

INTERVIEW



Paul Blomfield

has more than 20 years experience as a consultant to the fashion, clothing, textiles and creative industries in New Zealand. A successful publisher, he launched three magazines, including PULP and FLASH, and has published APPAREL on a monthly basis for 15 years. He was been involved with trade projects for the industry and New Zealand Trade & Enterprise and was a key player in the 'New Zealand Four' shows at London Fashion Week in 1999. Between 1990 and 2001 Paul played similar roles in Australian Fashion Week and was involved in the Air New Zealand Fashion Week. Locally, he is publicist consultant for Simunovich Olive Estate Bombay.

Paul, You have been called 'the city's most dapper PR.' How did your career come to be so fashion-world focused?

I grew up into the fashion media business. My mother was Women's Editor of the Auckland Star and I was often in the children's photo shoots in the paper and sometimes on the catwalk when I was only a toddler. I have been at virtually every major fashion event in the country ever since. I'm not sure about the dapper comment – being tall has its advantages.

Has New Zealand switched from being a follower of fashion to setting new trends? What do we have to offer the world?

I think the key point is that we don't really set nor follow trends now. When New Zealand fashion grew up was when our designers started following their own inspirations and not just doing trends copied from Europe or the USA. There are always themes that come through in fashion, but New Zealand designers were never going to be internationally credible while they were just following other designers. For those of us in the trade, we can see a garment by Trelise Cooper, Karen Walker, Cybèle Wiren, Zambesi or World on the street and recognise the designer's handwriting – that demonstrates the confidence they have in their own identity and makes them credible.

What makes a good fashion designer?

It is the most difficult job in the world! Apart from that essential talent and design identity I mentioned before, designers have to develop dozens, if not hundreds of designs a season, ensuring they all fit, that they all work, that they're costed correctly and delivered on time - and in some cases they have to be great retailers too. Then all that design virtually goes in the bin and the process starts afresh each season. That is the hardest point I think; that the designers have to be launching Winter when Summer is just beginning and vice versa – they never get to live in the moment – their business is always in the future.

Fashion is a serious business. What position does fashion hold in terms of the local economy?

Fashion is hard to separate from the greater apparel industry in terms of economic benefit, but it is an important contributor to the economy of the region. In terms of retail, more than a third of New Zealand's clothing stores are in Auckland not including department stores – about 714 stores employing 3,320. Likewise 34 percent of New Zealand's footwear stores are based in the greater Auckland region and about 780 companies wholesale or manufacture clothing, employing more than 5,000. That doesn't include the many other ways that fashion contributes

in other ways; to charity for example and gets involves with other business events such as car launches, alcohol brands, shows and exhibitions. Fashion Week alone attracts 700 delegates each year, including 209 buyers from 11 countries and 330 media representatives to see 78 designers show their collections. In all 20,500 people attended the Week last year! It is big!

How has the industry adapted to luxury brands becoming more accessible and mass market designs offering more glamour?

This luxury discussion is a murky one for the industry. Certainly New Zealanders have more access to high end luxury fashion than ever before, (apart from our own designers), with Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Hugo Boss coming to town, but the boom in 'fast fashion' that brings designer looks to the main street at reasonable prices may have petered out a bit. The simple fact is that designer garments made cheaply are still cheap garments! I think that the fashion shopper is watching the pennies a bit more and may be tiring of the disposability of fast fashion; buy a good garment to keep, rather than an item to throw away after only a short time.

Discount fashion was unheard of not long ago – is this tailored for a whole new consumer driven market? Tell us about the Designer Garage Sale.

Ha! Back in the '80s there weren't even factory shops in Auckland! Now discounting is everywhere. It was natural that some companies would try to bring the latest designer looks to the main street at affordable prices – but you need volume to do that and it seems sometimes that the world is awash with millions of excess garments looking for a home. The Designer Garage Sale we run at Air New Zealand Fashion Weekend was an idea to help the designers sell off their samples and end-of-season garments direct to the real lovers of fashion who attend Fashion Week. It has been a great success.

What have been the struggles and highlights of your career within the fashion industry?

What a question! So many highs and a few lows also. The highs for me were witnessing amazing, history making moments; like the shows of the New Zealand designers at the early days of Australian Fashion Week, being part of the New Zealand Four shows at London Fashion Week. The lows? I've forgotten already.

The New Zealand fashion industry of tomorrow – what do you foresee?

It is much the same as now, but I wonder if we'll see one of our designers as a publicly listed company, or whether one of the big design houses will take one of our brands into their stable and to the world. The sky is the limit.



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