

SHOWROOM ANTWERP

BELGIAN DESIGNER'S NEW YORK UNVEILING ECHOS THE HISTORY OF ANTWERPS SUCCESSFUL PAST.

Written by LYNN FURGE

The “Antwerp Six” is a name synonymous for taking risks in fashion. When these designers packed a truck with their wares and headed to London’s 1988 Fashion Week, it was not to show inside the tent, but to independently display their talent as a force to be reckoned with. It worked, and today Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, Marina Yee, and Walter Van Beirendonck are names that fly freely from the lips of any fashion groupie who speaks about challenging, well thought out, beautifully produced clothing that pushes the limits of ready-to-wear.

Joining together as an entity has garnered them international success and put Belgium on the map in terms of the fashion world. Every year in June, as the students from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp present their graduate show, throngs of international journalists and editors flock to the city in hopes of finding that next big talent.

Flanders House—a New York-based nonprofit supporting Flemish cultural activities in the U.S.—recently joined forces with the FLANDERS FASHION INSTITUTE (FFI) to present not six, but seven fresh talents: Anna Heylen, Stephan Schneider, Peter Ceusters, Idriz Jossa, Lenny Leleu, Marc-Phillipe Coudeyre, and Anke Loh. Some are more well known than others, but all are distinctly Belgian and new to New York, and took the stage in what was a heavily anticipated reveal.

Unlike the usual rat race that is Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, the Flanders House presentation was laden with decadence. High atop The New York Times building, guests were welcomed out of the cold with warm tea served in pristine china. Those that were ready to toast were treated to flutes of Veuve. Winding throughout the hallways, a crowd bubbled in a truly international mix, where snippets of Flemish, French, German and English could all be heard.

Entering the main room, Diane Von Fürstenberg (herself a native of Brussels) was on

hand to welcome the designers to New York, a stamp of approval that is essential, being that she is the Council of Fashion Designers of America President.

Bringing together design knowledge with marketing and production experience is where FFI’s focus lies: to guide fashion careers and establish a connection between the creative and the commercially viable. Edith Vervliet, the Director of FFI, explained the motivation and process behind this particular event. “In Paris we’ve been doing this since 2007 under the name Showroom Le Belge. This is the first time we are presenting in New York. A juried panel makes a selection that should be a nice reflection of what young upcoming talent stands for, but we also want to get the established designers in there because they not only garner buyer interest, but show the success and longevity of Belgian brands in retail. Each designer created his or her own atmosphere within the showroom yet harmonizes with all of the other designers to give a sense of the artistic and creative impact.”

Flanders House, a cultural gateway connecting the region (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and the United States, gladly got involved with the exhibition. With a mission is to establish a connection in the U.S. for the open, dynamic and innovative region of Flanders in terms of all creativity, it only made sense that they welcomed



ANNA HEYLEN coat.



IDRIZ JOSSA dress.

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the talent and their viewers with open arms.

“In Flanders, and especially in Antwerp, we can look back these last decades on a tradition of fashion excellence. Flanders House wishes to support and promote our Belgian fashion designers here in New York.” Stated Nicolas Polet, Communications & Media Officer of Flanders House.

But the question remains, do these young designers have the right style to make it in New York?

“With my final collection in at the Academy in Antwerp, “Black Renaissance”, I won the Tommy Hilfiger Award, and I had the opportunity to meet Tommy Hilfiger in person and to show him my collection. Again, I was [struck] by the enthusiasm and interest Mr Hilfiger showed for the collection.” Marc Philippe Coudeyre said, “These two experiences clearly showed me the particular style and feeling for fashion in the U.S., and especially in New York. The collection we develop is easy to wear but also chic and feminine and consists of high quality fabrics. I strongly believe it is a product that could fit the needs of the American market.”

Coudeyre’s “Avalon” collection (based on the legend of King Arthur, Avalon is a mythical island ruled by seven sisters with magical powers) is imbued with its own magic: clean-cut pieces and metallic fabrics evoke medieval suits of armour. There are delicately draped pieces hinting at figures in paintings by the Flemish primitives. It seems that Coudeyre understands the fashion desires of a New York woman: glamour, insouciance, and daring, all while being wearable. The use of metallics is perfectly proper for day, while the bold statement jewelry, exquisitely hand-crafted, adds a final touch of power to the collection.

Idriz Jossa, on the other hand, gave the showroom one-of-a-kind ladies’ coats made from blankets. “For fall 2010 I used old woolen blankets, transforming them into lady coats. My technique is like a smith who’s kneaded his metal, searching for the excellent form. I profile myself as a fashion smith. My grandfather was a farmer smith. For me it is a nice connotation.” Jossa explained.

