

Inspiring Minimalism

London Fashion Week

EMERGING BRANDS GAYEON LEE AND MATTER MATTERS ADDRESS THE RISING LEVELS OF CONSUMPTION WITH BESPOKE, LONGLASTING GARMENTS INSPIRED BY WIDER CULTURE.

Today, emerging fashion designers have much more to reckon with than their predecessors. In an age of rapid-fire references, lightning-quick trend cycles and often unsavoury fast fashion practices that allow consumers to remodel their wardrobes each season for a fraction of what it once cost, the competition is steep. Under these fast-moving circumstances, how are up-and-coming practitioners expected to create lasting impressions on their audiences as well as making garments that have a chance of standing the test of time?

For two young visionaries, Flora Leung of Matter Matters and Gayeon Lee of her eponymous line – both of whom present collections at the 2018 London Fashion Week *Designer Showrooms* – cross-pollinating between disciplines has become the key to making their mark, drawing deep on influences from the wider art world. Given that the renowned fashion week has played a role in the rise to public prominence of some of the best-known labels of the present scene – including Paul Smith, JW Anderson and Stella McCartney – this year's proceedings promise to be no different in their intent, providing a lasting platform for those shaping the industry and highlighting young innovators.

Armed with an arsenal of art world references and a sophisticated cache of influences, young talents are looking beyond the often self-referential confines of the fashion industry to create something completely new. Hong Kong-based Flora Leung is one of these, and she launched Matter Matters in 2012 as an offshoot of her degree show at the London College of Fashion. Having previously worked as a graphic designer and art director, she left her career

behind to pursue designing full time. But it wasn't a totally fresh start: Leung came equipped with a creative eye and design methods which were borrowed from a background in the visual arts and a strong understanding of art history. "I take the same approach to fashion as to art," she explains, drawing on the sources that influenced her in her graphic work. "All of my pieces have an underlying structure of primary shapes." Leung cites Art Deco, Bauhaus, the post-modern aesthetics of 1980s Memphis Group and the dreamy, supersaturated paintings of David Hockney as the points of reference which she looks towards. "Art and bright colours are fundamental sources of inspiration," she notes. "Memphis used bright shocking motifs, which made the products look remarkable, whilst David Hockney's paintings captured humorous moments in daily life with pleasing colours. I've always thought of these two together; I love mixing inspirations to create something with wit."

Indeed, strong echoes of Hockney's vibrant tones and Memphis-style surface decoration are front and centre in the collection. Joyously bright shades, sleek graphic prints and clever, irreverent illustrations adorn garments that range from dresses, minimal tank tops, pleated skirts, wide leg trousers to knitwear. A confetti-style print that calls to mind Nathalie Du Pasquier's iconic 1980s-era patterns is sprinkled over a butter yellow sleeveless dress, whilst blocky 3D shapes pepper loose sack dresses and elongated tees, elsewhere squiggly lines and a series of words – who, which, was, where – wind around slip dresses and skirts. Accessories, too, are a major focus for Matter Matters. Their signature





Photographer: Peckard Stevens. Model: Maria Almenta @Elite H&M. Art Direction: Chris Hopkins. Courtesy of Gayeon Lee.

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geometric leather handbags with sculpted resin details are produced in energetic palettes: alongside designs such as trapezoidal cross-body bags with orb-shaped clasps and chunky plastic feet, half-moon clutches with contrasting coloured wrist straps and richly pigmented bucket bags which also feature interchangeable straps. “I think handbags are always one of the most significant accessories in a woman’s wardrobe,” says Leung of their growing line. “They should always stand the test of time whilst style changes.”

South Korean womenswear designer Gayeon Lee has a similar approach when it comes to seeking out influences. “I always take inspiration from art,” she states as she explains the collection, which blends masterful tailoring, patchwork elements, sharp pleating and buoyant volumes on a series of dresses, skirts and blouses. “It could simply be the shape and colour of an artwork,” she continues, “but also the story behind it.” In the past, she has looked to 20th century artists Eduardo Chillida and Albert Eugene Gallatin for inspiration. Their influence is easily recognisable in a collage-like, almost cubist use of colour and form that recalls Gallatin’s abstract paintings. Meanwhile, an architectural treatment and understanding of proportion and weight clearly visible in the garments seems to find its precedents in Chillida’s sensuous but monumental sculptures.

