

CULTURES IN BETWEEN

DESIGN THROUGH MODE, DESIGN AND PORTRAITURE

The Canadian's Paraphernalia take on Menswear
Photography by Jody Rogac / Dana Lee Studio



Going beyond the conventions of a typical fashion lookbook, Dana Lee's dearest advocates and fellow New York artistic individuals such as James Wilson of website Secret Forts, Painter Mat Bushell (pictured above) and Jimmy Seitang of Psychic Ills were apart of her Fall 2010 collection. A collection transpired from Dana's studio's collected and bygone garments and objects.

Dana, can you share with us your personal journey from Vancouver to now where you live and work in New York City. What have you experienced and what's made you who you are today?

I guess the personal journey started back when my brother Derek and I would fish for rusty nails over the backyard creek with magnets tied to the end of a shovel, and cut and fold out 3 dimensional buildings from empty wax milk cartons. This is what we did for fun. We made fun from simple things and didn't pay too much attention to pop culture. Vancouver, Canada, was where I was born and raised except for a few early years from age 5-9 when we lived in a Pulp and paper town in Northern BC. A teen, I had a Swiss boyfriend. His mother ran a fashion boutique and his father ran ski shop. My Dad is Chinese and my mom is Canadian, so we would have Saturday morning Dim Sum and Sunday night Roasts. My first job in the fashion industry was working in a factory. I knew one day I would start my own business so figured it would be a valuable place to learn, despite the lack of glamour. I cut samples in the corner while about 50 workers sewed. We worked on Saturdays and even worked on Christmas day! In 2004 and 2005 I lived and interned in London and Helsinki just as Scandinavian fashion began to blow up and Dior Homme was at their peak. I was impressed how the Scandinavian brands could make great design for the masses and also noticed it was a great time to pursue menswear. I moved to NYC in 2006 and started my first line from scratch, A-Z Collection.

In the past, menswear was a supplementary range, complimenting womenswear by fashion designers. Strangely, for some menswear has become their pinnacle and today we find an increasing interesting number of female menswear designers including Siv Stodol Ute Ploier, Margaret Howell, amongst others. Why are you drawn to menswear?

Ya, It's amazing to see the lead that menswear has taken and also see certain women adding a point of view to menswear and making good, relevant product. I'd love to know why Siv, Ute, and Margaret chose menswear. That would be great conversation. As for me, I was a slight tomboy. I wore a lot of boyish clothes but at the same time was really picky about how the clothes looked: the cut the texture, the imperfections... they had to be perfect and have some sort of style or refinement. Also, growing up in the Northwest naturally encouraged dressing casually. In the mid 90's, I saw a photo of Shalom Harlow wearing some olive-drab long johns under a pair of rolled up jeans, which led to a funny obsession with finding the perfect men's thermals. Soon I was spending a lot of time in army surplus shops and camping outlets, and found all sorts of rarities that didn't exist in the regular mall shops. Mostly men's or uniform-type stuff. I believe that was what led to a detailed interest in news clothing and style. Design-wise, the parameters of commercial menswear are much more narrow than in Women's, and I enjoy trying to create a relevant and interesting statement while staying within men's comfort zones.

How did A-Z collection come to being and was this introduced by you? Did your work then transpire across to now your current eponymous work?

Yes, I started A-Z around 2006. The idea was create a brand that celebrated everyday things. At the time, fashion was very dark, gothic, asymmetrical and ethereal. I thought it would be inserting to do something the opposite: re-introduce color, and create pieces that were amusingly straight forward, and use iconic stock fabrics. Everything I made for A-Z was to fit the A-Z brand and it was very formulaic

and rather spartan: Geometric lines, flatter fabrics, more primary colors.... Dana Lee is aesthetically different: more broad and textural. Both brands, however, are somewhat of a tribute to everyday living.



