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As told to René Kladzyk, 2238 words.

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On doing something radically different with your work

Fashion designer Elena Velez discusses being truly authentic, maintaining a healthy balance of cynicism and optimism, and democratizing the American fashion narrative.

Can you describe what a typical day looks like for you right now as you prepare for fashion week, if there even is such a thing?

All of my days are relatively different, and now I'm getting to the place where I have the luxury to plug in different formats at different hours of the day. I have two kids under two. I have a partner who's also a painter, and we share a space in Brooklyn. The way in which we pass off our children is flexible. I have a great team of people now who I'm able to delegate off to—right now my work is very high level and the majority is securing funding, to get through some big projects we have coming up on the horizon.

I want to talk about a number of the challenges involved in the work you do, but before we go there, can you tell me what sustains you, working in fashion design?

I've known I wanted to be in fashion since I was literally four or five years old. My love for what I do is very craft-based, and I didn't even realize that there was an industry or an economy around this thing that I love to do until much later in life. Every day is a reconciliation between this passion that I have for this craft and having to make it in this industry. If I could choose to love any other thing, I really would. It really is such a frustrating and political world that requires a lot of entrepreneurial endurance and a lot of ambition and a lot of social nuance.

I have a propulsion from some place, and I think the reason that I've gotten this far is that creative propulsion also intersects with this chemical compatibility that I have for getting up every day and doing the same thing over again—being perfectionistic, having the drive and the focus to really see this through. If I had one thing without the other, I don't think I'd be able to say that I am where I am today. It really truly is an absolute coincidence of passion meeting physical chemical compatibility for the lifestyle.

Everything's impossible, and there's no reason whatsoever that my lifestyle should work, but somehow at the end of the month, there's enough money in the account, people are happy enough. I can't see the end of the tunnel, but we're still moving through it.

Looking at the descriptions of some of your collections, it seems that there's also an ideological drive in how you engage with fashion, in terms of representing a type of American woman that maybe hasn't been represented before by the fashion industry. Can you tell me more about that?

My interest in womanhood started when I was much younger. I had a really non-traditional childhood, with a mom who was a ship captain on the Great Lakes. I didn't have any siblings, so it was just she and I growing up, and I was trying to reconcile this passion that I had for creativity and fashion, and then also share that with my most intimate archetypes. There was such a disconnect, because my mom was just completely not interested in fashion. Her idea of style did not relate to what I thought fashion looked like and what womanhood looked like.

As I progressed and matured, I realized that there was a style and there was a methodology to the way that she portrayed herself and her femininity out in the world, and that I wanted to see more of that. I was becoming frustrated with this unilateral, shallow representation of what womanhood was that was being

generated in fashion. There's an element of the brand that really speaks to the need for democratizing who is worthy of contributing to the American fashion narrative, dismantling the geographical and creative condescension that is coming out of New York, LA, Paris—all of these typically established creative capitals. What does it look like to open that up to other non-traditional archetypes? I think that was really where I saw my room for opportunity and establishing myself.

The idea of authenticity feels very central to a lot of your design work. Can you tell me a little bit about what it means to be authentic as a designer?

I'm putting so much into building this brand. I am spilling my blood, sweat and tears. I've drained my finances. Everyone I love has drained their finances, and I don't want any of this to be inauthentic to myself and to regurgitate, recycle things that don't feel necessary out in the world. Part of this stems from this cynicism that I'm not going to be on this scene very much longer, because it is such an impossible lifestyle that requires such intense, high level overhead. If there's anything that I did with my time here, it was to tell people what this industry is like—to dismantle this fashion school-to-fashion designer industrial complex that's perpetrated, and it's just unsustainable and unhealthy. I want young people to have the understanding into what my lifestyle is like; to have that transparency and that authenticity is really validating to me and makes me feel seen. That's the personal animus for being authentic.

There are other ways that we incorporate that into the brand stylistically. I'm not interested in seeding out the brand to people that aren't interested in the narrative or creative philosophy. Then we also work with salvaged and repurposed site-specific materiality. For me, what is so exciting is when you can bridge the wearer with the source of the inspiration in a really direct and tangible way.

We think about authenticity in almost every single context. The way that I live my life is very transparent and authentic. Sometimes that gets me into trouble because I don't feel like I can be bought. I don't feel like I can be politically influenced. I'm going to come with the same energy in every context and I'm going to tell my truth, whatever that is. It's a liability professionally, so sometimes I'll say too much and sometimes I'll be too forward, but I think that really is essential to attracting the right attention.

Baked into your approach to authenticity, there seems to be a willingness and understanding that it may result in losing it all, but that you would rather have it on your own terms for a shorter amount of time.

