

Chic clothes, saving your conscience?

During Boston Fashion Week, a show featuring socially-conscious clothing begs the question: Does it make a difference?



MAGGIE LIU—THE TECH

"Sustainable Style," a fashion show that took place at the Charlesmark Hotel on Wednesday, provokes contemplation on the role of social consciousness in fashion and how plausible it is to integrate into the everyday girl's wardrobe. The show's apparel and accessories were borrowed from Nomad, a boutique based in Cambridge, in collaboration with Stilista, a style agency.

By Maggie Liu
ARTS EDITOR

Socially conscious fashion. A conundrum in itself. For an industry that is based mostly around aesthetics and has been historically nonchalant about animals — much less the healthcare of employees — the growing attention to sustainable design and fair trade is curious. We hear about it occasionally — Natalie Portman's line of shoes for Te Casan composed of all man-made materials, Bono and his wife's fashion brand ROGAN — but for the most part, sustainable fashion has not hit the pavement runway.

Last night I attended *Sustainable Style*—a fashion show at the Charlesmark Hotel hosted by Stilista, a personal shopping agency, with apparel and accessories from Nomad, a boutique based in Cambridge. The lounge was tightly packed with bass beats booming in the background and well-heeled patrons conversing over drinks with names like Crouching Ginger Hidden Apple Martini.

The show itself featured an autumn palette: austere greys, ochre blouses, deep navies. Highlights included knit scarves paired with tough motorcycle boots, draped car-

digan with an ethnic print bag slung over a shoulder, and of course the ubiquitous structured blazer contrasting with muted ruffles. It was a fitting vibe for the urban girl: feminine yet edgy, romantic yet practical, and at the same time, all clothing displayed was socially conscious and vertically integrated.

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What made me really think about the role of fair trade and social consciousness in the context of fashion were my conversations after the fashion show. I was fortunate enough to catch both the owner of Nomad, Deb Colburn, and Stilista's representative Maria Vasilevsky.

Nomad is a local boutique based in Cambridge with a wide variety of fair trade. Colburn, Nomad's owner, explained that the fashion's interest in social consciousness

mostly lies in the new generation. The pieces from the show were mostly from young underground American designers. "We're going more fair-trade, more eco-friendly," Colburn explained, "People are paying more attention to how clothing is made."

However, why is it then that we hear so much of green and sustainable fashion yet see so little of it on say, the college campus? Heck, even in the streets? The main problem, Stilista's Vasilevsky explained, still lies in lack of awareness amongst the consumers. Although there has been much buzz in the media about celebrities sponsoring green fashion and photoshoots paired with phrases like "tree hugger" or "ethical chic," your everyday shopper has remained unfazed. What are the first things that come to mind when shoppers buy something? Price. Quality. Vasilevsky notes that until questions like "How was this dye made?" "Where did this cotton come from? How were those workers treated?" appear in the consumer's subconscious, green fashion will remain a niche. While fair trade and eco-friendly designs are by no means cheap, good quality items usually are comparable in price to moderate mainstream designers — French Connection, Elie Tahari. Designer jean lines have also started to market socially

conscious products but it has so far only been a fad, by no means a classic favorite. It will still take a while longer before green fashion truly appeals to the mainstream.

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What can we do as consumers, especially college students on a budget, regarding eco-friendly fashion? Truthfully, not a whole lot. We can use our recyclable totes when going to Shaw's, buy American Apparel's "organic t-shirts," drink our fair-trade coffee. At the end of the day, we can only make the effort to spread awareness about why socially conscious fashion is important, transcending a fad into a principle. Perhaps five-ten years down the road, shoppers will ask "Was this beading the work of underpaid child labour in Cambodia" and think twice about where and how the product was created, before purchasing it.

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