

Interview with Valérie Berckmans

1. Since when have you been creating eco-responsible collections? What was your motivation?

I started designing my own collections in 2003 and since the beginning, I really wanted to work in a sustainable way, with a local production, with fair trade and organic fabrics, or recycled, up-cycled or vintage fabrics.

I wasn't interested in having a big company with a big production in the Far East, I always wanted to keep my collection local & unique. The motivation is easy to understand, when you see how polluting the fashion industry is, and how much should be done to help save our environment and ourselves... So this is my small stone to the building and although it is hard because the profit margin is really small when you work that way, I wouldn't change my philosophy for anything in the world.

2. What concrete measures have you established in the realisation of your collections?

A) local production

From the start, I decided to produce locally, that is in sewing studios in Belgium and France. It is very important to me to work like that because, although it is more expensive, it keeps the great local skills alive. It enables me to check the working conditions. It also avoids long transportations around the world. I can also easily check the production on the spot, at least for Brussels' studios & I can ask for small quantities, avoiding mass production.

B) sustainable fabrics

I also directly searched for sustainable fabrics: 15 years ago, it was really hard to find organic cotton, at least in nice colors or different types of fabrics. You could only find some black or off-white jersey or canvas or some strange colors based on vegetable dyeing... In the meantime, the market for organic fabrics really developed and we can find a lot of

different fabrics and colors in organic cotton, wool or hemp. It really goes in the right direction. We also work with up-cycled fabrics (cutting in existing vintage garments) & dead-stocks (vintage fabrics, unsold stocks from other designers, etc.). We like that part of the job because it is really exiting for a designer to create unique pieces on the base of something that already exists.

C) zero-waste project

We recuperate all the leftovers from the ladies production so that nothing is thrown away: we developed a zero-waste project, since 2014. Out of the leftovers, we make lingerie for men & women, a kids collection, washable demak'ups, washable sanitary pads & decorative pins. The very last little bits are used to fill draught stoppers, so that we really throw nothing away.

3. What were the reactions of the clients? What are the reactions of your colleagues in the fashion world?

In the beginning, people were more interested in my designer's work. They came for the uniqueness of the pieces and the style, and back in those days, the awareness for sustainability was very limited.

The reputation of sustainable brands was not good, people always linked it to some hippie:patchouli smelling style that wouldn't meet their request.

In the meantime, this reputation has disappeared, surely because a lot of interesting designers started working sustainable and the consciousness has grown among the public: people know more than before the ugly things hidden behind the glittering fashion industry, so we also have a lot of customers who are coming to us because they want to buy less but better. They really appreciate the philosophy behind the project, and of course, they must like the style too, otherwise it doesn't make sense.

My colleagues of the fashion sphere are more and more starting to count this sustainable

dimension in their work, but of course, this is not easy because it really has a cost.

4. What are the financial implications of eco-responsible fashion for you and your customers?

Working sustainably has a big cost. Organic fabrics are a little bit more expensive, but the biggest cost is to produce locally. There is no possible comparison between the salaries in Belgium and the ones in Bangladesh for example. So the most complicated thing is to manage the balance between reasonable

public prices including this huge salary cost and a profit margin that allows us to keep the company boat sailing.

Of course, our collection is more expensive than the clothes you can find in the big companies of the lower segment, but they are not different from the ones of the middle-high segment, the only difference is the profit margin, that is really huge for the companies producing in the Far East and selling their production at expensive prices here, and really small for us. But money is not at all our motivation, we want to do business in a good way, and we are proud we can achieve this...

About Valerie Berckmans:

Valérie Berckmans officially presented her first women's ready-to-wear collection in 2003, one year after graduating in fashion design from the Institut Saint-Luc in Brussels.

In 2006, she sets up her studio-boutique in the Dansaert district, the trendy place in Brussels where artistic creation is in full swing. She designs a line of clothing for women in a graphic and minimalist style, evoking an airy femininity often brightened up with particular details.

The collections are exclusively made in Belgium & France, out of sustainable fabrics (organic cottons, dead stocks, upcycled second-hand pieces, etc.).

Since 2014, she works in duo with the fashion designer Meyrueis De Bruyn.

Together, they developed a zero-waste project to handle the leftovers of their production: they design for example a lingerie collection & a kids collection using those smaller pieces of fabric so that nothing is wasted.

www.valerieberckmans.be