

## CREATING A SLOW FASHION COLLECTION – A DESIGNER–MAKER’S PROCESS

Ariane Bray



Figure 1. Ariane Bray, NZFW Collection, Lookbook image.  
Model: Lily Van Buskirk. Photograph: Dylan McCutcheon-Peat.

## ABSTRACT

This paper considers sustainable practices in the fashion industry that address my core brand values of environmental ethics, while supporting a strong brand identity for my label. While investigating sustainability in the fashion industry, I was presented with the opportunity to show at the New Zealand Fashion Week (NZFW) Graduate Show which debuted in 2016, presenting top emerging designers from around the country. The creation of my collection has been analysed using the method of reflective practice to consider how a brand with my values might operate within the New Zealand fashion market. Supporting these reflections, I examine key ideas behind slow fashion, a designer–maker method, and commercial sustainability in the context of both local and global fashion labels. These approaches endorse transparent business conduct to achieve improved conditions in the textile industry from production through to a garment's end of life. My research has informed the outcomes for an eight-outfit collection showed at NZFW in both design and production aspects. The result was a collection that aimed to take a holistic design approach and have lasting value for each wearer – thus avoiding the unnecessary textile waste that the planned obsolescence of fast fashion products generates.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project has been to ask the question: *How can I, and how did I, as a designer planning to operate in the New Zealand fashion market, retain my brand values of slow fashion and a designer–maker method, and also be commercially sustainable?*

The project has been evaluated using the method of reflective practice. Indicators of success would be twofold:

1. Develop and show a collection which is material evidence of my brand values.
2. Create guidelines for my practice as a sustainable practitioner in the future.

The results of my project will form a part of an ongoing dialogue on sustainable practice and will be of use to fashion students, fashion educators and practitioners and the wider realm of designer–makers who wish to integrate sustainability into their commercial design practice.

As a designer, I aim to maintain a strong brand identity while promoting my core brand values of environmental sustainability and ethics. There is a clear market opportunity in the endeavour to produce clothing that is grounded in these principles; today, consumers are moving towards ethically produced fashion, a fashion subculture that is rapidly gaining prominence.<sup>1</sup> This viewpoint is supported by design theorists who use "ethical fashion" as an umbrella term covering the treatment of clothing workers, environmental impact and the effect of clothing post-use.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will use the term ethical fashion to focus on the treatment of workers in the production chain, rather than the broader meanings used by other commentators.

## VALUES: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND ETHICS

I felt compelled to respond to the negative side of the fashion industry during the final year of my Bachelor of Design after attending a workshop on zero-waste fashion<sup>3</sup> that revealed the true environmental impact of the fashion industry. In garment production, 15-20% of textiles end up on the cutting-room floor – unused and sent straight to landfill.<sup>4</sup> This information led me to research further and discover that the global textiles industry is the second most environmentally damaging industry in the world.<sup>5</sup> I began my research into environmentally sustainable design through exploration of zero-waste patterncutting, slow fashion and the use of sustainable fabrics.

The term "ethical fashion" can be ambiguous, as ethics are transparent and therefore are not a commodity. A patent emphasis on ethics – as with fair trade and organic products – can signify that a business is ethically run. However, many

companies take a pick-and-mix approach to ethics that allows them to maximise the "ethical" trend while masking other areas that show a less responsible attitude. For example, a business could be certified organic but still utilise cheap production methods that exploit workers. Companies aiming to benefit from the trend of ethical fashion often make changes that are compatible with a traditional Western model of consumption, such as being seen to implement better standards in the production chain. However, due to the lack of transparency in the production system, these standards cannot be guaranteed without inspectors present. This discrepancy allows a business to put on an ethical face while ignoring deep-seated issues such as animal welfare, the use of toxins in personal care products, and body image – as dealing with such issues would require a fundamental change in Western cultural practices. As consumers, it is important to research whether the business we are dealing with takes a responsible approach as a whole.

Events like the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh have put an international focus on the production of clothing, leading to media exposure of the widespread corruption in the global fashion industry.<sup>6</sup> Ethical problems, however, begin much earlier than garment production. Studies indicate that villagers in cotton-farming areas with high levels of pesticide use are developing increasing rates of cancers and birth defects.<sup>7</sup> These problems are going largely unnoticed – only 9% of the brands studied in Baptist World Aid's 2015 *Australian Fashion Report* were aware of the conditions in which their cotton was produced.<sup>8</sup>

At the production level, the extreme economic competition between companies means that production costs are driven down, resulting in subsistence wages for those who make their clothing.<sup>9</sup> However, the popularity of ethically driven clothing brands such as Kowtow and Reformation suggest that consumers are aware of and are interested in buying ethical alternatives. This is supported by studies that reveal that many consumers understand that over-consumption does not satisfy – they are choosing a more ethical consumerism and garments produced in ways that do not negatively affect the production chain or consumers themselves.<sup>10</sup>

