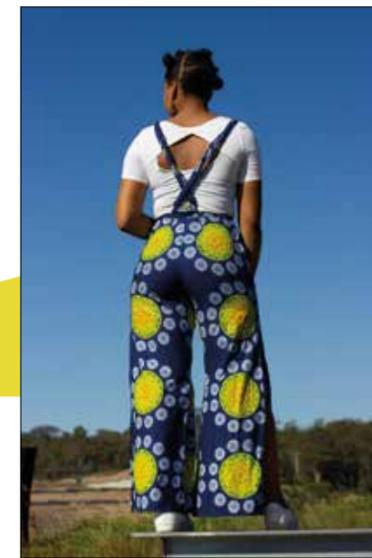


High fashion in the Hunter

It may seem a long way from the cobblestones of Morpeth to the catwalks of Milan, but that hasn't stopped a rich seam of Hunter design creatives putting their best stitch forward to create a career out of fashion.

Story Michelle Meehan



Photography courtesy of Martha Ngoyi



ÆGLE COUTURE

Pursuing a career in fashion is a major juggling act for Fletcher designer Martha Ngoyi, who launched her label ÆGLE Couture two years ago while completing a Certificate III in Applied Fashion Design and Technology at TAFE and a double business degree at the University of Newcastle.

Born in the Congo, Martha moved to Australia from Zimbabwe 12 years ago with her brother, sister and her mother, who she says inspired her to turn her hand to sewing.

"Bespoke fashion is massive in Africa. Making clothes is big culturally and second nature to my family, so I took that on," she said.

"I'd learn as I watched mum sew. I started off using her scrap fabrics and making stuff for my dolls then realised I was really interested so I moved on to homewares like placemats and cushion covers.

"When I progressed to making clothes for myself, I put them up on Snapchat and received lots of positive feedback from friends who suggested making clothes for them and selling online. Their encouragement was how I

got into the business side. I didn't really plan to go this far but I'm happy that we're here now."

Martha uses vibrant African print cotton fabrics sourced from countries including Kenya and the Congo to create bespoke garments, which are uniquely based on each customer's size, selection of fabric and their preferred design from her collection.

"I feel it's really sustainable making clothes specifically to order," Martha said.

"That way we're not wasting energy in making things that may, or may not, be bought and we also save on resources, which is really great."

Now in the final year of her studies, the 22-year-old has set herself some major post-graduation goals.

"I would like to grow the brand on a global scale, and share this culture and this unique fashion with the world," Martha said.

"There's so much passion involved with our culture and our way of dressing, and I'd love to involve more people in that."

www.aeglecouture.com

VOUS

Sustainability is at the heart of another Newcastle-based womenswear label, VOUS. Created by Renee Verdon in 2013, VOUS carefully considers each garment's environmental impact and the fair work conditions under which it has been created. The "slow fashion" advocate uses deadstock, traceable and Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) certified fabrics in each collection and minimises waste wherever possible, producing less than 10 garments per style per season and creating Zero Waste accessories using leftover material that would otherwise be thrown out.

Renee said the label's impact on the environment had become even more important to her since the birth of her son two years ago.

"Having my child has made me think, 'What sort of environment are we leaving our children? What role can we play to really start to shift the problems that society has created?'"

"There are things that have started to become more apparent in my mind around fashion and the impact that fast fashion is having on our environment and I just don't think it's something that can be ignored."

Renee's collections are also clearly influenced by her background as a clinical psychologist, with the contemporary, ready-to-wear designs inspired by both the conceptual exploration of 'self' and concrete forms of beauty such as the natural environment.

She is currently exploring initial design concepts for a new Spring/Summer line that will take its cues from Lake Macquarie.

"Each collection has a theme to it that will be referencing something to do with our natural environment, and also something to do with our human nature," Renee said.

"I've got an idea for a new collection in my mind that will be called The Lake House. It's using the colour palette and beautiful softness of Lake Macquarie with pale pinks, pale blues and pale greens, but also the idea of the lake being a reflective place to sit and think, 'Okay, what's going on for me as an individual and how do I make sense of my life?'"

"I guess that's my combination of fashion and psychology."

<http://vous.net.au>



Photography: Edwina Richards Photography



Photography: Blake Chaney

KATIE MAREE DESIGNS

Inspired by a lifelong love of fashion, and surrounded by family members who made clothes – including an aunt with her own label – Katie McIntyre was destined to be a designer.

After completing her Diploma of Applied Fashion Design and Technology at Tighes Hill TAFE in 2014, the then 20-year-old launched her self-titled label, Katie Maree. In the past six years the Morpeth woman has notched up some major milestones, including creating two collections of modern bohemian inspired garments, which are sold online and in a range of Hunter retailers.

Her designs have also graduated to the red carpet, with Katie creating the outfits worn by Newcastle-based reality TV stars Cathy and Victoria Fren at the 2018 and 2019 Logies.

"Cathy contacted me through my website and said they were looking for local designers to do their dresses for the Logies," Katie said.

"Initially when I got the email I thought someone was playing a joke on me ... so just seeing them on the red carpet was pretty surreal and very cool."

"Last year's Logies definitely skyrocketed my label, especially in custom dresses. It made me more confident in trying new designs, working in different styles and for different women as well."

Katie is now putting together her next Spring / Summer collection, which she hopes to finish in the coming months. Inspired by a modern 70s vibe, Katie said the collection will be more feminine than her previous designs and will feature plenty of frills and florals, with natural fibres including cotton, linen and lace.

www.katiemaree.com