Amber Valletta launches Karl Lagerfeld capsule, explains goals as brand sustainability officer

By Godfrey Deeny - March 10, 2022

Few fashion icons have an such impressive careers as Amber Valletta, runway superstar, multiple Vogue cover gal, accomplished actress and now both designer and brand sustainability officer of the house of Karl Lagerfeld.
This week, the house revealed her second collection for Karl Lagerfeld adding a concise capsule collection to the hit cacti vegan leather handbags of her debut capsule last fall.

Though half it is made in ecru and beige, and not Karl's beloved black and white expressionism, it does feel rather Lagerfeld. Like the sleek minimalist black biker jacket in vegan cacti leather, to the well-fitted classic black blazer with matching skirt to the slimline white cotton poplin shirt. All the way to the black or white singlets made of organic cotton and lyocell, a form of cellulose fiber rayon.

After 16 American Vogue covers, the first at 18 and appearances in mega shows, often in the best single look, for the likes of Versace, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Karl Lagerfeld, Prada, Valentino and, perhaps most spectacularly, Helmut Lang, Valletta has enjoyed a second career as an actress.

She is one of those American beauties whose mixed heritage – Italian, Portuguese, English and Cherokee – produced a truly unique beauty, blessed with green eyes and a fertile wit. Ever since she grew up in rural America, Valletta has been on a mission. The concept of humankind being stewards of our planet, one she picked up early.

So, we caught up with the effervescent Valletta, in the house of Karl Lagerfeld’s world headquarters, a former banker’s mansion right on the city’s classiest canal, the Herengracht.

A day that began with a presentation of her latest ideas for Karl Lagerfeld x Amber Valletta, where CEO Pier Paolo Righi praised her for pushing hard for new ideas in sustainability even if it made her "tough."

Asked about it later, Valletta responds: "I don't know if I am difficult. Maybe, but challenging in a good way." Before fake-grimacing to Karl’s long-time right-hand woman Caroline Lebar: “Am I difficult?” To which Lebar responds, “In French we say exigeant, demanding, but in a fair way.”
One wonders: when did sustainability become such a mission for her?

“I grew up in nature. My grandparents had a farm in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with animals and land and a natural creek. So, we were told to go out and play all the time. My mom was single, so she did not have the luxury of a babysitter. So, it was ‘go outside and play’. So, that’s the first love, and where I felt safe,” she recalls.

While still modelling, Valletta began studying the politics of the environment at NYU and was influenced by Al Gore’s course on ecology.

“My generation are children of the boomers, and they were hippies, so when I talk to my contemporaries, we think similarly. We are all kind of earthy!” she smiles.

“After taking time to raise my son (Auden) and act, I came back and wanted to bring my values to whatever I was doing in fashion,” explains Valletta, who has lived in LA these past 20 years. Where her second career was more than respectable, racking up roles in over 15 films.

She first met Karl when she was 18, before stepping away to act, and then reconnecting at a Chanel anniversary show. Subsequently, when Valletta developed her own online store, entitled Master & Muse, to sell responsibly made fashion and accessories, Lagerfeld was the first designer she approached.

“That was about eight years ago. But my partner at the time Yoox and also Karl Lagerfeld were not ready to produce sustainably, even if they were all in theory in favor. People didn’t quite know how to produce sustainably back then,” she recalls.

However, everything changed when Lagerfeld’s house signed the Fashion Pact, adding fresh impetus, which was when CEO Righi re-contacted Valletta and they decided to act. Her first collection was a small series of K/Kushion handbags, based on a childhood cushion Karl brought with him while travelling. Amber reinvented it in vegan cacti leather. Sourced by a firm in Mexico, it’s a plant-based material that requires no irrigation, and thus helps the local flora and fauna regenerate.

“What I hope we achieve as a team is that we prove fashion can be sustainable and desirable. And that we can make really great changes. You know, it’s like when you shift a boat, even an inch, then it completely changes direction. And they have already shifted direction, so I hope that he brand takes a leadership role,” explained Amber, dressed for the day in a mannish beige cotton suit with wide pants and black cotton top, both from the collection, anchored by Off-White sneakers.
What did she learn from modelling that she put into this collection?

“Ultimately, sustainability has to be appealing as we thrive on beauty in any form, from the magnificence of nature or a great sunset or a great piece of fashion. Karl taught me to bring that into every collection. If clothing is not desirable then we are just wasting people’s time, natural resources and your money.”

Prices are not painful at the cash register: biker jackets cost €545; blazers €395; trousers €295 and cotton tanks €89.


A tour of the five-story HQ, with a rooftop meditation room, shows significant strides in sustainability. All lighting is LED; all energy is sourced from wind; while a climate control system recycles the warmth of the staff’s bodies, computers and appliances.

Valetta confesses to “some pretty lofty goals… I think the biggest one is really turning to circularity. And, that our carbon footprint is zero way before 2050. And, that we can take back what we are creating. We double-check our
fabric's certification, and make sure all are of natural materials. Right now, end of life is so vitally important to a garment. So, if it is not bio-degradable, then we won't work with it.”

Due to the pandemic, Valletta created the collection via scores of Zooms from the USA; initially with the house’s designer Hun Kim in Korea, and the studio team in Amsterdam.

“We made plans to come to Amsterdam, but had three flights cancelled, so we did tons of Zooms. But we are also mindful of taking too many trips,” she cautions.

Clothes are consciously made to avoid extra transport, so the cotton fabrics come from Portugal, where the garments were manufactured.

Given the ever more alarming reports of climate change, does she think we passed the inflection point?

“Well, we are already in climate crisis, for sure. But we have to be optimistic, otherwise I should go and sit in a
corner and cry. I do get extremely frustrated, but I believe the only purpose I have personally is to be doing this work. But I also believe from all the people I collaborate with or learn from or talk to that there is sooo much great innovation. And collectively there are so many great minds thinking and NGOs and individuals that I cannot but feel hopeful. But my responsibility as a public figure, with some sort of voice within my industry is to really help change the way we are thinking about business. I am not an expert, but I have the ability to get people to sit down and get the public to listen. That’s my job. I cannot think we are too late, otherwise what is the point?”

Though son Auden is 21 now, his arrival impacted her latest career as a designer.

“Of course, you think about the world you are going to leave to your children. I don’t want them to live in a future where cities have bubbles to keep out dirty air. Or where they cannot see nature, as we are still fortunate to do. It is a privilege to be on this life journey and to take advantage of all of the great things. Life is hard enough if we just strip away everything, just to live, to breathe, to die. All the things we create to perpetuate more suffering is mind-boggling. So, even when I was very little, I felt the need to be serving some greater purpose,” she concludes.

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