Stella McCartney heads to G7, at BFC Forum says eco is "the future of fashion"

By Sandra Halliday - 12 June 2021

One of fashion’s biggest names has issued a warning to the fashion sector not to get too complacent about current green drives as there’s a lot more work to be done, with legislation also needed.

Speaking on Friday, ethical fashion pioneer Stella McCartney was representing the fashion industry in a group of business execs brought together by Prince Charles ahead of the meeting of world leaders at the G7 summit being
Prince Charles announced the Terra Carta Transition Coalitions, a global collective working to boost investment in a more sustainable future. And McCartney said she will ask some of the world’s most powerful politicians to adopt new practices to help make fashion more sustainable.

That followed both the Prince’s and McCartney’s appearance on Thursday at the British Fashion Council’s first Institute of Positive Fashion Forum.

At the event, she highlighted how “our industry [remains] one of the most harmful to the environment”. That’s despite the strides some companies are making towards a more ethical and sustainable future.

“The reality is that we are using the planet’s resources and not really replacing them in a positive way. We’re doing the opposite,” she said.

She said that “challenging” an industry that’s still making heavy use of chemicals, “destroying land and resources, killing animals” and trying to come up with solutions “is what I do every day and have done since I started”.

And she feels that while it’s getting easier to do that (given the rising sustainability tide in fashion), she’s still not at the stage where ethical and sustainable are enough of a norm that she can just relax and “talk about how fabulous my clothes are!”

As mentioned, her words were a clear warning to the industry to avoid being too self-satisfied about where it’s at sustainability-wise, because it has only really scratched the surface.

And that means it’s still hard to be at the helm of a sustainability-focused label in the fashion sector. Mccartney said that the reality of running a business that’s based on an ethical stance is that it’s more time-consuming than running a ‘regular’ label. It also narrows her choices: “Every day I’m problem-solving. I’m having to work in a very different way and it consumes a lot of time. An example is not using PVC in our sequins so we have a lot less available to us. There’s thousands of beautiful PVC-based sequins available to the rest of the fashion industry and I’m stuck with two or three”.

And there are issues with virtually every other material too from organic cotton to faux leather. The latter has been a big issue, before she started using Mylo mycelium vegan leather this year. “The faux leathers that we [usually] work with are like rock, I’ve not been able to make anything bigger than a handbag or a shoe until very recently,” she explained.

It all adds up to having to work harder to find a solution that might be straightforward using a non-sustainable option and means she has to work with suppliers at an earlier stage: “I have to commit much earlier with the materials I use. We work with people years in advance and I work a lot on pilot programmes.”

That was said less as a complaint and more as an explanation and it’s something she’s clearly become used to after more than two decades working that way.

“What I’m trying to do at Stella is not to have you notice that you’re wearing a vegan bag or vegan shoe, or that your sequins don’t have PVC,” she said.

But to make that happen more quickly, she says help is needed.

“We’re not incentivised,” she said. “We need policy change, we need to have incentives. I want the young designers of tomorrow to not be penalised and punished financially, which we are at the moment. I want them to have great tax breaks, to have really exciting business reasons to work in this way”.

But she believes that eventually, her level of sustainability will win out.

“I’m trying to create and invisibly implant into my business model a better way of working in fashion. I believe I am the business model of the future of fashion,” she insisted.
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For now though, in a world that’s still trying to figure out sustainability, she sees job market opportunities for those who are ahead of the curve. She thinks that those who do embed sustainability in their thinking now have skills that are likely to be in demand across the wider industry as it becomes a must-have.

“You can’t launch a brand [today] without having some level of ‘responsibility’ at the core of your business model,” she explained, adding that “my team are so entrenched in this way of working. If you’re thinking of going into fashion this is an incredible job opportunity. If you can train or have this insight or foot in the door, your value is much, much higher.”

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