Jean Atelier's Jérôme Dahan on what's next for the independent denim label

By Olivier Guyot - 5 July 2018

Jérôme Dahan has a secret: he knows how to turn blue into gold. A Frenchman, Dahan moved to the USA a long time ago, and he is one of the leading figures in the US denim industry. After working at Lucky and Guess a few decades ago, Dahan made a name for himself by successfully launching labels that now have an international reputation, like 7 For All Mankind and Citizens of Humanity. A few years ago, Dahan, who has close ties with the California-based French denim community, left Citizens of Humanity. Never one to stay still, just under two years ago he launched a new label, Jean Atelier, together with his wife Elsa and designer Noam Hanoch, a long-standing collaborator who put his own brand aside to join in the adventure. Having got his latest brainchild off the ground, Jérôme Dahan came to Paris a few weeks ago to present Jean Atelier, which is positioned as a high-end women's label. We met Dahan at the offices of BraMarais, Jean Atelier's European distributor, and talked about the premium denim market, denim know-how and the label's clear ambitions.

FashionNetwork.com: How was Jean Atelier born?

Jérôme Dahan: For me, it was a labour of love. I ran Citizens of Humanity for 15 years, and before that, 7 For All Mankind. Citizens is a fine brand, but its product range is very basic. Instead, I wanted to create a jeans collection that felt like ready-to-wear. We started working on the brand in 2016 and we launched it in 2017.

FNW: You are not alone in this venture. Design-wise, you are working with Noam Hanoch. What is your connection?

JD: We worked together for 10 years in New York. Noam had his own sportswear label. We met. At Citizens, we were already thinking about what we could do besides a line based simply on price. I felt like doing something
were already thinking about what we could do besides a line based simply on price. I felt like doing something different and we agreed to set up a project together. We wanted to shake up the market a little.

FNW: How?

JD: Our approach was to combine denim with a design which has a very couture feel. Paying attention to details, to precision tailoring. We launched Jean Atelier with non-stretch jeans. We realised that fits and silhouettes have been dominated by stretch denim in the last 10 years. And we were sure that we had to work on ‘stiff’ denim, very soft but ‘stiff’ nevertheless, to create Jean Atelier. Now, not a single client asks us why we don’t do stretch jeans. They understand what we set out to achieve.

FNW: Consumers have lived with stretch jeans for 10 years. Do they need help in understanding?

JD: I don’t think so. They understand as soon as they see the cuts. When we presented the collection, we mentioned that Balenciaga and Vetements do non-stretch jeans. All the leading designers are going down the non-stretch road. Stretch is no longer cool. The first time I used stretch denim was at 7 For All Mankind. I used a stretch fabric which had to look ‘stiff’. It wasn’t ultra stretchy. Then, various types of stretch denim came out. But each type of stretch fabric required a different way of working with the material, and the majority of industry people failed to realise this. Nowadays, brands that are used to working with stretch denim and try to do stiff can’t figure it out. Do you know why? Because they don’t have the cutting expertise.

FNW: Why not?

JD: Because with stretch fabrics you can cheat, while with stiff ones it’s impossible. You realise that some people don’t know what they’re doing. They are only familiar with the stretch era. The right fit, the right cut is essential. And nowadays it’s possible to find stiff denim which is also comfortable to wear. Most of our materials come from Japan, and some of them have been developed exclusively for us. It’s a pleasure, and it’s great when you find manufacturers willing to put their innovations at your disposal, without wanting to talk about minimum quantities and all of that, just about the product. In the last seven or eight years, [manufacturers] haven’t really been pushed to the edge. Brands have focused on price and on price alone. Instead, manufacturers are happy to be able to talk about materials, about the product.

FNW: What is your criticism of the premium denim market?

JD: For me, premium denim has made no progress in the last ten years. All the labels do five-pocket models with the same types of wash. But nowadays, jeans are a fashion statement. Great couturiers feature jeans in their collections, but they’re not basic, everyday items. They are items which could be made with different materials, but denim is used because there is an element of creativity, and innovation, in it. Jeans labels must reinvent themselves. There are about twenty brands on the US market, but they’re all fighting the price battle.

FNW: How do you envisage your presence in the premium segment?

JD: Right from the word go, we told ourselves we couldn’t go below [a pricepoint of] $350. I had no intention of competing with labels operating in the premium denim segment. We created collections that are totally different, targeting a much more upmarket clientèle. We have different prices, with the Flip model at $475 and the Enter model at $425. They will be priced similarly in euros. One of our best-selling models was the Window Pant, priced at $925, of which we sold the entire production batch. It’s a model on which we do extra hand-stitching work to add details.

FNW: Where are you currently selling?

JD: At Barneys, Moda Operandi and FWRD [in the US]. And we’re starting at MatchesFashion and Le Bon Marché in Europe. With our European partner, we are targeting France, Italy, German and London to begin with. We are keen to adopt the same strategy we have in the USA, where we have about fifty clients.

