

# LABEL IS MORE THAN A TAG SEWN ON A SHIRT

ART DIRECTOR SANDY GALLI  
PHOTOGRAPHER LAYNNA MEYLER  
ASSISTED BY SARAH WESTLAKE  
WORDS BY OLA MAZZUCA

If the three wise monkeys of a Japanese pictorial proverb designed clothing, they would assert: "See no label, Hear no label, Speak no label." That's the *modus operandi* of Toronto fashion designers Shawna Robinson and Natalie Sydoruk of LABEL.

The pair follows their own golden rule: by creating clothes for women with various body types and modern, fast-paced lifestyles, the wearer implements their own style rather than being defined by a household name. Robinson defines them as "building blocks for your wardrobe."

Those wondering who the average LABEL woman is can look to talk host Tanya Kim. The duo chose her to model a reconstructed Barbie dress for Toronto Fashion Incubator's 25th anniversary gala — one of their most prestigious events to date. The piece was tough, like Kim, with laser-cut lace over pink satin lining, which translated LABEL's brand identity by "referencing Barbie with a personal spin."

"Tanya Kim is a modern woman," Sydoruk says. "She is a great role model and has a lot going for her on TV."

The busy lives these ladies lead began with humble retail jobs at Toronto's Queen West boutiques Show Room and Mendocino, where

Robinson and Sydoruk examined the ground level experience between consumer and product. Finding quality-conscious items among \$100 polyester shirts was challenging for LABEL, with the two of them falling into "trouble" when caught in their critique of monotonous pieces.

With support from Toronto Fashion Incubator, a non-profit entrepreneurial startup organization, product knowledge stems from professional experience. Sydoruk is a Ryerson University fashion design graduate while Robinson made screen printed t-shirts. Their bond was instant, though the progression of their enterprise was slow and steady.

"In retrospect, we should be more established than we already are because we've been doing this for a while," Robinson says.

But it's a gradual rise that's garnered them the attention they deserve. Their clothing is sold in six Ontario boutiques, including trendy Lost & Found, along with shops in Boston and New York for American audiences. Each purchase is ethical as eighty per cent of LABEL's fabrics and materials are naturally sourced, and leftover scraps are reimagined as hangtags or are donated to local soft sculpture artists.

Sydoruk affirms, "cotton, silk, and bamboo feel better," while Robinson believes that green initiatives are important to modern design.

"When we started our business, we had to be conscious of this," she says of incorporating personal ethics. "Natural fibres are good because if they do end up in a landfill, they will biodegrade very quickly."

Balance plays great contrast with LABEL's Fall/Winter 2012 collection. Inspired by mental instability and elements of Girl, Interrupted, its pieces are versatile to Canadian weather with leather and a non-itchy, recycled poly-acrylic fabric. Unique day-to-night cuts are incorporated into asymmetrical velvet dresses and sleek jackets. The collection's signature piece symbolizes its theme to the maximum: a Rorschach inkblot print blouse.

Robinson says that LABEL runs with strong themes to support their commercial brand. Rather than sticking to a high fashion, couture route, Robinson and Sydoruk produced "A Dangerous Mind", a multimedia video in lieu of a fashion show that captures "the LABEL girl gone mad," disturbed and donned in the season's collection.

Although unconventional marketing approaches show a constant flow of ideas, Robinson feels that "balancing the books" can be a challenge.

"Creating the collections, shaping the brand and working together is quite easy because that's what we're good at," she says. "Managing finances, sales and thinking of future development are challenges because we're both creative."

Sydoruk adds, "It's a constant cycle to keep up with, because as you sell more, you have to produce more."

The Toronto Fashion Incubator eases challenges for LABEL and other upcoming designers, mentoring them on business planning and providing a shared workspace. TFI aims to nurture credibility through its many services until major retailers put the brands in demand.

LABEL wishes to alter this notion in the future of fashion by creating designs consumers will buy and trust, just like they do with H&M and Zara.

"If we continue to buy these labels, we'll all look the same," Robinson says of valuing personal style. "I'd love to see people taking risks on younger brands, being conscious consumers and paying attention to the sustainability behind clothing."

Robinson has seen brands "come and go", but insists that LABEL is here to stay. Proof is in the impression they've made on Toronto's young sartorial audience — those that follow fashion week to the retail stores on city streets, one in which her younger sister works.

Wearing the "quintessential LABEL piece" of an army jacket with chiffon panels and snaps, Robinson's sibling stopped sorting clothing as a customer asked:

"Is that LABEL?"