With his priest-themed project, “Oh, my God!” he enters yet a different symbolic theme.

“It is haute couture, inspired by Flanders religious tradition. [It is part of a project] called Devout/Divine, Fashion vs. Religion. I am doing this together with Raf Simons, Walter van Beirendonck and many others. I work only in projects, not collections, so then moving on to Summer 2011 I will make a new fashion-sculpture collection...each piece is unique. It’s more a kind of art sculpture with fashion clothes in one. Some whole new thing in 3D!” Jossa adds.

Which is hardly a coincidence, as Belgium is one of the jumping-off points for the symbolist movement in the first place, having produced greats like Fernand Khnopff. It is obvious that the designers approach fashion as art first.

“In 2008 I experimented with video and optical fiber fabric dresses. I used the stills of this light dresses for the knitwear prints. I ended up

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with prints of dresses on dresses, which reflects my feeling of a ‘double’ identity. Coming from Antwerp it is still a process of finding my way living and designing in the U.S.,” explains designer Anke Loh, who now also teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

There are nods at out of place and out of proportion imagery, which is a fundamental point of surrealism for which Belgian painter René Magritte is famous. Not that Loh’s collection is mimicking the paintings, but the luminosity, gradations of texture and sweeping lines that take over the garments are further proof that the marriage of Belgian art and fashion run subconsciously throughout.

Ingenue Lenny Leleu has previously worked in NYC (Daryl K) and L.A. (Jeremy Scott) so the Flanders event was like coming home to friends. She saw it as a platform to show what makes her different from all of the other designers out there, and her collection was a standout out due to emphasis on swim and loungewear. Young, fresh and fun, the all-white collection lit up the gloomy Manhattan day.

“So for the swimwear “Come.swim.with.me”, I always look for new shapes without losing a good fit. I am a woman myself and want to be able to really wear my pieces. The focus really goes to the shapes. It’s like a little architectural creation around the body. With the t-shirts I called this collection “jersey chic”. For my clothing line I always pick themes and always have a strong reference to reality, or details we know. So you might notice a purse t-shirt and a little Chanel detail, or a blazer-detailed t-shirt. Again I tried to find new shapes to a very known and everyday item. It’s just a t-shirt, but it’s not...” describes Leleu.

Anna Heylen and Stephan Schneider both have shops right in the center of Antwerp near those that have paved the way before them, like Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Bernhard Willhelm and Kostas Murkudis. Their desire for additional success in the U.S. is palpable.

“New York is inspiring for a designer. There you’ll feel a vibration. NYC is part of the world. It has been a long time for me so it was also a discovery.” Gushes Heylen.

For the fall/winter 2010 collection she has designed a wonderful skirt that is a cloud of pleats. Fabrics shine, while various lengths and folds positioned to create amazing shapes. There is a definitive menswear influence seen in the tailoring as well as the obvious male images that are hand screen printed onto the garments.

This group of designers unveiled together do share similarities to help emphasize the overall aesthetic.

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Vervliet proudly elaborates. “The fashion that our designers bring is inspired by avant-gardism. They study the fine arts here in Antwerp so there is a huge degree of shapes which is much more important than in other schools...the viewer can recognize a degree of innovation in shapes, forms and finishing. Of course there is also an obvious quality of craftsmanship from the sewing to the fabric and treatment of such.”

And they are really happy to all participate together. When asking each designer about their collection, a common denominator pops up each time—the aforementioned shapes, for instance—which makes them seem as unified as those original Antwerp Six did before them.

Jossa explains the necessity of working together. “Today, we have to think in groups. This is not always evident for some of the designer egos. In themes of crisis is it a surplus to spread the energy on the costs. The egocentric feeling in the world is not a gift...the business of today is hard!”

Lenny Leleu, the most divergent from the pack, is appreciative of her fellow designers’ work. She smiles when describing their strengths. Just like her designs—detailed, unique but approachable, she speaks about the others at Showroom Antwerp.

“What linked us most together is that we all live or studied in Antwerp, and focus on design and designing. Whether it’s in the menswear collection of Stephan Schneider, or the Peter Ceusters scarves, or even my swimwear shapes, I think there is always something ‘Belgian’ to it.”

The crowd silenced as Fürstenberg combed the racks with every single camera zooming in to capture her reaction. And in a brief speech with that raspy voice, sun-kissed hair and proud, mentoring grin, she promised to “check each and every one of their progress from across the street”. A hint, to be certain, directed towards Jeffrey, her Meatpacking District neighbor and retailer to some of the original Antwerp Six, to start placing an order.

All images supplied courtesy of the designers.



LENNY LELEU swimsuit.



IDRIZ JOSSA shoe.