FNW: How many collections do you create?
JD: We create four collections, each with 30 to 40 models. It's what the market wants. And we create exclusive items. When we present the collection, [clients] choose an item and we make it in another type of wash for them, so that they have an exclusive on it. It's what we did for example with Barneys.

FNW: You enjoy blending materials. How do you do this?

JD: Thanks to fabric manufacturers. We do it with their help. The first time we worked on indigo fabric, we asked them for three different gradations, so we could have exactly the one we liked. This enabled us to have items made with the same denim with superior shades. We are also working on jeans made with a blend of ribbed corduroy and denim, something for the Autumn/Winter 2019.

FNW: How is Jean Atelier organised?

JD: Noam works on product and design. I work on the washings, and our offices are integrated within the production facility. We work shoulder to shoulder with the team that produces our hand-made items. Elsa is in charge of PR, marketing and sales. It's actually Elsa who runs the company. We have a team of 15 people at our atelier in Los Angeles. We have to invest a lot in training, to provide these people with the set of skills required by this kind of product. It takes two years for a person to be fully trained. This is why, in the factory, the employees are more like sample makers. They are much more skillful than workers who know how to handle one or two operations only. We work on a piece-rate basis, and sample makers can produce a pair of trousers from start to finish. They know all the steps in the process.

FNW: Isn't this a disadvantage in terms of production time?

JD: It seems to be a slower process. But it can go much faster. We work with a friend of mine who devised a system for making jeans this way, producing a batch of 200 to 300 items in the morning that are ready by the evening. It's excellent. He has about fifty people working for him.

FNW: And this is the system you use?

JD: Yes. This is another reason why we have a selective distribution network. We have full control of our output. And we aren't at 100% capacity yet. With our factory, if in future we needed to produce 2,000 items per week, we know we can do it. We have no problem in meeting demand. But 2,000 units of high-quality jeans, that would be really great for Jean Atelier.

FNW: Do you own the production facility?

JD: No. It belongs to a friend of mine. When I left Citizens, I presented the project to him and he put his resources at our disposal. These days, producers see brands take off for Asia, Turkey and Mexico. Because with jeans, the battle is about the price and no longer about the product. And premium labels, with such tight price competition, can no longer afford to produce in the USA. They eventually source elsewhere and their quality drops even further.

FNW: Does this manufacturer have a stake [in your business]?

JD: No, we own it. In future, if I was working with a manufacturer which is very committed to us, I'd think about giving them a percentage. If I found a launderer that wants to work 100% for us and wants to do the research for us, I'd give them a stake. So that these elements of the supply chain can have a direct return for their collaboration.

FNW: [French designer] François Girbaud told us that investment funds always find the denim industry interesting. As you have experience of this, what is your opinion?

JD: If we look at the evolution of the jeans industry, we see there are several new technologies in which we need to invest. One needs resources though. For example, we are investing in laser technology with Jeanologia. With a laser machine, we can create wear marks with extreme accuracy on all our products. Then, we use 3D machines to make special shapes. We also work a lot with ozone washers rather than using chemicals.
to make special shapes. We also work a lot with ozone machines, rather than using chemicals.

**FNW: Are these investments a heavy burden for an independent label?**

**JD:** Very heavy. For a laser marking machine you need to invest €170,000. And you need a dedicated area for the laser, which has to be housed in a suitable environment. Altogether, the budget is €350,000. A huge investment for a small company.

**FNW: Is this why investment funds are interested? Have you already been approached?**

**JD:** Yes, we have been approached. We had a discussion. But we aren’t ready to do it. Finding investors means finding good investors. People who look at products the same way we do. If they only have an eye for figures, Jean Atelier isn’t for them. Because I’d tell them “you will lose a lot of money before you start making a profit.” Not like when I launched 7 For All Mankind or Citizens. Setting up this business will take a little longer, a little more money. It’s dangerous for us when people think “he’s done 7 For All Mankind, he’s done Citizens, he’s sold Lucky, he was with Guess in the 1980s… Everything worked … We must buy a stake in this brand.” Besides, when I left 7 For All Mankind to launch Citizens, the clients followed.

**FNW: Are they still with you?**

**JD:** There are many clients in the upmarket segment who are aware of this. What pleased me most is that those who took the label on board did a good job. I always say this when I launch a new business: it doesn’t take me three months to know if it’ll work. It takes me a week. If the stuff sells in-store, you know you’re on to something.

**FNW: What potential do you think Jean Atelier has?**

**JD:** It could go far. What’s important is to approach the distribution in the right way. For example, with department stores, we said yes to Nordstrom because they put us with designer labels, in a section called Nordstrom Space, which fits us hand in glove. For high-end boutiques, we must come up with products that are consistent with their range. In our first season, we sold out, and all our retailers truly played our game. It’s very encouraging. I’d like to grow the Jean Atelier business to between $20 million and $25 million and then think about a [monobrand] store. And also think about fleshing out the brand, with accessories and a whole range of products with the same feel. A strategy for the future.

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