

The National

Change of pace

Robert Cordero

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Fashion is all about speed. Or at least it was: the industry had been moving at a breakneck pace before economic turmoil set in. Many labels that had accounts with blockbuster department stores not only fulfilled their autumn/winter and spring/summer orders every year, but had also started to produce resort and cruise collections. In turn, fast-fashion conglomerates such as Spain's Zara have speedy and agile supply chain systems in place that can knock off looks from the catwalks and deliver them to their stores in a matter of weeks.

"Excellent high-street knock-offs have without a doubt placed pressure on the big names to add more value to their pieces," says Zayan Ghandour, the creative director, co-owner and head buyer at the UAE boutique S*uce. "Hence, they are spending more time on innovative cuts and expensive fabrics that justify the price point. Catwalk styles are becoming more and more difficult to copy, and take longer to make."

The economy's go-go years have nurtured this unsustainably speedy supply-and-demand relationship, but not everyone subscribed: many forward-thinking but peripheral designers have condemned the pre-existing system for years. Now, though, it's not such a radical cause to take up: with the economy in a downward tailspin, fashion seems to be switching gears in favour of a slower approach.

"I think that consumers will pay more attention to their spending habits well beyond when the recession ends. In this respect, the recession is doing a big favour to slow fashion," says the designer Alina Cosma, founder of Party Noire (www.partynoire.com), whose meticulously constructed, mainly black party dresses are on trend with the season's pared-down look.

With credit harder to come by, designers struggling to stay financially viable, let alone churn out new products every few months. Meanwhile, retailers are moving merchandise slowly, if at all, and shoppers are reigning in their spending. Just as the once robust economy provided an environment for conspicuous consumption, its collapse is ushering a new kind of fashion as



A model sleeps backstage at the Jens Laugensen autumn/winter 2007 show at Baden Powell House in West London. Just as a robust economy encouraged consumption, the financial collapse is leading to more restrained designs. **Andrew Parsons / PA**



people start to engage in more responsible, discerning and restrained ways of buying fashion.

“Conscious consumption is the key term here. Consumers will think twice before making a purchase and they will demand more in terms of detail, style, quality and originality,” says Ghandour.

Sparked by the slow food movement and buoyed by the global warming crisis, brands such as Alabama Chanin (www.alabamachanin.com), the spin-off from Project Alabama, a pioneering label in sustainable design, are part of a whole raft of socially conscious brands that have emerged in recent years. Others range from big-name initiatives such as Bono’s wife’s Edun organic clothing line and the hipster-approved brand American Apparel’s fair wages to Tom’s Shoes, which, for every pair of shoes sold, gives a pair to a child in need in impoverished villages around the world.

“We are rethinking luxury today. In the past, a plate of simple, home-grown vegetables would never have been considered a luxury. Today, we find this same plate of vegetables a delicious surprise,” says Natalie Chanin, who runs Alabama Chanin.

“The benefit of a slow fashion approach is having a sustainable advantage. A slow approach is a thoughtful one with consideration to who is making the garments, how they are being made and what materials are being used, from where,” adds Alice Demirjian, the assistant professor and director of fashion marketing AAS at New York’s Parsons The New School for Design.

But Chanin also sees beyond the fashionable cachet associated with sustainability, noting: “At this moment in my life, having experienced large-scale, smaller-scale and now a truly small-scale business model, I can attest to the fact that smaller is, in fact, better. Today, I can only see advantages to the slow fashion approach. We make more money, have less environmental impact, are able to satisfy demand without having the feeling that there is never enough – never enough time, never enough money, never enough stores, never enough clients. We make beautiful, long-lasting pieces, have a very strong following and through the process have been able to create a very diverse base.”

Such an innovative attitude naturally comes out of a creative arena. “I believe the slow approach often has a more creative point of view and relationship with the design process that fosters innovation rather than jumping on trends, tweaking it for your customer and pushing them through the production cycle,” says Demirjian. With consumers’ free-spending days over, this strategy gives the designer some breathing room to focus on well-made clothes that can stand the test of time – products that shoppers are likely to purchase.

“You can really develop a long-lasting signature. People know that they will always get a good dress or jacket/coat from you. You can focus on quality, you can become a master of a particular fabric – if you work with it frequently, you know how to manipulate

it,” says the designer Osman Yousefzada, the purveyor of the most well-thought-out daywear in London.