Dana Lee identified that a working man's staple is indeed his working shirt. Pictured and worn by Jimmy Seitaro is a rugged yet soft charcoal melange knitted cardigan. Knitted garments with varying mixtures of woolen fabrics has built this collection with a greater working dimension.

Without too much categorization, to be the equivalent of being elegant as a woman means to be as a man with a sense of rugged rigor – putting layering interesting fabrics together. How have you updated your outerwear and wardrobe pieces and what kinds of fabrics you have explored?

A wide variety of fabrics have been on the radar: some more novel and expensive imported goods, some stocked goods that are very cheap and generic, some rugged, some fine. The most important quality to is that they all have an authentic feeling that works for the design: 1/4" saddle leather, a nubby wool suiting, a basic waxed cotton, a sturdy smooth white poplin shirting, a basic stocked rubber-backed nylon, or a classic alpaca lining. As for wardrobe, the range is broad. A sturdy, classic, unassuming undertone but translated into fashion.

What formulates the start of creating specific individual garments? How do you form ideas around this that has resulted in cable knitted sweaters, long johns to the nubby crewneck grey cardigan in your previous range?

The nubby crewneck idea was formed around the a-z concept. I chose it because it looked like a black and white composition book- very A-Z. However, The long johns and sweaters are a Dana Lee thing: the long johns are an updated softer version of the itchy Sanfield's Long johns that I sought out as a teenager, and the sweaters are hand-knitted in Canada. My first step in developing a style is deciding what supports the brand.

A strange phenomenon is realizing how much men don't like fashion but clothes yet it's a slight taboo to be socializing about it publicly. The compliant has been menswear has needed more softer tones in fit and cut – basically the garment feeling. Is this why you have chosen to combine cotton/cashmere blends worsted wool and flannel cotton?

I'm glad that people are become more interested in the feeling of a garment. The soul or feeling of a garment is something that is really important to me (maybe even more that the flat design.)

How did you extend your ideas to the current Spring/Summer 2010 range and can you share what individual pieces you have introduced?

Fall 09 was based on the austere Canadian Winter dependable I grew up with, Spring was inspired by the idea of sun bleached work shirts and painting smocks that hang around the garden and clotheslines during the summertime. The spring collection was marked by a bleached ombre fade. We made chambray work shirts and jean jackets then dipped-dyed the bottom halves in bleach. The effect was a gradually fade from indigo to pink.



What are important aspects surrounding your process of design:

The odd and indefinable cast of people who are in and out our studio during the week. Fresh food, sunlight and a comfortable chair. FIP radio and my dog Zafiro.

Jody Rogac has led your collection's past two seasons in photographic direction. It's also reflected a soft, nubby and possibly reserved personality across the range. Is this a fair observation?

Yes, I think that's fair assessment. We wanted the photos to feel more like portraits and capture not only the feeling of the different people who were cast, but also the feeling of the clothing- what it feels like to wear a piece of clothing that you love and feel natural in. Jody takes amazing portraits that really capture the style and essence of people and places. I never get tired of looking at Jody's photos. They are just so special, and I'm continually looking at them over and over. I've seen photographers attempt a similar style, but the feeling of a Jody photo can never be replaced. She is such a pleasure to work with.

I'm curious to know from your perspective on the world of fashion right now and where you think you seat inside or outside of it. On one hand, you could be fashion educated; on the other hand you can experience many things and just pursue it. Has it been difficult to set up a growing fashion business especially in New York and any factored considerations?

That's a really good question and a difficult question. I have felt both inside and outside. Some days I want to be outside and some days I think I should be more on the inside. Most days, I try not to think about it. It's a fast paced industry and work needs to get done. Like running down stairs: if you pay too much attention to the stairs you lose your instinct (and maybe even your footing!)

New York has been an ideal city to work with Fashion. The nature of the manufacturing business is challenging- it is very capital intensive and the day-to-day is much different on the 'inside' then on the outside. The more I work in this industry I become less judgmental and respect thosewho can make it happen and keep it going, no matter what the style.

Where to from here?

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