Pure London: sustainability focus is key as new section debuts

By Sandra Halliday - 27 July 2018

At Pure London, a big talking point may have been Pure and Scoop (happening at the same time across town) working together rather than in competition as they’re owned by the same organiser, but the really important action was taking place on the sustainability front.

The organisers made it a focal point of the show, including the Power of One campaign advancing the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development. There was plenty of activity around that and many visitors took a Power of One pledge to galvanise the fashion industry into making it more ethical, sustainable and inclusive.

Pure shone a spotlight on sustainability directly via its show set-up too. Its first-time outing for dedicated section Pure Conscious contained some of the most interesting brands at the event, and a program of talks and discussions around the subject dominated the show’s main stage.

In a discussion chaired by Hilary Alexander, panellists highlighted the problems facing the sustainability drive as much as the solutions.

Scarlett Curtis Style Columnist at The Sunday Times, writes about (and spends a lot of time talking to) Gen Z and underlined this issue. Despite most people assuming younger consumers are very eco-focused, she said that “social media had done some interesting things in terms of promoting sustainability but also detrimental things with a big culture of people only wearing things once. Luxury brands are heading towards sustainability but that’s not translating to younger people who have the wear-it-once culture.”

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And while Michael Beutler, Director of Sustainability Operations at Kering, detailed the deep dive the luxury firm has taken into sustainability, he said that driving towards a totally sustainable future means brands and consumers both need to believe it matters.

“There’s been a lot of change in the past 10 years but consumers need to be much more aware of their carbon footprint given that fashion makes up 10%-12% of that,” he said. “We’re seeing it happen. Social media can be a tool for good and a tool for not so good, but we need to leverage these tools to really get the message out. [We need] tools that consumers can use and [though which] we can effect change. It won’t happen overnight though.”

Hilary Alexander summed it all up saying “we need to make sustainability cool.”

BRAND FOCUS

Making sustainability cool, as well as making it feel like the norm, was something that the brands showing at Pure Conscious took to heart. There was a big increase in brands with an ethical standpoint and environmentally-made collections this season as part of the new section, with the organisers saying this showed “the pace of growth and interest in this sector as it drives to become the norm.”

The brands had lots in common on the simple sustainability level but also illustrated how diverse sustainability is becoming. This diversity also extended to their opinions on how successful the new section was, with some very enthusiastic and others less so, although all the exhibitors Fashion Network spoke to had done business at the show, were very supportive of the initiative and mainly planned to return.

Pure Conscious was home to an interesting mix of labels from some just starting out to more established labels, such as People Tree.

Jenny Hulme, Head of Buying at People Tree, said she “really enjoyed the exhibition and felt it was much improved. There was more to see, with a better atmosphere. I was happy to see a greater emphasis on sustainable brands, and hope this can continue for future shows.”
What was clear from the brands was that the ethical sector is evolving in ways that mean sustainability is important but so is style. That approach was summed up by young designer Emily Evans, who runs Zola Amour, a label focused on a capsule of “timeless essentials” with an understated edge and a determination to make an ethical approach feel “normal” rather than the exception.

She started the label after her early experiences of working in fashion left her unhappy about accepted industry practices. She stepped away, “tried to be a sustainable consumer and realised that it’s very hard to buy great sustainable basics.”

In starting her own label she “developed pieces that will last a long time rather than, becoming unfashionable quickly and being thrown away.”

She avoids the obvious sloganeering that was a feature of ethical product in the past. “What frustrated me is that you can buy an ethical T-shirt or sustainable T-shirt but it's got a slogan on it. There wasn't anything simple, so I decided to do exactly that,” she said.

That resulted in very simple items like certified organic cotton tees that retail for £42 or a great pair of ultra-wide, wear-anywhere jeans at £175.

She now has eight stockists in the UK, Germany, Italy and online and picked up business at the show. But she was a little disappointed that the Pure Conscious section was on the edges of the show space rather than at its heart, although she seemed quite upbeat overall about the prospects for the ethical sector at such events.

LAUNCHPAD FOR EUROPE

A brand that was a complete contrast was Naadam, an established NYC-based label that offers ethically-sourced luxury cashmere. Currently “branching out into Europe,” head of sales Mark Stevens said the show “has been good,” even though the label was showing AW18 product at the SS19 event.

“We wanted to test it with immediate merchandise and we liked the response so far. We like the venue too. We’ve seen a lot of smaller stores as well as larger stores. They’ve been actively looking for this section so it’s a good place for us to be,” he explained.

Stevens, who said the label is likely to show in Paris next time too, added that visitors to the show seem to be heading to Pure Conscious for the ethos behind the section but are expecting good product too. “For the people coming to see us the product is the most important thing but being ethical and sustainable helps. For instance, Selfridges loves the product, and the fact that it's sustainable is like ‘check, check’,” he said, ticking off on an imaginary clipboard. “Sustainability and good product can go hand-in-hand and we’re hoping there’ll be a time where sustainable is the norm.”
Over at Talula Little, a colourful kidswear offer, the owners actively chose to show at Pure Conscious rather than Pure Kids. Lisa Etheridge and Aviv Solnitsky got into the business through seeking items that wouldn’t aggravate their daughter’s sensitive skin and have evolved it into a full apparel offer that’s all about organics, ethics and transparency.

In fact, the hangtags (paper of course, not plastic) all come with a QR code that can be scanned so customers can have a ‘virtual’ tour of the factory where the pieces are made.

And how was Pure for the duo? “This show seems to be aimed towards adult clothing so although people have been coming for [that], because our stand is nice and colourful we stand out,” said Aviv. “We have attracted quite a few passers-by, they love our ranges and a lot of people have asked about buying them personally. And we’ve had some orders, and have seen bigger department store who will get in contact later.”

The pieces retail from £15 to £30 with Lisa saying “we’re trying to make it as affordable as we can. We want organic to be an everyday option because it’s so important for kids’ skin and for the workers in the factory too. We have the assurance that the workers are paid fairly. We want to encourage the average consumer to buy organic and not see it as a luxury.”

Another interesting exhibitor was Afterlife, an India-based collective of which Anoir brand founder/designer Amal Kiran Jana is a major part and was the main contact at the show.


Much of the product is made in Amal Kiran Jana’s studio in India where the group can unify three supply chains: materials, which are woven on-site; dyeing (with one piece shown having been dyed in the studio using tea, coffee and turmeric); and embroidery, an area in which India is known for its expertise. That allows the brands to keep prices low (wholesale around £30 for a silk dress to retail at around £90).

“It’s a working model of a sustainable business, giving the benefit back to the consumer through affordable prices,” Amal said, adding that the show had been “good.”
But the designer, whose own accessories label uses up-cycled leather that would otherwise have simply been factory wastage, believes the organisers could go further in their aim to be sustainable. “Look at the entry badges, why do they have to be in a plastic pocket? And why do they use nylon thread? It could have been jute,” he said.

It’s a subject he feels very strongly about and he’s planning to come back to Pure because “I have to tell the sustainability story.”

And continuing to speak out about sustainability did seem to be a common theme for all the brands we spoke to. The organisers appear to be listening too. Julie Driscoll, Managing Director of the event said the February 2019 show’s focus “will remain on collaboration across the industry to continue to offer visitors and exhibitors a better experience, to ensure we make sure the issues facing our industry are top of the agenda.” And she insisted that the Power of One campaign “doesn’t end here, it is just getting started.”