

Houston's second-hand-glam, sustainable fashion house hits London runways

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1of10Houston fashion designers Clarence Lee and Jerri Moore

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer



2of10Sarah-Jayne Smith, founder of Magpies & Peacocks, which is dedicated to the redesigning old clothes, fabrics and textiles and turning them into wearable fashion.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer



3of10Creations by Jerri Moore and Clarence Lee using repurposed materials at Magpies & Peacocks

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

As London Fashion Week continues Sunday with runway shows by icons such

as Vivienne Westwood and Roland Mouret, the Houston-based nonprofit fashion design house Magpies & Peacocks is adding a recycled spin to the British runway.

The group, which is Houston's only nonprofit fashion organization that promotes sustainability by finding ways to reuse old clothing and fabrics, has collaborated with three local designers — Jerri Moore, Clarence Lee and Rene Garza — to present collections at London's Fashion Scout indie showcase.

Moore and Lee will feature their Hollywood-glam women's collection called "Undone: the New Americana," which incorporates unexpected fabrics including upholstery jacquards and waxed linens. Garza has reimaged the classic black tuxedo into a modern, eclectic look for women. Both lines are made from fabric remnants and textiles that Magpies & Peacocks receives through donations.

In the eight years since its launch, Magpies & Peacocks, located in a massive warehouse at 908 Live Oak, has diverted more than 165,000 pounds of used fabrics and textiles from landfills by engaging artists and designers to recreate the old into something new. But it's not enough, said founder Sarah-Jayne Smith, a London native and interior designer who moved to Houston more than 20 years ago.

"We've got to do better. Eighty-five percent of everything we wear goes into a landfill. We need to be more honorable about the things we have. It's no secret the fashion industry is a nightmare for our environment."

The environmental damage is increasing as the industry grows, particularly with fast fashion that is often discarded or donated as quickly as it's sold, she said.

In the U.S., only about 10 percent of donated clothes get resold. The rest ends up in landfills — 10 million tons of textiles in the U.S. each year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. These items can sit in a landfill for

some 200 years, leaving toxic chemicals and dyes to contaminate local soil and groundwater.

At Magpies & Peacocks, Smith shows off dog toys made from discarded T-shirts and dog collars made from men's ties, clutch bags from upholstery fabric and bomber jackets made from mesh fencing and textiles left over from the 2017 Super Bowl LI in Houston. The NFL actually donated 3,000 shopping bags and 8 miles of plastic fencing to the group. Some of the materials will be used to create a uniform for NASA to celebrate its 50th anniversary this spring.

Magpies & Peacocks collects donated clothing, textile samples, remnants, leather scraps, ends of fabric bolts, trimmings and abandoned dry-cleaning clothes. Then emerging and established artists and fashion designers are engaged to create new, wearable pieces out of the donations.

“We want consumers to look at clothing and fashion in a different mindset. You don't have to go out and buy new. You can give old clothing new life,” said Smith, who works closely with Magpies & Peacock's communications director Ahshia Berry on each endeavor.

To that point, Smith approached Moore, also a filmmaker, and Lee, a skilled fashion illustrator, to collaborate on a seven-piece collection that used some of the donated fabrics. The designers had worked together previously when Moore launched her luxury evening-gown collection in 2011. It sold at Tootsies.

In recent years, Moore has returned to filmmaking. She produced “Land of Leopold,” which starred her actor son, Christopher Pinkalla, and aired on HBO in 2016. Her recent film, “Bull,” about an aging rodeo clown in Houston's Acres Homes, is set to screen at the Cannes Film Festival in May. And Lee, a 2014 graduate of the Art Institute of Houston, went on to become head designer of the Houston-based Inclan Studio womenswear. It's sold in 60 stores nationally, including Cotton Club Collection on San Felipe, and in

Toyko.

Reconnecting on a project that helps save the planet is a dream, the designers said.

“We have the ability to get into each other’s minds when it comes to design,” Moore said. “When we first started sketching, we understood exactly what we wanted and how it would look.”

Moore and Lee began working on the collection for Magpies & Peacocks early last year. Their collection was accepted for London Fashion Week even before it was even complete.

Garza actually showed his recycled line with Magpies & Peacocks in London in February 2018 and was featured on BritishVogue.com.

“This definitely opened my eyes to what’s happening in our industry and how much waste it produces,” Moore said. “It was like a ‘Project Runway’ challenge for us to work together on looks made from recycled material. We had to make it work.”

Using materials such as a men’s shirt or upholstery from a chair is a challenge because there’s only so much of it available, Lee said, unlike bolts of fabric at fabric stores. It’s also harder to sew heavier upholstery fabrics. “But once you start cutting the fabric, it all falls into place,” he said.

Moore and Lee also worked with artist Nicola Parente, who painted on the fabric to create a more deconstructed look.

The result is a collection with a relaxed, luxury feel, including a recycled gown, jogger pants with neon drawstrings and pieces with unfinished hems.

The collection was created with celebrities — such as actresses Zendaya and Tracee Ellis Ross — in mind. But the message behind the work is about helping to protect the planet.

“I had to take a step back and look in my closet after we started,” Lee said. “I challenged myself to see how many T-shirts I had. I counted 40 black T-shirts alone. You don’t really think about how much you are contributing to the problem until you are faced with it.”

Smith hopes more people realize it, too.

“I would like the soul to get back into dressing,” she said. “I want more people to be mindful about the clothes they wear and the things they buy. If this just sparks a little interest in being a responsible consumer, then we are making a difference.”

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