



LESS IS MORE (OF BEAUTIFUL THINGS)

Sustainability plays a huge role in Liz Mitchell's clothing designs, in the fabrics she uses and in her design philosophy. By Annie Gray.



New Zealand designer Liz Mitchell is celebrated for her fine tailoring and the quality of the fabrics she uses in her clothing designs. And increasingly she is putting emphasis on sustainability and on the up-scaling of the fabrics she uses.

"I am not about fast fashion, but rather about slow fashion," about loving her craft, and loving the whole process that is involved in creating clothes of real beauty and quality. She says only a handful of designers are now keeping these traditions alive in New Zealand and her passion is for the fine fabrics she uses and the skill of bespoke tailoring and couture.

Mitchell, who was appointed a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for services to the fashion industry in the 2005, is currently working with vintage Japanese textiles which she sources from an antique dealer. Many of these Japanese kimonos are only worn for special occasions and the fabric is of the highest quality. She sees using these pre-owned kimonos as a reuse of resources noting that one of the beauties of these garments is that they are hand sewn. Their unique construction is discovered as they are taken

apart, the origami folding to utilise the length of woven fabric and only two cuts made for the neck shaping.

Environmental considerations are playing an increasing role in her business and Mitchell believes part of design now is thinking about waste. She is horrified by the images of ships carrying tonnes of waste into the Third World and believes we all have to take responsibility. She also points to companies such as the British-based chain, Marks & Spencer, which is placing an increasing emphasis on sustainability in all the goods it sources and the disposal of waste materials and garments at the end of their usefulness.

In the past people had very small wardrobes, she says, but now they might have separate dressing rooms for their clothing and shoes but Mitchell suggests women should look to have less of more beautiful things. "Have less that has more meaning for you."

The price of clothing in general has come down markedly over the last 10 years but she believes it is at the price of both lesser quality materials being used and of unsustainable working practices in parts of Asia.

She says that if things don't cost anything they still cost the environment – fabric that is produced cheaply often means a lot of environmental waste and pollution. The impact particularly of pollution in China and India has been devastating to communities.

Seven or eight years ago there was a range of sources for quality cashmere but now the mills who source their cashmere from Mongolia have pushed to make the product cheaper so farmers are carrying more animals on the land and the fibre isn't grown for so long to give the quality needed for a luxury fibre.

In the 20 years she has been in business Mitchell has had opportunities to expand and leverage her brand. In 2006 she created a diffusion label "Mitchell by Liz Mitchell", an affordable range for women, developed with Farmer's Trading Company. Mitchell was able to offer her designs to a much bigger market throughout New Zealand. The company produced this line and developed knowledge manufacturing from China. It was a successful development for a number of years and also included a lingerie range.

The fashion industry is notoriously tough and the challenges of the business environment in the recession had an impact. She had to restructure her business and survived by scaling back and focusing on the core strengths of the business.

These days she concentrates on bespoke tailored fashions, the bridal market and a limited edition of ready-to-wear classics in her Grey Lynn retail store.

Mitchell is an ambassador for The Campaign For Wool, an international promotion to encourage customers to embrace wool and its qualities. Wool has always been a favoured fabric to work with, especially New Zealand merino jersey, with its beautiful drape.

Mitchell has a passion for working with the best fabrics available. For many years she has used woollen materials by celebrated tailoring houses Dormeuil and Scabal. Other suppliers include an English company which will produce exclusive fabric weaving especially for Mitchell and her clients. A favourite silk supplier is the famous Thai silk manufacturer, Jim Thompson.

This summer Liz Mitchell has also been inspired by the history of indigo textile dyeing and printing in Japan, Java and West Africa. Beautiful contemporary African cotton prints have been sourced and created into full skirts and stylish dresses.

Her latest designs include delicately hand painted material and hand-sewn appliqué providing a strong point of difference to her clothing range.

Business women make up a good proportion of her clientele and are right across the age spectrum.

"Everyone is working so much harder – for some clients shopping is enjoyable, but for others it is frustrating and they don't have the time."

She often helps clients by putting together their wardrobe, suggesting ideas on what ensembles might work together – perhaps something the client has not considered for herself before. **M**



BUILDING A CORPORATE WARDROBE

Designer Liz Mitchell suggests that a working wardrobe can start with buying a few high quality pieces – a well tailored jacket and dress or fine wool trousers that can each work with other ready-to-wear pieces.

Mitchell says the cut of the jacket and the quality of the fabric are important noting that these items are great staples. She also likes the idea that clothing can work at different levels...

a little bit of metallic in the jacket fabric means that paired with jeans and heels it can look sexy to go into the evening, while with a dress it can have a more classic, timeless effect.

"That is what we give customers – the tools to know how to wear things and the styling to create a versatile contemporary wardrobe."

Asked if business women were more casual these days, rather than the power dressing of the past, Mitchell says they are more individual in their mode of dress and points to the influence of the Duchess of Cambridge with her beautiful coats and dresses. Successful women can express their femininity with style, strength and confidence.

She says the most important things in fashion dressing are the proportions and balancing – how to enhance what you wear so that the balance is right – slim leg pants with a tunic top for example – and most of all the fit and cut must be comfortable.

As to pricing a bespoke woman's jacket can cost \$1500 upwards plus GST, a trouser suit from \$2500 plus GST, all dependent on the fabric you choose. The bespoke jackets are made to the client's measurements in a toile first so the fit around the armholes, shoulders and bust is exact. And all the patterns for each client are kept on file for future use.