeremy Moon, Icebreaker founder and CEO.

“Last year we started a review of our entire manufacturing process, focusing on every stage from wool grower to delivery to retailer. I can guarantee we make the most socially and ecologically sustainable clothing in the outdoor industry.”

Moon says Icebreaker has done a great deal of work in determining what is fundamentally important to the company and its customers. Honesty, ethics, integrity and respect for its loyal customer base are crucial.

Just as buying the likes of fair trade coffee now pervades the conscience of many consumers in New Zealand, eco fashion is a matter of growing public awareness. And there’s nothing like a big name to get a trend rolling. About 20 years before Bono lent his image to Edun, the eco fashion collaboration of his wife Ali Hewson and designer Rogan Gregory, Katherine Hamnett was paving the way for responsible clothing production. The anti-establishment designer proudly wears her beliefs on her organic cotton sleeve with campaign directives such as Clean Up or Die, which reiterate the alarming environmental and labour issues associated with today’s clothing production.

Hamnett's menswear range is made using 100 percent organic cotton, pesticide-free wool, chrome-free leather, organic zips and sustainable accessories. The clothing is made in the European Union under EU employment law and in ethically and environmentally certified factories in India. Hamnett says growing cotton organically can increase use of pesticides and fertilisers that cause climate change.

Giorgio Armani launched an eco-friendly range of jeans about nine years and was recently awarded the Eco Tex certification at Ecomoda, the Ecological Trade Fair, for the use of recycled polyester from bottles, and certificated organic cotton from communities in Peru, which were previously dependent on opium crops.

Stella McCartney has always been vocal about her reasons for not using fur or leather in her accessories and shoes and was recently recognized by PETA for her contribution to animal-friendly fashion. Sensibly, she has chosen to use polyurethane-based faux leather, as opposed to the polluting and harmful PVC base.

Other names and labels that are committing themselves to change include Versace and Diesel, which both use Ingeo, a word derived from "ingredients of the earth". Leading sports brand Nike has committed to using organic cotton and has set a goal to use at least five percent in its garments by 2010. The British super-chain Marks & Spencer is on target to use five percent in its clothing line by 2012.

In the USA the number of brands using organic cotton has increased to around 250, which is up from fewer than 100 in 2002. Figures are still now — the amount of organic cotton produced worldwide is less than one percent of conventionally grown cotton — but this will change.

With increasing awareness among retailers and consumers, supply and demand will go the way of organic produce: sky-high. It will eventually register on every consumer's radar.

The option of buying alternatively made clothing in New Zealand is limited at the moment, but it's reassuring to know New Zealand-made makes for a sound buying choice, at least when it comes to the human rights of the people who work in our manufacturing industry. Also, because it's a form of recycling, vintage shopping holds some credibility when considering an eco-friendly wardrobe.

But it's not enough for a label to be eco and ethically sound — customers are discerning, and cut and style remain foremost when making a purchase. Auckland clothing store Fabric is phasing out its stock of jeans by Edun and Loomstate, both organic cotton labels. "It's not that they're not good quality", says manager Leon Vince, "it's just that they don't offer a full collection of styles. A lot of people are going for a skinny look but Edun doesn't offer that style, although they do offer a really nice boot cut."

"We do have a couple of customers who buy the label because it's organic, but most people buy for color and cut," says Vince.

The price of Edun or Loomstate jeans is comparable to other labels stocked by Fabric. The major selling point is the organic cotton, a fact that's clearly stated on the swing tags. The cotton is noticeably softer than conventionally grown cotton, although it is not at all lightweight.

Loomstate's mission statement says the company is a member of a "cultural movement toward a sustainable future".

Edun, which is designed in conjunction with Loomstate designer Rogan Gregory, is a bit more upbeat and less earnest in its approach. "The company aims to bring the issue of sustainable employment to the world of catwalks and high fashion. This is conscious consumerism, with a radical and crucially stylish twist."

Edun manufactures its clothes in locally run factories in Africa, South America and India that have been inspected by the Edun team.

If we follow the trajectory that fair trade and ethical clothing have taken in the UK, we'll be on the right path. The British are the biggest consumers of fair trade products — approximately \$415 million annually, and growing. An impressive 59 percent of UK consumers buy fair trade, and the ethical clothing market has grown by 30 percent in just a few years to \$127 million. Awareness is on a rapid rise in New Zealand, where sales of fair trade products have increased 4,000 percent in the past two years.

The task of making environmentally sound and ethical choices needn't be daunting. By being a discerning buyer, you can make a significant difference — without sacrificing your fashion flair.