Prior to setting up shop in her hometown of Seoul, Lee cut her teeth at the MA womenswear course at Central Saint Martins in London under the direction of the acclaimed Professor Louise Wilson. In interviews, she credits Wilson with her drive to expand, telling the *South China Morning Post* in a 2016 interview: “Louise pushed me to the edge and taught me not fall back on my culture. She wanted me to explore

other places that I hadn’t been.” That advice propelled Lee to some excellent spots. By her 2013 graduation, she had already provided garments to Lady Gaga and secured a design post at Marc Jacobs in New York. In 2015, whilst still at Marc Jacobs, Lee launched a first collection, and to date has produced six successful seasons under her own name.

“My only rule is to make something fun, that looks remarkable but remains timeless,” says Matter Matters’ Leung of the ethos behind the young brand. Creating a collection that moves easily through seasons and trends whilst remaining steadfast in an assured and individual aesthetic is not only a practice that builds a loyal customer base, it remains a somewhat radical act in an industry that has been overrun by underhanded practices. “I always wonder what keeps a garment relevant for five to ten years without becoming boring,” says Leung of her research process, which looks to the vintage market as well as the art world to decode what stands a chance of staying fresh for years to come. “I really don’t want to have a label that creates waste and loses its value after a single season,” she continues. “I want to make the kind of art objects that people won’t forget after they see them.” The calculated decision to forgo chasing the trend cycle is central to both Leung’s and Lee’s practices. “I always wonder why designers feel the need to rack their brains to come up with new collections so quickly,” says Leung of the choice to stay true to a single style across seasons and collections. “Instead, we should pay a bit more effort and create something timeless that will run for years.”

But timelessness is tough in an ecosystem that constantly demands something new. In an industry where brand interaction is increasingly mediated by social media, the ability



Photographer: Packard Stevens. Model: Maria Almenta @Elite H&M. Art Direction: Chris Hopkins. Courtesy of Gayeon Lee.

to stand out from the crowd is the difference between life and death for any young brand. Building online engagement and then translating that into actual real-world sales has become an increasingly tricky science as competition on social platforms for the attention of consumers continues to grow exponentially and the window of opportunity for reaching buyers shrinks in consequence. "You have two to three seconds for audiences to notice your brand and decide to check out your products," says Leung of the challenges that face emerging designers in trying to connect with potential consumers in these fleeting attention spans. "People are impatient and easily distracted. We want them to recognise and remember the brand."

But how does an emerging label ensure that their products will be noticed above all others, without hitching a ride on whichever gathering wave of a new trend that's splashing across Instagram with every screen refresh? "Art and fashion are about expression," Leung explains. "However, art is thought of as timeless and important whilst fashion is understood to be fickle and frivolous. That's why the label Matter Matters takes inspiration from Memphis, Bauhaus and the colours of Hockney. We're taking modern classics and creating something fun and new."

For emerging practitioners, these symbols are a clever way to ensure their collections are recognised and that like-minded consumers begin following their work. Of course, this isn't reinventing the wheel. Fashion and art have always been willing partners. Ever since Elsa Schiaparelli trotted dresses which were whimsically decorated in Salvador Dali's lobster illustrations down the runway in the 1930s, designers have fervently mined that world for references. There was Yves

Saint Laurent's 1965 Mondrian collection, in which he paid homage to the Dutch minimalist by producing shift dresses in colour-blocked grids, followed up in 1981 with a couture collection of evening gowns covered in prints inspired by Matisse's cutout collages. In 2012 Rodarte's ethereal frocks were given the post-impressionist treatment, scattered with Vincent van Gogh's swirling stars and big-faced sunflowers and just last year Jeff Koons collaborated with Louis Vuitton on a line of purses which were plastered with the paintings of the great masters. Because who doesn't want a Mona Lisa backpack, or a Manet carryall for spring?

However, it works both ways – relevance is a symbiotic creature. "In a way, fashion has created a higher demand for art," explains Leung of the trend which is increasingly collapsing the two disciplines into one another. "Museums now display garments with as much consideration as they do other works." Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this is the Costume Institute at The Met, hosting a yearly *Vogue* magazine-sponsored exhibition and accompanying media firestorm Met Gala. Indeed, this is also true of other sell-out shows like Iris Van Herpen's *Transforming Fashion*, which toured galleries such as The High Museum of Art, Atlanta (November 2015 to May 2016), as well as *Viktor & Rolf: Fashion Artists*, which took over NGV Melbourne (October 2016 to February 2017).

"Fashion is a possessive art," says Lee. "It's deeply connected to our daily lives. It's an expression of yourself and your best tool to show who you are." For designers looking to solidify a brand aesthetic and build up a recognisable collection, aligning themselves with the art world is another way of defining themselves, one reference at a time.

Right:
Flora Leung /
MATTER MATTERS STUDIO

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