Yeah, to survive and to make a pathway yourself, you have to do something radically different—especially in the creative industry where there's so much noise. I think [it can be] patronizing to people that engage in our work. They can smell inauthenticity, they can smell superficiality, and it's not nice. It's not pleasant. It's not what's going to sustain you or them. I think being radically transparent and failing radically is also something to be very proud of.

Can you share any reflections or lessons learned about dealing with financial constraints while avoiding burnout?

It's really difficult, especially coming upon fashion week. A lot of the advice I can give is real and is beneficial, but is tinged with a certain cynicism, which makes it sometimes demoralizing. I have to put professional trigger warnings around the advice that I want to give, because sometimes it can dissuade people from wanting to pursue the career in the first place. This was something that really helped me get to where I am today - jumping right into the brand and not oversaturating myself with too many demoralizing and difficult facts that would dissuade me from pursuing the career.

Looking back in retrospect, it's not necessarily information that I would volunteer because I think that it could dismantle that animus that was so helpful for me to get to where I am. Blind beginner's luck, if that makes sense.

I think you're selling yourself a little short; it seems like there's a lot of diligence and drive and talent that is a key part of your story. How do you think you put yourself into a position to be able to access that luck?

Well, the other part is that I really don't believe that the things that have gotten me the furthest in life can be learned or adopted. They really do feel chemical. I am just strangely blessed with laser focus on accomplishing certain things, and I can apply that to certain areas of my life.

I think that the motor and the engine of this creative enterprise relies a lot on you being able to sustain yourself internally and physically. It is such a stamina sport and an intensity sport. To be able to have a wellspring of your own coal to burn is important. Then somehow, I just was able to apply that to fashion, which is really strange. That really is the lightning strike of all of this. I understand if these answers aren't palatable or packagable, but this really is the honest answer.

A lot of what happens in this industry transpires in the most meaningless and bizarre and random interactions. How can you plan to be in traffic in that taxi at 3:00 AM with the right people who are deciding the creative project that's going to transpire? I swear to god this is going to sound so pretentious, but I can just see the four dimensional chess board in my industry, and I can see what's going to drain me and what sort of interactions socially, professionally, financially are going to generate the most high impact return on investment of my time and my energy. I can't explain it, but it's working for me somehow.

In terms of replenishing the fuel in the engine that goes, what are some of the tactics you have?

I think of the vision of the future that I have—I really, really believe in the future and I have so much optimism. I know that I can commit to a struggle for five, 10 years if there's going to be some sort of grand payout at the end. I'm open to the possibility that that payout isn't going to be professional or financial success. It could be, "Wow, I had this incredible experience that really fortified me as an individual." Having that awareness that success might not look like what you think it will look like, and being open to the possibility of your path deviating along the way.

There are different periods of the honeymoon phase and disillusionment phase throughout this entire experience that are really important—to feel the highs and the lows. For me, something that's essential is having solid witnesses and people around you who have seen you in all of these different moments and who have undergone these experiences with you, who can tell you about yourself when you forget sometimes. For me, that looks like building a family and diversifying the things in my life that give me meaning.

I'm still so young. I'm 27 years old and I have maybe five years out in the world detached from some sort of academic institution. I'm learning so many huge things about my career and myself and my ability as a woman and mother, that I'm still in a raw phase of my life. I'm looking forward to seeing in five, 10 years how I can look back at it and distill it into something that is more interesting and adoptable for other people.

It seems like you are holding space for some pretty deep cynicism and yet deep optimism at the same time -

Totally.

Can you talk more specifically about the future of the fashion industry and how you hold both of those things, because you are simultaneously grappling with this entity as it exists, but also you're an architect of it in many ways. What is your vision for the future and what does your cynical mind say about that vision?

Well, I'm building a really beautiful boat on top of a really rickety sinking ship. That's how I think about cynicism and optimism in the fashion industry. To build a fashion brand with the tools of the fashion industry right now, it's a doomed enterprise. I'm trying to understand which vestiges of the fashion industry can I poke more of a hole in, and which are absolutely untouchable and will get me thrown out. Which institutions can you critique and which do you have to play ball with?

I think I'm uniquely positioned to inject a sort of candor that is very diametrically opposed to the way the industry historically has been run. I have the life experiences and the credentials and the authenticity of my own origin story to be able to challenge that status quo in a meaningful and good faith way. I think it is going to take somebody like me, with my story and with my passions, to be able to cross over this contentious line between old guard and new guard in a way that is sincere and with love.

Elena Velez Recommends:

Reading Sexual Personae by Camille Paglia

Listening to "Familiär" by Agnes Obel

The color of milky tea

Feeling gratitude

Getting hands dirty

Name

Elena Velez

Vocation

fashion designer

Fact

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