The New York-based cashmere knitwear company Lutz and Patmos has successfully put this design mantra into practice as well. Eschewing bold colours for a neutral palette and trendy silhouettes for more forgiving and versatile shapes, the label, founded by Marcia Patmos and Tina Lutz in 2000, understands that fashion doesn't have to abide by fast moving trends to be desirable. And if there's any question to their success, just look to the number of influential women, such as Carine Roitfeld, Kirsten Dunst, Sofia Coppola and Jane Birkin, who are fans as well as design collaborators.

“When consumers purchase clothing with the intention of wearing it for multiple seasons, rather than one season and toss it, they also take responsibility for their role in the apparel life cycle. By purchasing quality clothing with intention, we rebuild the tactile relationships with the clothes we wear and how we feel in them – remember your old favourite sweater or dress?” says Demirjian.

But for some, it's not enough to have this intimate and flexible relationship with clothing. Buying becomes a more involved process that goes beyond the transaction of making a payment. “I believe that our approach is a very old ‘new way’ of doing business,” says Chanin. “Our trunk show model – where a retailer can host us, allowing their clients to create their own pieces – has met with a tremendous response. I believe that this is true luxury, to have a bespoke item hand sewn just for you, and at the price of other off-the-rack designer goods, is what drives customers to our business model.”

Creative selling is essential, agrees Ghandour, whatever speed fashion itself moves at: her boutiques are known for their unusual decor, innovative events and quirky stock.

“It's not so much about a slow approach as much as it is about a shift of focus from quantity to quality,” she says. “The slow factor is a by-product of that trend. The industry has evolved at an accelerated pace over the past few years, with a huge focus on fast, disposable fashion and it would be difficult to erase that from the consumer's consciousness. So it is up to retailers to live up to the consumer's expectations, and further inspire and excite with creative merchandising and new evolved brands and styles that place a premium on quality, cut and fabric. In today's climate, we are more likely to pick up a new brand that offers something fresh than hold on to an old brand that has nothing new to offer.”

Wool and the Gang takes this level of interactivity one step further. The line, which sells knitting kits for consumers to make vests, hats, and headbands, promotes a community building strategy to the product it sells. The just-launched label has held knitting parties at Colette in Paris and at The Smile, a boutique/café/tattoo parlour in New York, and eventually plans to hold similar events all over the world. Apart from the luxurious Peruvian wool the label uses, the draw is simple: people not only create pieces that they can wear, but, in effect, they attach meaningful memories that make each item harder to discard and easier to keep.

“It's so much more endearing to wear and be able to tell a story about the time and the place a piece was made. For me, when I talk about it, I always refer to where I was and how I remember it,” says the label's co-founder Carolyn Main.

But for many labels that already have a strong and loyal customer base, this paradigm-shifting approach isn't necessarily the wisest business strategy. Instead, adapting their products to suit market demand is the best option. During the recent fashion

weeks from New York to Paris, designers upped the craftsmanship of their collections, but also anticipated a selling season in which merchandise will move very slowly on shop floors.

“Essentially what you have now is a large number of people with a decreased disposable income,” says Ghandour. “With less to spend, there will be an emphasis on pieces with an outstanding cut or fabric, and pieces that cannot be knocked off by high-street brands. A high-quality product is, by nature, more difficult and time-consuming to produce – hence we end up with slow fashion. We are not talking about basic blacks or classic cardigans here, but timeless pieces set apart by a quality and vision that renders them extremely relevant to the spirit of the times and transcends the constraints of a specific seasonal trend. These are investment pieces. And as with most investment pieces, the turnover is generally slower.”

In other words, while it is hard enough for the designers, the boutiques and department stores they sell to will have to adapt even more quickly.

“As a boutique, the implications of this are an even more creative approach, with an increased emphasis on originality combined with quality,” says Ghandour. “Pieces may have to be displayed for a longer period of time, which means that we have to find new ways of merchandising and display to ensure the boutique does not appear stagnant to the returning customer.”

Of course, while we’re all obsessed with the recession, it is a temporary state, and fashion is truly the fastest of industries. Ghandour believes that while the philosophy of slow fashion may remain, the market will continue to dictate change.

“It is important to note that consumer behaviour is often in a pendulum swing,” she says. “If the trend for slow fashion continues for the next couple of years, we will see the opposite once the economy gets better. Also, fashion is naturally conditioned by everything else that’s going on, and in a world where everything (the dissemination of information in particular) is getting faster, it is unlikely that fashion will slow down for long.”

What this means is that if a true change is to take place in fashion, it cannot be only economics that will drive this change. Demirjian believes it will happen: “Natural resources are running out globally and sustainable thinking will become more standardised as we move forward,” she predicts.

In other words, while the style pendulum swings on, there are some imperatives that even the notoriously contrary world of fashion must obey.

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