Timberland's Christopher Raeburn on innovation in sustainability and breaking new ground at the brand

By Olivier Guyot  -  June 15, 2022

British designer Christopher Raeburn, under whose aegis Timberland is embracing sustainability and circular fashion, is presenting his latest collection, EarthkeepersXRaeburn, at Florentine menswear show Pitti Uomo, scheduled on June 14-17. Raeburn has been working with Timberland for five years, and this collection will allow the brand owned by US group VF Corp. to draw attention to its advances in sustainability. In an interview with FashionNetwork.com, Raeburn shared his approach and his vision on the environmental challenges of today.

Timberland has set itself several sustainability objectives. By 2030, it wants 100% of its products to be designed with circularity in mind. By the same date, it aims to ensure that all of its fabrics are made with materials derived from regenerative agriculture. Raeburn's circularity expertise can be clearly felt in the projects being developed by Timberland: he had already adopted a circular approach when he launched his own label in 2006, after completing his studies.
FashionNetwork.com: Your collaboration with Timberland is continuing with the new EarthkeepersXRaeburn collection you are presenting at Pitti Uomo. But your work [at Timberland] is changing. What is your new role?

Christopher Raeburn: I now have a broad collaboration remit. I have been working with Timberland for nearly five years. Our shared history began with an apparel collection in autumn 2017. It was a brilliant opportunity to work with the [brand’s] apparel design team, which is based in Europe, but also to travel to Stratham, north of Boston, USA, to [Timberland’s] global headquarters, home to the brand’s footwear design and development. I discovered that everyone [at Timberland] was highly committed to sustainability. In October 2018, I took on the role of creative director, a genuine peak in my career. This has allowed me to work extensively with the design teams in the USA and London. In my new role, I will continue to work on this collection with the goal of breaking new ground for Timberland. For example, we can manufacture products based on sugar cane, Tencel and recycled materials. I’m also busy forging other partnerships, and there are plenty of projects, still top-secret, in the pipeline.

FNW: With your eponymous label, you push the boundaries of a more environmentally friendly fashion. Aren’t you concerned about being the sustainability guarantor of an international brand like Timberland?

CR: One might think it’s difficult to change such a large corporation. I actually felt the opposite. Very many people at Timberland already had the right ideas, and a willingness to make extremely high-quality products. One can easily forget that the brand’s logo is a tree. I believe [Timberland] was committed to quality from its inception. I graduated in 2006. In 2007, Timberland launched its first Earthkeepers [product]: a pair of boots designed and produced in the most sustainable way known at the time. As a young designer who was very open to these ideas, it struck me that a company would be thinking along those lines. That was 15 years ago. What has been interesting, in the over three years I’ve been creative director, is being able to work on product development, which still thrills me, but also on sustainability strategy. And to really think about the future of Timberland, and where the brand will be in 2030.
FNW: After collaborating for five years, what difference do you find between developing your own brand and running projects in a company the size of Timberland?

CR: I was able to introduce at Timberland some of my methods in terms of product sustainability and circularity. But I must mention teamwork again. It’s amazing, being able to rely on specialists like these. There are a lot of resources [at Timberland] I didn’t have in my own company, because it was so small. At Timberland, the materials specialists, the colour specialists, the people in charge of innovation and strategy, they make it possible to breathe life into ideas that are crazy for a major brand. But one needs to learn to coordinate.

FNW: What do you mean?

CR: I realised rather quickly that when you work for a brand that has more than 2,000 stores worldwide and a huge team of collaborators, you need to ensure that a large number of elements are properly aligned. It’s not just a matter of developing the best product. The way you communicate and how you present your projects must be consistent. I think I had to mature quite fast, because I realised that my role was to push forward a sustainability strategy and, above all, to inspire the team that needed to work on it. In reality though, the main difference is your projects’ impact. With Timberland, the impact is immense. As a groundbreaker, I have the opportunity to initiate systemic change in industry, for example, by committing to regenerative agriculture or by using sugar cane-based materials rather than synthetic ones.

FNW: Do you still see obstacles to the use of sustainable materials?

CR: If 10 years ago we’d been talking about availability or performance issues, perhaps. But today, we no longer have these issues. I don’t think materials are an obstacle. In the last five years, the collaboration between materials and innovation specialists has made a difference in terms of sustainable solutions. I’m lucky to be working with specialists at Timberland who are constantly engaged in innovation and testing, to guarantee the quality of what we put on the market.
FNW: Innovation-wise, you are exploring various routes, from product recyclability to open-sourced projects; can you illustrate them to us?

CR: One notable innovative project is ‘Construct 10061’, a highly dynamic platform open to designers and technical experts. It involves a different way of imagining the future of [Timberland’s iconic] Yellow Boot model, both from the aesthetic and materials aspect. More broadly, we need more collaborations. We have been able to develop projects very openly with Tommy Hilfiger. There are still many closely guarded corporate secrets in this industry. This doesn’t help us move forward. Working together on a large scale would be a real opportunity and a blessing for the planet.

I’ve also been involved in the Timberloop project since it kicked off. The aim is to promote the recovery of used products. The advantage Timberland has is that it has been running footwear recovery programmes for years, to make donations to charitable associations. But we’re just beginning to get going on these projects.

FNW: You’re also an expert in giving a new lease of life to products and materials. What form does this take at Timberland?

CR: I believe that my role at Timberland, as a creative, is not just to think about product design, but about a product's entire life cycle. We have already developed products that are easier to disassemble, especially shoes. This is a crucial element in working towards a greener future. It’s also a pragmatic response, as commodity prices keep rising and resources are dwindling.
FNW: Have your work and methods as a designer had to evolve since you started in business with your own label?

CR: I started out in 2006, and I’d like to think that my approach has kept pace with innovation. As a designer, you solve problems, and if the problems and challenges change, your role is to change with them. Circularity was the basic tenet behind my own company, and that is what I brought to Timberland.

But then we thought about materials performance, about designing products that would be easy to disassemble, about recyclability. My perception is that this is a very complex subject. There is no simple answer. It takes a multitude of micro-projects that must intersect for things eventually to change.

FNW: What is your next big challenge?

CR: A corporation the size of Timberland, despite its efforts, always has an impact. We can always improve our sustainability practices. We have the opportunity to improve our products, especially with regard to [the use of] natural materials, notably leather. We must seize every opportunity to reduce the amount of CO2 released into the atmosphere. The EarthkeepersXRaeburn programme allows me to explore these topics.

Also, I’m a strong believer in regenerative agriculture. We can transform farming practices to make them less impactful. I believe that this isn’t the most visible of goals, but it could make the biggest difference.