## SLOW FASHION

To understand slow fashion it is necessary to first understand fast fashion. The apparel industry is dominated by a fast fashion approach, characterised by minimising production costs and encouraging the mass consumption of cheap but on-trend products to increase profit. There are benefits to this approach, as low prices allow for wide accessibility, allowing those who cannot afford high-end designer fashion to buy into trends. However, while there are short-term benefits, the fast fashion method of consumption can lead to customer dissatisfaction as retailers urge customers to buy more whenever the next trend becomes available. Fast fashion has economic benefits as, by responding rapidly to consumer wants, companies are able to exploit the customer's willingness to pay for trendy products.<sup>11</sup> The downside of this system is that it relies on rapid consumption and obsolescence of products which, while creating revenue, exploits natural resources and workers and encourages wastage on a massive scale.<sup>12</sup>

Slow fashion aims to provide an alternative to this system by focusing on products that will look good for a longer time and that have been created by holistic methods; consumers are becoming increasingly interested in this option.<sup>13</sup> Slow fashion is a design methodology that developed out of a need for clothing that has a smaller environmental and ethical impact than fast fashion. Dr Hazel Clark has investigated whether a slow fashion approach can offer a sustainable solution for fashion; her interpretation of slow fashion is best articulated in her own words: "Valuing local resources and distributed economies, transparent production systems with less intermediation between producer and consumer; and sustainable and sensorial products that have a longer usable life and are more highly valued than typical 'consumables'".<sup>14</sup>

The value placed on the local raises issues within New Zealand, where it is difficult to source a variety of locally produced fabrics, as the majority are still imported. Without being present on-site, it is difficult to ensure that workers are being treated ethically and that environmental impacts are being considered. This aspect can be controlled in certain areas by producing garments locally, as many New Zealand designers do. However, without factories and wholesalers being completely transparent in their conduct, it is difficult to ensure that the desired standards are being



Figure 2. Ariane Bray, *Quiet Spectacle*. Photoshoot at an ancient water town, Shanghai.  
Models: Shanghai University of Engineering Science. Photograph: Amy Politt.

met. With these issues in mind, New Zealand designers must consider which areas they *can* control.

Slow fashion offers a way for clothing to be more authentic; combining this with other design approaches presents an opportunity to further increase the value of a responsibly sourced and produced product.

## DESIGNER-MAKERS

The designer-maker approach complements descriptions of slow fashion, which parallel the farmers' market system by which local producers sell directly to the community.<sup>15</sup> A designer-maker is an individual who designs and makes garments in small batch quantities, usually using some prefabricated materials. This method is appropriate for someone in the early development stages of their brand, as without the resources to take on multiple employees the designer must take a hands-on approach, often becoming business manager, designer, machinist, visual communicator and creative director rolled into one.<sup>16</sup>

A designer-maker is similar to a craftsperson, as both take a hands-on approach to their work. The main difference lies in the designer-maker's ability to outsource production; for a craftsperson, personal involvement with production is crucial.<sup>17</sup> Items made by a designer-maker will inherently have a high cost, as the individual needs to sustain themselves and production is highly labour-intensive. This contrasts strikingly with fast fashion pricing, but embodies a very different value proposition. Higher-priced, more holistic products can lead to fewer purchases and less wastage, as the wearer is less likely to dispose of something that cost them a good deal, especially if they understand the reasoning behind the price. Such garments are more likely to be gifted or passed on to the next generation when they are no longer worn by the original purchaser.<sup>18</sup>

## COMMERCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

While it remains crucial for me to undertake my practice in a socially responsible way, it is equally important that this approach allows for commercial sustainability. While slow fashion principles encourage the production of garments with longevity, in order to sustain a business it is necessary to build customer loyalty – to have customers return and continue purchasing products. Designers must therefore have a clear picture of their target market and the products their customers will purchase and, while each designer takes a different approach, the strength of one's brand identity remains key.

Although I have indicated that my personal design style aims to avoid passing trends, it is important to be aware of macro trends that reveal people's attitudes to various issues and lifestyles as well as to current political, social and economic concerns. My embracing of ethics and sustainability align with the growing global demand for ethical fashion.

A close relationship between producer and consumer – encouraged by both slow fashion and designer-maker practices – offers a pathway for higher levels of consumer satisfaction. When a product begins to feel less new and exciting, easy access to the designer provides an avenue whereby the garment can be adapted rather than disposed of.

## COLLECTION PLANNING

The NZFW Graduate Show provided me with the opportunity to completely re-evaluate and build on my 2015 collection, "Quiet Spectacle." I began designing with the same concept and colour palette, following an extensive process of research, reflection and design. The result was eight completely new looks, that drew on earlier garments in completely different ways.

