

Gemma A. Williams / Fashion Curator and Author

In the fold

For a number of years the discipline of fashion in Ireland has been marginalised by funding agencies, trade bodies and arguably the wider design sector and community, often hindering a meaningful engagement with dress and costume on a cultural level.

The inclusion of fashion and textiles within the broader remit of Irish Design 2015, a year dedicated to the promotion of Irish Design within Ireland and abroad, is a timely and monumental step towards an acceptance of fashion as artistic, intellectual and design research expression.

In The Fold, an exhibition of emerging Irish fashion designers, premiered at the International Fashion Showcase as part of Irish Design 2015. A joint initiative between the British Council and the British Fashion Council, the International Fashion Showcase was established in 2012 to highlight the importance of contemporary culture and identity in young designers' practice. The only event open to the general public during London's Autumn/Winter Fashion Week schedule, the showcase offers a unique platform for the dissemination of noncommercial, craft-led garments. Visitors in their thousands range from academia and students to the fashion professionals and industry insiders.

The current context of Irish students and graduates migrating to London to avail of specialist masters and internships, or establishing their businesses in the city to avail of mentoring and financial support, places London as the prime location to launch Irish Design 2015's dialogue with fashion. Given its positioning among the big four fashion schedules as the city for avant garde and experimental fashion, London Fashion Week also lies at the very heart of this dynamic eco system. Continuing with this very considered repositioning of Ireland as a home of avant garde Irish fashion, I was particularly excited to hear that the exhibition would return to Ireland, thus engaging a whole new audience. On display at Kildare Village's retail space the exhibition unwittingly acts as a showcasing bridge between consumption and culture, the components, which continually blur and push the boundaries of this discipline.

Curatorial Philosophy

As the curator for the inaugural Irish pavilion at London Fashion Week I was

conscious of the need to craft a compelling curatorial narrative.

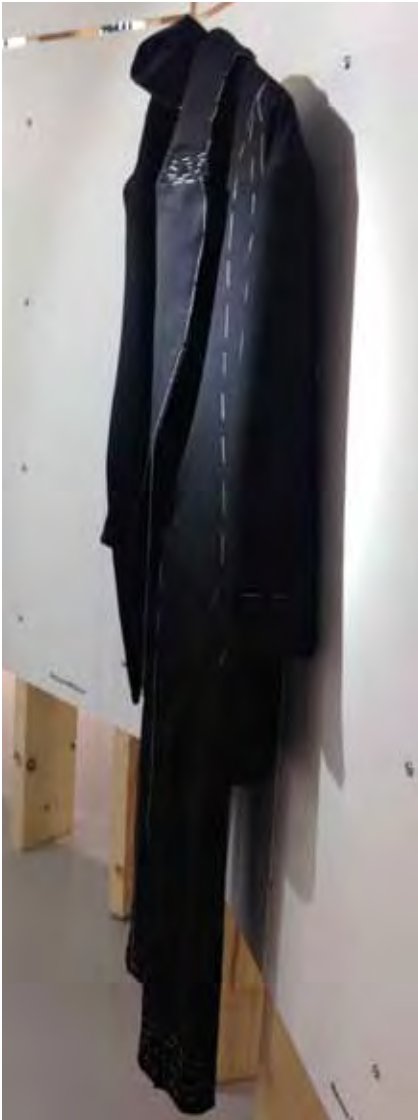
Living on an island inspires unique parameters of self-sufficiency and sustainability, which lie at the core of Irish Design 2015. What might be considered negatives such as isolation and remoteness can arguably be channeled into positives, resulting in an indigenous identity that is truly unique.

In the Fold sought to showcase a new generation of Irish design graduates who together are changing the face of Irish fashion today. In their collective output one can detect the emergence of a singular identity. Assured and confident, these graduates are addressing issues often clichés of Irish identity, navigating them with a contemporary bravery. These participants' output recognises the role of fashion and making in daily life, for example the make-do-and-mend tradition, as well as, the importance of concept behind a research-informed design collection.

The exhibition title itself holds special significance, representing a colloquialism for a group with common beliefs or the feeling of being part of a group. It also spoke to the sartorial act of constructing and creating garments, essentially formed from the folds of materials and fabrics.

Process

The selection process for inclusion the exhibition was the result of a call out by the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland for designers with their submitted portfolios and personal statements critically reviewed by the Fashion And Textiles advisor to Irish Design 2015, Aisling Farinella and myself as the exhibition curator, under the guidance of Alex Milton, Irish Design 2015 Programme Director.



Each applicant was considered in terms of unique vision, engagement with techniques and materiality and predicted longevity in and relevance to the industry. The final selection included Rory Parnell Mooney, Michael Stewart, Caoimhe MacNeice, Naoise Farrell, Richard Malone, Jocelyn Murray Boyne, Oliver Duncan and Laura Kinsella. During the selection a distinct aesthetic, based on purity of silhouette, handcraft practices and sociological interventions, presented itself, helping inform the curatorial approach.

Images courtesy of Caoimhe McNiece, Suzanne Martin & Anthony Woods



Exhibition design by ABGC created an installation subtly reinforced the curation and content, and created an holistic design presentation and spatial narrative that enabled the garments engage audiences in a meaningful discourse. An emphasis on the power of the object, abstracted from the body, was foremost within the display while the audience, guided by the exhibition layout, was left to draw their own conclusions and interpretations. The accompanying catalogue offered another level of interrogation.

The 8 selected designers represented design Universities from the UK and Ireland and cover accessory, menswear and womenswear sectors. Each of the designers' creative approach is based on intellectual



considerations of function, fabrications and cut as well as intricate tailoring.

The effects of living on an island inspire unique parameters of self-sufficiency, illustrated in the collective creation and manipulation of material as a basis to practice. Just as the Antwerp Six revolutionised Belgium's national identity in the 1980s, instigating a purchase-local mentality, these designers embody a fresh new outlook questioning the possibility of reconstructing identity through design. Thus the legacies from In The Fold are manifold. Networks have been expanded among the young design community while fashion curation and fashion-led exhibitions are key to this communication and transformational process. Moreover Ireland should be engaging fashion tourism as a means to support indigenous crafts and techniques as well as positioning itself in relationship to and within the wider international fashion network.

What is interesting for practitioners in Ireland is that much like other emerging fashion

hubs, the scope for designers here to identify alternative career paths is far more flexible than more established centres. Winner of the Deutsche Bank Award, Wexford-born Richard Malone's focus is on sustainability and although London-based he currently produces small quantities of his first collection in his hometown. Dublin-based milliner Laura Kinsella operates on a bespoke basis only, while LSAD graduate Michael Stewart has chosen further study at London's Royal College of Art as his next step.

Conclusion

Once fashion design is accepted on an artistic level it facilitates the integration of fashion's ancillary trades, photography, styling, curation, and so on, which in turn foster the creation of a supportive infrastructure. Once this is firmly in place, the economic benefits of trade will filter through, illustrating the importance of culture and the creative industries. In The Fold is a vital first step in supporting, mentoring and disseminating Ireland's fashion designers and growing the creative sector.

