



Maria Pichler



Exclusive Interview

Oliver Kresse

Finding the unexpected moments in fashion

By Maria Pichler

With big labels and corporations dominating Europe's sparkling yet sophisticated fashion scene, it takes more than just talent to successfully persist as an independent designer. For German designer Oliver Kresse, a clear artistic vision, creative curiosity and the willingness to take risks became the recipe for success. With his Hamburg-based label, the up-and-coming designer puts out two collections every year and has become one of the popular addresses in Europe for elegant yet highly wearable designer wear.

A few years ago, you were involved in a rather unconventional fashion project. You and three other designers were asked to design a clothing line out of the interior upholstery of a car. How did this come about?

The project was based on a collaboration between one of Germany's major daily newspapers, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and several German car manufacturers. Each designer was coupled with a specific car maker – in my case Volkswagen – in order to design young and fun clothes, using the



manufacturer's upholstery material. The challenging part was that we didn't know what textiles we would be working with up until later in the process. Needless to say I wasn't exactly thrilled when I discovered that I would be working with Styrofoam! Leather would definitely have been an easier material to work with, but in the end the pieces turned out just fine. They were in fact so popular that I was asked to produce a larger quantity for retail. To spice things up, we added a few bags to the clothing line, made out

of the same materials.

Over the past few years, your label "Oliver Kresse" has gained tremendous recognition in fashion circles throughout Germany as well as Italy, France, the Netherlands and Iceland – just to name a few. How do you explain the great success of your line?

I think people appreciate the high quality and exclusiveness of my work. I believe in fashion as a means to bring out its wearer's personality rather than subdue it. I therefore keep the person that's going to wear my clothes in my mind the entire time I'm designing. The results are elegant and refined pieces that complement the human shape without being uncomfortable. I want the buyer to sense the luxury of the piece, but at the same time present him with a highly wearable garment. The next step is to design the shoes that will go with my clothes since I often find it difficult to find the perfect match for my

“Good fashion enhances the personality of its client rather than subduing it.”



garments. And one day, the other accessoires as well. Selected jewelry might be something I'd like to incorporate in the not-too-distant future.

Your collection for Spring and Summer of 2008 certainly turned a lot of heads. What was your inspiration?

When I designed the new collection I was thinking of a Frisian Summer [province in Northern Holland] even though I never really sit down to consciously think what I want to do next. Creativity in my case is something that happens almost naturally. I always have ideas or get inspired by certain colors, patterns or something I'd like to wear myself. With every new piece I make the effort to raise the quality.

Since its launch in 2003, the label has come a long way, and I continue to work on its sophistication and style as we move forward.

You currently design two collections a year. To what extent are you involved in the various stages of the process?

I'm there for every single part of the production. The famous German designer Karl Lagerfeld once said, the most important thing you need in this business is capital. My capital is my talent and experience coupled with a tremendous sense of perfectionism –



in this I'm probably very German. I design, I tailor, I sew and overlook the work of my employees – in other words, I do it all. We are still a relatively small business but nevertheless compete with the major companies in the fashion industry; efficiency is therefore the key.

You outsource specific areas of your production to countries like Poland and Romania. How important is the collaboration with other nations in your business?

Very important; both in respect to the actual manufacturing process as well as the acquisition of materials. A great part of our production is being processed in Poland and Romania. We provide the respective companies with the necessary patterns, sketches and materials and they go from there. Unfortunately things don't always flow as smoothly as we'd like. A few years ago, we had to unseam 400 out of 700 shirts that were crafted in Russia; they failed my quality control because they weren't assembled properly.

Obtaining the fabrics can be equally challenging, especially with countries like Italy. Italy has, without a doubt, the most beautiful fabrics when it comes to weaves and craftsmanship. But it's not unlikely that you order red fabric from them and they send you green. In this I really came to appreciate the German

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work ethic based on reliability and punctuality – without sounding overly patriotic.

The high demands you place on yourself and your creations are apparent in your work. What qualities are you looking for in your apprentices and new employees?

I'm not interested in grades or letters of recommendation. Fashion is a craft and an art, and you have to have a feel for it – that's something I can't teach you. As a requirement, anybody who wants to start an apprenticeship with us has to complete an internship first, whereas all regular applicants have to test-sew for two or three days before I consider them. Since I learned everything from scratch myself, it's hard to fool me. Eighty percent of all applicants don't make it, but my method still proves itself successful; not only are our trainees top candidates for fashion schools, I'm also the only employer whose staff looks at their watches and begs for longer working hours to finish up a piece. We all share a great passion for the work we do, and I think it shows.

Location, location, location

While a lot of hip and innovative fashion comes from Berlin, your studio and main store are located in Hamburg. Why there?

I did my apprenticeship [with German designer Brigitte Büge] here, and during the course of the three-year-training, really came to appreciate the city and what it has to offer. There's a reason Hamburg is called "the gateway to the world." Its history as a major trade center and the highly efficient infrastructure make it a wonderful work environment, especially for obtaining the materials and textiles

I work with. Berlin surely is an important location for fashion, too. For that reason part of my collection is for sale in several boutiques in Berlin. From a creative point of view, however, I feel that Berlin is still in the middle of a maturing process, still striving to find its true identity in the world of fashion. This aspect aside, I also needed a location with a bustling economy and, if you will, a certain capacity by my clientele to spend. Hamburg offers all that.



Independent thinking

Speaking of a "gateway to the world," do you have any plans to introduce your line to the US market in the near future?

I'm definitely open to this option. While I know that my creations are not designed for the American mainstream, I do believe that in certain parts of the country there would be an openness to the fashion I design. I'm thinking of New York or Los Angeles. In order for this to happen I'd have to get an import company in the States. Just like with Japan, I can't simply mail my clothes to boutiques and retail stores throughout America but need

a mediator. We'll see what happen.

In terms of marketing, my possibilities are somewhat limited since I don't have the budget of big cosmetic companies that spend up to 80 percent of their revenue on marketing. I also don't believe in taking out credit to generate capital. Overall, this allows me much more freedom in my creative process and ensures I'm independent.

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