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Genderless Fashion's Australian Future

More and more designers are crossing gender lines, bridging the gap and blurring the boundaries between menswear and womenswear.



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harmony for mankind (a not particularly gender-neutral choice of words) and Gernreich responded by sending bald men and women onto the runway, their eyebrows shaved cleanly off. They stood side-by-side wearing identical jumpsuits, mini skirts and shapeless kaftans. Gernreich's deconstruction of gender won praise from the fashion industry, but his message failed to break into the mainstream. It was only a year earlier, after all, that Barbra Streisand became the first woman to wear pants to the Oscars.

Almost 50 years on, fashion is still largely divided into his and hers collections; we're not living in the genderless fashion future Gerneich imagined. This is despite the growing understanding in the mainstream that multiple gender identities beyond male and female exist - that there is a spectrum of gender identity. And that gender is a social construct. There has, though, been a shift in mood, and considering the rapidly changing norms and ideas around sex and gender, gender-neutral fashion looks more poised to exit the conceptual realm - and haute fashion runways - than ever before. (In fashion, the terms "unisex" and "gender-neutral" imply clothing that does not adhere to the traditional, binary definition of sex and gender, and they are often used interchangeably.)

Androgynous fashion is nothing new; it's been a stalwart on couture runways since at least the 1960s. In the '80s haute-fashion designers such as Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Walter Van Beirendonck deconstructed and blurred historical gender boundaries with their imaginative, avant-garde forms. In the '90s, American sportswear brands sold a unisex aesthetic to the masses.

More recently experimental designs by Rad Hourani, Eckhaus Latta, Hood By Air and Telfar have pushed gender-neutral fashion forward. And what separates our current era of androgynous and gender-neutral fashions from previous iterations is the cultural climate. Discussions surrounding gender and LGBTIQ+ issues occur in the mainstream. Now, global

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that fashion's gender revolution might be embraced en masse – retailers need only catch up.

As usual, runways have provided a space for experimentation that most retailers can't or are too risk-averse to try. Designers including Kenzo, Tom Ford, Vetements and Calvin Klein have condensed once-separate men's and women's runway shows into co-ed affairs. Thom Browne, Rick Owens, Louis Vuitton and Chanel are dressing men in traditionally female garments such as skirts and pearls. Earlier this year New York Fashion Week added a unisex and non-binary category to the show calendar.

"It's not a fad," says Sydney-based designer Robert Rigutto, who recently launched unisex label Level, which focuses on knitted jersey T-shirts, sweats and hoodies. "It's a political movement and progression of humanity. We're at the pivotal point where everyone wants the same opportunities regardless of gender, size and age. The dots are all lining up politically and socially and not just in one area – in pop culture and everything you look at today. It's all about acceptance."

Dylan Best launched his Melbourne-based unisex casualwear label Best Jumpers last year. While working in New York, he'd seen a desire among consumers and especially his women colleagues for looser, menswear-style fits while working for Derek Lam, 3.1 Phillip Lim, Band of Outsiders and then Rag & Bone as intern, before joining the design teams at Ralph Lauren and then Club Monaco.

"It was often women who bought the men's clothing," he says of his experience at Rag & Bone and Club Monaco in particular. "The women I worked with at Club Monaco used to wear the men's samples, like pants, because they liked the more oversized, loose fit."

He points to French menswear label Ami, which recently launched a capsule collection for women after designer Alexandre Mattiussi realised women wanted his clothes and were buying them in smaller sizes.

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Best's range of unisex Japanese cotton tracksuits aren't divided into men's and women's styles – there's just one fit, in a range of sizes – and his campaigns feature women and men.

“Women's styles tend to be more tailored and slimmer. Men's styling is a more oversized and looser look,” Best explains. “So if you're doing a women's jumper, usually it's shorter and slimmer. I've designed one fit – so my jumper is a bit longer and looser – and about the half of our sales are to women.”

Best Jumpers and Level, along with other Australian labels such as Strateas Carlucci, Ten Pieces and A.BCH, represent a diversity of styles and aesthetics but all explore unisex clothing concepts. At one end of the spectrum Best and Ten Pieces are gender-neutral, and do not have men's or women's ranges; in the middle, Courtney Holm's sustainable basics label A.BCH doesn't have men's or women's sections on its website and her designs are not overtly masculine or feminine, but she does design with gender in mind; Strateas Carlucci designs distinct men's and women's collections, but they are conceived as unified whole rather than separate ranges, with tweaks made to, say, the same concept for a jacket that exists in both ranges.

