Berlin Fashion Week, between sustainable and sustainability

By Godfrey Deeny - September 9, 2021

Most people when they think of Germany this month will think of politics not fashion, as voters will select the successor to chancellor Angela Merkel in two weeks’ time.

This week, the country also witnessed the three-day Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Berlin, with the nation’s capital covered in political posters in an election pundits say is too close to call.

One of the remarkable things about the 16-year-reign of Angela – always pronounced like 'angle' and not 'angel' – is that she managed to make Germany far stronger in Europe without alarming its European neighbors. The same is not true in fashion. For, if anything, it remains a mystery quite why German culture, which is highly influential in such creative pursuits as fine art, architecture and photography, has if anything lost ground in fashion during Merkel’s era.

When Angela came to power Karl Lagerfeld staged the biggest shows in the world at Chanel, the single most important couture brand; Jil Sander had founded and led feminist fashion and Berlin had a burgeoning club and street fashion scene. Today, the few prominent young Mitteleuropean designers – Luke and Lucie Meier at Jil Sander, GmbH founded by Serhat Isik and Benjamin Huseby, and recently hired by Trussardi, or indies like Lutz Huelle – all plough their furrows abroad.

Indeed, it’s hard to recall a German designer who made it to the final of the LVMH Prize, fashion’s richest award for young talent.

Part of the explanation is that over the past decade Germans didn’t really want much change. In an uncertain world, their economy prospered and they re-elected Merkel four times.

Fashion, however, thrives on change, and the first seeds of a renaissance were visible in an element of great importance in Germany, the environment. The whole ecological movement was born with the Greens here, and their ideas about sustainability, upcycling and local and honest sourcing permeated many collections presented inside Kraftwerk, a former power plant in former East Berlin that was the nerve center of the season. A Mercedes-Benz concept car made with hipster DJ and designer Heron Preston, who also made a capsule collection of recycled airbags from the automaker – took pride of place in the raw concrete space.
Brands like Lutz Morris, led by Tina Morris, a brilliant accessory designer, who returned to Berlin after two decades in New York working for the likes of Calvin Klein and Issey Miyake. Defined as new luxury design made in Germany, Morris sources almost exclusively from German leathers, with chains from the Black Forest, and works with local artisans, selling 90% of her beautiful bags online.

Or Moot, which stands for Made Out Of Trash, whose founder Michael Pfeifer joined Morris on a panel inside Kraftwerk, along with Julia Leifert and Mira von der Osten of Cruba. It stands for Create Revolutions in the Berlin Argument, a brand that uses 3D technology. All meeting for a discussion on Fashion and Digitalization led by Der Spiegel style editor Philipp Löwe. Pfeifer came dressed in a T-shirt made of an old bed-sheet; pants of former curtains and a jacket from an old wool blanket – which looked pretty natty.

One of several discussions inside Kraftwerk, as industry leaders struggle to detect a path ahead. All held under the auspices of the Fashion Council Germany, whose chairperson is Christiane Arp, the respected former editor in chief of German Vogue.
However, last year, in a major disruption to German fashion, the inventive trade salon Premium decamped to financial capital Frankfurt, its organizers lamenting publicly the lack of support for fashion from the local Berlin left-wing administration.

Nonetheless, Berlin Fashion Week, which is now backed by the local Berlin senate, did manage to stage almost dozen actual fashion runway shows, most notably by William Fan and Fassbender. The latter blending Hanseatic hauteur with Balearic panache in a collection inspired by Ibiza.

Bold seaside striped pants and matching waistcoats; fluid alpaca coats sourced from animal-friendly farms and swirling aqua blue countesses’ flamenco dresses all made for easily the most polished show in Berlin.

Fiona Bennett
If the action on the runway was modest, there was plenty to see elsewhere, beginning with Fiona Bennett, the city’s most famous milliner, whose airy store in Schoeneberg is a must-see boutique.

