

Fashion

MEET YOUR MAKER

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Transparency is one of the scariest words in a fashion designers' vocabulary. In an industry where don't see / don't tell is the modus operandi, opening up your supply chain for the world to see seems incredibly risky, especially to those retailers who rely heavily on brand reputation. This mindset renders the most important people in fashion, the makers, invisible.

These faceless makers form a significant part of the local workforce. In 2009 there were over 49,000 Australians employed in textile, clothing and footwear manufacturing. Out of sight out of mind has led to some appalling work conditions; many clothing workers in Australia, particularly home-based workers, are paid as little as three or four dollars an hour and do not receive sick pay, superannuation or annual leave.

Ethical Clothing Australia is aiming to change this with their newly launched Meet Your Maker campaign. ECA have been working behind the scenes since 2008, with their holistic social auditing process, to engage designers in working towards transparent supply chains and socially inclusive business practices. From November, brands that have been accredited as ethical by ECA will use special Meet Your Maker swing tags, including the key maker involved with producing that particular garment and information about the garment manufacturing business. Having the information available to shoppers from a credible third party gives them more control of the purchase decision.

Positioning the makers centre stage is a successful tool in promoting supply chain transparency, providing a less scary entry to becoming an ethically minded business. Tracing the supply chain is not easy, because there are so many people involved in the manufacturing process. The ECA work hand in hand with designers to go through this rigorous process, and the more labels that join the easier the process is becoming. There are currently 60 fashion labels that have accreditation with more added every few weeks.

John Condilis, director at Nobody Jeans, was apprehensive about allowing Ethical Clothing Australia access to his business. "At first the word accreditation was daunting. The key is being transparent and communicating, willing to show others what happens in our supply chain. If you hide anything it makes things hard... until we found ECA who helped us through the process. They also helped us to communicate with our whole team the importance of having a transparent supply chain and being ECA accredited."

He has found the process invaluable. "There are many angles that point to ECA accreditation being important to Nobody Jeans. Being in the local manufacturing business for such a long time,



Melinda Sammut, pattern maker at Cue.

it's about promoting this industry, showing people how a sustainable business model looks. Being accredited is part of our bigger commitment to building stability in the Australian fashion industry."

Makers as heroes extends beyond Australian borders. In Europe, high end labels are focussed on making their makers the star attraction. In a world of Masstige where designer diffusion lines

are accessible by the average Joe, true luxury is now the time and skill invested in a garment. Alyx Gorman, fashion editor of *The Vine*, applauded this trend on a recent trip to Milan, Paris and London fashion weeks. "Fendi flew two of their makers to an exclusive party where they sewed bags in front of the A-list guests. By emphasising the craftsmanship behind the product, it emphasises why we want to pay a premium for the labour and time."

She is not so complimentary of the Australian industry. "There are so few people left who are well trained, any Australian designer will tell you how hard it is to find skilled workers to produce their ranges. There are a few people who are well trained but they are in such high demand, it's really very difficult to get garments made. The Australian fashion industry is heavily invested in Ready to Wear, shying away from a focus on quality. Makers tend to be hidden from view, and let's face it, who wants to stand up and say they worked on that piece that was rushed through production? Luxury labels focussing on the makers makes sense as the high quality of skills that go into the garments are worth celebrating. Luxurious, bespoke, beautiful garments want to show off the maker."

Daniel P Dykes, editor at *Fashionising* agrees. "The industry has become increasingly buyer-focussed. Labels pander increasingly to customer feedback rather than innovation and creativity. We need creative origins for clothes. Product developers create seasons based on Twitter and Facebook likes, anxiously monitoring consumer demand, rather than looking to the future.

"The luxury market in China and Australia is growing, but only in bespoke orders that generally take months to fill, where customers pick every detail. According to spending patterns, handmade high value items is where the future is headed. Australia needs skilled graduates dedicated to filling the need for quality craftsmanship. In Austria 40 percent of the population take up an apprenticeship, the same statistic from the 1950s.

"The Ethical Clothing Australia campaign makes sense. People want to know the story behind a product. We all buy with the hope of eliciting comment. If you have a story to tell when somebody mentions your clothes you feel better about the purchase. We are seeing a global movement towards purchasing not the product, but the story and lifestyle around it. The ECA tap into this cleverly to engage consumers in the stories of the makers."

The positive effects of the campaign are already being felt at Nobody Jeans. "To our makers, being ECA accredited and being involved in the Meet Your Maker campaign has instilled a sense of pride. They're really proud to showcase the processes we have at Nobody. Before it was just getting a job done, now it's much more, advocating for a better industry and representing the fashion makers' community. They know we are involved in creating better opportunities for the Australian fashion industry."

INFORMATION

While ethical credentials are an important part of sustainability, they should not be confused with environmental or eco initiatives such as organic or recycled. ECA is currently working with other interested parties in developing further accreditation for eco fashion.

For more information and a list of accredited labels please visit: meetyourmaker.org.au