Some pioneering retailers are experimenting with removing gender divisions in their stores. London's Selfridges launched Agender, a genderless pop-up retail space in 2015, and Dover Street Market organises its clothing lines by brand, not by the typical men's and women's sections found in most department stores. High street giants H&M and Zara each launched unisex capsule ranges (in 2016 and 2017 respectively), though both collections – all loose hoodies and jeans but no feminine-coded items like dresses or skirts – were criticised for merely capitalising on the movement without challenging society's gender norms. And none of these retailers have announced dedicated, permanent genderless lines or retail categories yet.

Lane Crawford, the Hong Kong and China-based luxury retailer, is taking note of the gender-neutral movement, but hasn't dived in headfirst. Chief brand officer Joanna Gunn says while millennial customers in particular are responding to unisex

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“This [movement] has not necessarily changed the way we buy at Lane Crawford,” Gunn told *Broadsheet*. “We still buy for men’s and women’s categories but we do bear in mind the unisex trend in the same way we have colours, fabric, silhouette trends. In terms of merchandising, it has made us think more about how we could make it easier for customers to shop across category.”

Gunn, who has led Lane Crawford’s charge to find emerging Australian fashion talent to stock at its stores, says it’s increasingly new-generation labels and younger customers at the forefront of unisex fashion. “Millennials use clothing to express their individuality and that could mean wearing items across both the menswear and womenswear category,” she says. “[But] there is still a majority of customers who aren’t as fashion forward.”

While retailers wrestle over the best way forward, designers are rising to fill the widening niche. The New York-based, Melbourne-raised designer Jess McKie launched her label Skodia in 2014 with no specific gender in mind.

“It was a very natural thing for me from the get-go,” says McKie. “I always wore both men’s and women’s clothing so I assumed others did too.”

Skodia’s signature revolves around a slightly oversized, comfort-first aesthetic (sweatshirts, boxy jackets) that fits a wide variety of bodies. But the label doesn’t shy away from traditionally feminine spaghetti-strap singlets or slip dresses either.

McKie’s sizing strategy for Skodia is built into the label’s beginnings. “Most garments are slightly oversized and range in sizing so our customer can choose what best works for them,” she says. “All our bottoms and pants have an elastic waistband with a sizeable waist tie not only for comfort but for fit also.” “[Sizing] is a challenge and it takes more time to get right,” says Level’s Rigutto. “We do a lot of fittings and research, putting the design on people of different ages and sizes to make sure it’s looking good.”

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buy in most: men are committed to stricter sartorial limits.

“Despite advances, there is still a real anxiety in men that if they’re seen to be paying too much attention to their appearance or dressing effeminately, they might be considered gay,” she says. “It’s not as bad as it used to be, but a lot of men feel constrained by social expectations of their gender.”

In the early days of her New Zealand label Kowtow Gosia Piatek produced a women’s, men’s and unisex line, but eventually dropped down to just womenswear because women were predominantly the buyers of the unisex pieces.

“Most men still dress very classic,” says Piatek. “I am influenced by a utilitarian, minimal and sometimes masculine aesthetic so, it’s only natural that some of our pieces work on men too. Our woven trousers and some of our shirting are frequently worn by men. However, we design and fit our garments on women.”

Dr. Sherlock leads the fashion studies course at RMIT in Melbourne, which, a few years ago, began spending a portion of the third-year course analysing gender theory. For a few weeks in the course, students delve into seminal texts by social and gender theorists Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler that posit that gender is fluid rather than fixed – a sliding scale of varying degrees of masculinity and femininity. (This is something a growing portion of millennial shoppers already believe.) The hope is that students will keep inclusivity in mind with their own designs.

“We teach them to question what seems natural,” says Sherlock. “How can fashion contribute in a positive way and become more inclusive to a wider range in society? How do we change fashion positively rather than reproduce the same old habits? Any fashion program these days can’t ignore these important questions.”

Harriette Richards, a teaching associate in the Bachelor of Fashion Design at RMIT believes an understanding of gender as a construct will make students more employable. “I think the

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masculine styles, with masculinity being the norm,” says Sherlock. “We’re now seeing more ideas of men wearing skirts (or at least not pants). Whether or not this will continue is whether masculinity is ready for this shift.”

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