

Designer Profile

DEEP

IMPACT

Transitioning to a fully vegan label for her spring/summer 2019 collection is just one of the ways that Toronto designer Hilary MacMillan is making her mark on the Canadian fashion scene - and reducing her footprint on the world.

by ANDREA KARR

AT FIRST GLANCE, Hilary MacMillan's latest collection for her eponymous label seems breezy and carefree. Whether you peruse the racks at her Cabbagetown studio or click through photos of her designs at hilarymacmillan.com, you'll notice bursts of pattern and colour - a sea of red and blue mosaic tile-inspired prints sprinkled across joggers, a bell-sleeved dress, a floor-length kimono, a blousy pair of shorts. Yes, there are a few basics - if you can call them that - like a pair of wide-legged white trousers or a sky-blue slip dress; but the overwhelming message seems to be to let loose and have a bit of fun with fashion.

Creating a sense of play is one of MacMillan's goals every season, but for spring/summer 2019, she also made a significant step toward building a world that she wants to live in. As of this year, Hilary MacMillan is a fully vegan brand - a rarity on the Canadian fashion scene - which means the line avoids fur, leather, feathers, wool and silk on all garments. The decision stemmed from MacMillan's own lifestyle choices, as



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she's been a vegetarian for most of her life and became vegan three years ago.

"I was reading and looking online," she says. "And [consuming animal products] sat funny with me, so I decided to try veganism. I felt great [physically], plus I felt better about my choices." The same process applied when she began to learn more about animal cruelty and the fashion industry, then realized how significantly technology has improved when it comes to quality vegan fabric alternatives. About a year-and-a-half ago, MacMillan began sourcing new materials and as of this year her label is completely cruelty-free. "I'm not a preachy vegan and I don't think that people should be," she says. "Every person's pathway is their own. But [transitioning my label] made me feel better about what I was doing in life."

Taking a stance against animal cruelty isn't the only way that MacMillan recognizes the vast consequences that clothing production can have for the planet. Sustainability – a huge issue for the fashion industry, as the second largest polluter in the world – has also been on her radar for years, and she continues to look for more eco-friendly

options for manufacturing and materials. "I didn't grow up with fast fashion," she says. "It came around when I was in my teens and it's not something I really thought about at that time. But when all of those people died in the Bangladesh factory [collapse, which claimed the lives of more than 1,000 workers], it was

horrific, an eye-opener. Then there are videos coming out of all this plastic on the beach. We're starting to see the impact of our lives more."

To do her part, she's looking at using recycled plastic buttons for her spring/summer 2020 collection, which is already in the works. She also tries to keep as much of her manufacturing in Canada as possible – right now it sits at about 60 per cent – because it means she's able to produce more styles at lower units, plus there is less harm to the environment caused by transporting garments from overseas.

MacMillan admits that she feels significant pressure to make socially conscious decisions, even though she heads up a small Canadian business whose choices will ultimately have fewer ramifications for the planet than those of a global, fast-fashion brand. When she created her first collection in 2013 – 12 looks that she sold at her sister's Toronto boutique, Elle Hardware – she thought her *raison d'être* was "to make nice things that people would like to wear," she says. "But being more visible now as a brand, we get a lot of comments from a lot of people." Since social media platforms have become such widely used forums for criticism, MacMillan has become painfully aware of the opinions about her label that swirl in the ether. "Everyone's always asking where we're donating," she says. "We get people telling us that we should be using wool. They'll say we're virtue signaling for feminism [particularly when she stamped a varsity jacket with "feminist" in large block letters after attending a women's march in Washington]. There are a lot of comments, both positive and negative. Fashion is not only about making pretty things anymore. Our generation is using our dollars for our beliefs."

On the other side of the spectrum, though, is a large percentage of the population that doesn't give much thought to how their clothes are made or where their money goes. "Whether you buy from a designer, or you buy fast fashion, you're putting your money behind it and you're supporting it," she says. "People don't always realize that, but every day, you're making that choice." While the people who buy her clothes may understand the value of purchasing from small, locally made brands – for the environment, the economy and Canada's creative culture – that's largely not the case for the average shopper who might be putting their budget first. "A lot of consumers don't care if a brand is Canadian

or if it's not. Many people don't even know which brands are Canadian," she says. "The government doesn't support us that much, either. You know how on the radio, you have to have a certain amount of Canadian content? Why isn't there something like that for the fashion industry? Maybe boutiques should get a tax break if they sell a certain amount of Canadian goods." She notes that it's also very difficult to produce her clothes within the country, because "manufacturing in Canada is dying" and there are so few options left. If the government cares about Canadian businesses, and Canadians want more sustainable fashion brands to choose from, MacMillan thinks that something needs to change.

Perhaps one of the reasons that her Canadian label continues to grow despite the challenges of a sometimes unsupportive, fickle and judgemental marketplace is because MacMillan manages to walk the line between crafting pretty, accessibly-priced clothes that celebrate the playful side of fashion and producing garments that align with her own values and those of a more socially aware millennial generation. Even on her worst day, she will assimilate the criticism she's given because she genuinely cares about what her wholesalers and customers want. "Getting feedback and seeing what people think is invaluable to me," she insists, and she'll take any comment into consideration to see if it can improve her designs, her business practices or her brand's global impact.

That very willingness to accumulate and weigh out opinions can be exhausting for MacMillan, but it also makes her a more sensitive designer and responsible business person with limitless potential to pivot, expand and redevelop alongside our society's burgeoning appetite for fashion brands with a conscience. "There's that saying: if you're not growing, you're dying," she says. "I think I grow every season. I get more refined. I get more ambitious and more creative." With that attitude, the whole world is her oyster, and we can trust in MacMillan to take good care of it. ☐