When I reflected on my collection for NZFW, I considered the balance between commercial appeal and aesthetic impact. Whereas "Quiet Spectacle" consisted of heavy layering, I made the decision to keep layering to a minimum for the NZFW collection as I felt it distracted from what was underneath. I wanted each piece to be wearable in an everyday context, and therefore selected fabrics that I like to wear myself in everyday life: viscose, wool crepe, silk and linen. While I was keen to source ethical fabrics, due to the dearth of ethical fabric wholesalers in New Zealand, time constraints for sourcing overseas, and the inclusion of several pieces from "Quiet Spectacle," I was unable to



Figure 3. Ariane Bray, *Quiet Spectacle*, 2015, graduate collection. Models: Roseanna Bray and Alex Burns.  
Photograph: Dylan McCutcheon-Peat.

access ethical fabrics for NZFW. In future, it will be important to source ethically produced fabrics that are available in bulk to allow me to produce garments commercially.

“Quiet Spectacle” was characterised by the difficult and labour-intensive textile manipulation of drawn thread. Mindful of the commercial context of NZFW, I minimised the garments with this type of textile and incorporated a premade textile that had been woven with a similar look. While the original manipulation was done to display the craft-like connection to a garment made by a designer–maker, it is not feasible to produce such pieces in bulk due to the time it takes to create them. One challenge for my next collection is to create and incorporate a textile manipulation or other feature in the collection that adds interest in a similar way and is commercially sustainable.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project has been to reflect on theories of slow fashion, designer–making and commercial sustainability in order to guide my future practice as a fashion designer in the New Zealand market.

The first of my original aims was to develop and show a collection which would stand as material evidence of my brand values. At NZFW, I created a collection of eight outfits designed through reflective practice on my previous work which incorporated the findings of the literature I had researched. The design outcomes reflected my brand value of environmental sustainability through high-quality finishing and fabrics used in timeless pieces intended to replace today’s throw-away approach with an investment in the buyer’s wardrobe.

Ethics have been considered through my personal production of the collection – I was able to ensure both quality production and my own personal wellbeing as the producer; I created each garment by hand, maintaining the close relationship that a designer–maker has with their products; I also commercialised the textile manipulation for a more realistic approach to the craft side. My inability to source fabrics with environmental and ethical production guarantees means that this is an ongoing goal for my future practice.

My second aim was to create guidelines for my practice as a sustainable practitioner in the future. My Honours year project began with the intention to develop a collection created using ethically and environmentally sound fabrics. However, being selected for NZFW meant that the project had to be rethought – it became an extension of my graduate collection, encouraging me to reflect and grow rather than starting afresh.

I believe that the entire production chain should be treated fairly; this includes both fabric production workers overseas and those in local garment construction. Ideally, I would source fabrics locally to ensure that standards are being met. However, due to their lack of availability in New Zealand, trust must be placed in accreditation services used by overseas wholesalers such as Fair Trade and Social Accountability Accreditation.

As I grow my brand, I intend to be more involved in the ethics behind my products by developing relationships with producers. I believe that environmental considerations should be embedded throughout the entire chain to make clothing as sustainable as possible. These practices will be gradually become second nature and guide my future conduct. Following my observations on commercial sustainability, I plan to create a space where I can offer customers a personal service and continue selling previous seasons’ products to prolong the life of a garment.

I understand that it is not possible to implement all elements of slow fashion and designer–making and at the same time achieve instant commercial viability, and that through a commitment to ongoing development I can improve my personal and professional approach to these values and needs. Along with my commitment to using ethically produced fabrics, I seek to consider the end life of my garments through methods that both increase value to the consumer and revenue to the producer, and reduce wastage and unsustainable behaviour.

**Ariane Bray** is a Dunedin-based designer with a strong focus on slow fashion and designer–maker methods in her practice. Ariane has shown collections in Shanghai, New Zealand and at several iD Dunedin Fashion Weeks. Since graduating with a Bachelor of Design (Honours) in March 2017, she has worked in the local fashion industry. Alongside this, she continues her own practice with the aim of developing her portfolio for further career and study opportunities.

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- 2 Sanjukta Pookulangara and Arlesa Shephard, "Slow Fashion Movement: Understanding Consumer Perceptions – An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 20:2 (2013), 200-206, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2012.12.002>.
- 3 Zero waste is a design method that involves utilising 100% of a piece of fabric for a garment or garments in order to illuminate wastage.
- 4 Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Fashion Tries on Zero Waste Design," *The New York Times*, 13 Aug. 2010, <http://nytimes.com/2010/08/15/fashion/15waste.html>.
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- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Tim Holt, "Is the Time Right for Slow Fashion?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 Feb. 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/2009/0210/p17s01-lign.html>.