Born in Britain and brought up in Brighton, Bennett moved with her family to Berlin before the Wall came down, going on to learn classic hat-making techniques - apparent in some great felt gents’ fedoras that recalled Otto Dix paintings and naughty boys in Cabaret.

But Bennett’s most beautiful ideas were her dramatic conical straw hats, made in Ghana.

“It’s the definition of sustainable; the hats are made by by real experts in weaving, a group of villagers living deep in the countryside,” smiled Bennett, whose creations have featured in shows by Wolfgang Joop and Michael Michalsky.

Add in some marvelous swirling straw concoctions worthy of My Fair Lady and dainty straw florals for summer weddings and one realized Bennett fully merits her reputation as one of the world’s greatest milliners.
One brand that captures the urban elegance of contemporary Berlin is Working Title, a labor of love by a very cool couple – Antonia Goy and Bjoern Kubeja.

The duo operates out of a fully function atelier, in a space they share with fine and graphic artists near Merkel's chancellor's office.

“Our key influence is the city of Berlin, its energy and architecture; its gardens and surrounding lakes,” explained Kubeja.

Concentrating on mono-color luxe fabrics like perfectly pleated wools or bio cottons, Working Title offers a truly sophisticated wardrobe for urban professionals all cut with great aplomb – most notably the beautiful men’s shirtings made for women. Every look reeked of art openings, quality restaurants and insider soirées.

Natascha von Hirschhausen
One brand walking the walk when it comes to sustainability is Natascha von Hirschhausen, who invented the concept of No Waste Cutting.

A sketch she showed of typical CAD/CAM cutting showed that many conventional cuts can waste up to 20% of the material. Natascha, by contrast, only loses 0.5% on her cuts, and she turns those tiny scraps into fabric earrings.

“I did a student exchange in Bangladesh, a country I loved for its beauty and people, but was shocked to discover it is completely littered in small scraps of fabric. Which is when I decided something had to change,” said von Hirschhausen, in a visit to her studio/apartment in the residential West Berlin district of Wedding.

The result was a skillful collection where the extra folds of fabric added an astute sense of volume to her “size-fluent” silvery pea-silk blouses; voluminous organic denim workers pants; and some great rock-star at the weekend cutaway sweatshirts. All from a designer that won the Federal Award for Ecodesign 2017 shortly after she founded her house.

William Fan: Ceremonial Mitte-Mode
William Fan is a Chinese national who has made Berlin his home, and the capital's hipster denizens were the inspiration for his latest collection.

In one of the few shows on the Berlin calendar, Fan unveiled his collection inside a huge, looming disused factory, of which there are so many examples in this city.

Fan likes a dressed-up look and creates clothes in grand jacquards; floral brocades and dark serge wools. He cuts his clothes with a certain ceremonial style, whether for men or women.

Though his biggest idea was an indented cement-hued cotton used in smock like dresses; airy trenches or blousons. Often he dressed men and women in highly similar looks – heavy silk priestly coats or brocade cloak-like looks.

The key element is that Fan is a talented tailor – from his cloak-like Eisenhower jackets paired with tailored dhotis to following monsignor calico coats.

Born in Hong Kong, Fan moved to Europe to study fashion before ending up in Berlin and debuting his own label in 2015. Fan is something of a local star, and has the self-assurance to match. His inspiration was the neighborhood.
Fan is something of a local star, and has the self-assurance to match. His inspiration was the neighborhood in which he lives, hyper-central Mitte, which means Middle in German.

“We’ve been locked up for over a year, so the people who have been inspired me are young people I see walking around my own neighborhood,” said the lanky Fan.

Fan even hired some of the kids in what the French call 'un casting sauvage,' mixed in with professional models.

Marcel Ostertag

However, the oddest event was by Marcel Ostertag, whose show outside the elegantly dilapidated St Elisabeth church was partly aided by Mercedes-Benz rival Opel.

Staged with some flourish, the collection was often made in the same hue as the car and a pair of Opel socks every guest was given in their goodie bag. We are not sure what the German for 'naff' is, but that sums it up.