

Fashion week comes to Portland

Twenty indie designers put on a show

Thursday, September 18, 2008

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FACTBOX

• [Portland Fashion Week](#)

Take one part "Project Runway," a pinch of "America's Next Top Model," add a smidgen of New York fashion week. Sift and discard air-kisses. Blend five days and enjoy Portland Fashion Week.

In a city best known for plaid shirts and running shoes, the idea of a week of runway shows seemed half-baked at best. International buyers and media spend six weeks on the road with packed schedules attending fashion shows in New York, London, Paris, Milan and Tokyo and were hardly going to add Portland to their lineups. Los Angeles, Berlin and Miami have a hard-enough time getting attention. San Diego, Phoenix and Charlotte, N.C., have fashion weeks. And suburban malls everywhere host "fashion weeks" that don't even try to show samples from designers' future collections, pulling straight from the retail racks.

Fashion forms a critical vertebra, if not the backbone, of industry in some cities, but the term "fashion week" has become little more than a promotional gimmick. Even Portland's history as home to Jantzen, Pendleton, Nike, Columbia Sportswear, Hanna Anderssen, Lucy and more couldn't save its fashion week from sounding like a poor imitation.

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Then last year, its third, Portland Fashion Week emphasized sustainable style. Some were skeptical: Smells like green spirit. But sustainability is of authentic interest to many Portlanders, and the event felt genuine, even if only half the participating designers emphasized sustainable clothes. This year, the shows take place in the 14 Square in the Pearl District, a building that includes Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified elements.

All that makes Portland Fashion Week sound like the new hair shirt. But it's a blast. You can catch a rising design star among the 20 indie designers showing. Last year's group included Leanne Marshall, a finalist on the current season of "Project Runway."

"She would be in our lineup this year, but Bravo (TV network) has all of those designers under pretty strict control while they are still on the show," Chris Cone, executive producer of Portland Fashion Week, says.

Alice Dobson earned Best Debut of New York fashion week from Paper Doll Magazine with her Sofada line. Modi Soondarotok honed her skills working for Donna Karan and now has a tiny shop on Alberta Street called Idom. One extraordinary dress she showed last year was snapped up by a New York-based editor for herself. New this year is Christopher Bevans with a menswear line that performers John Legend and Jay-Z have discovered.

"Portland Fashion Week genuinely focuses on launching the upcoming collections for these designers," Cone says.

Several strong indie designers who showed last year are not in this year's lineup. Elizabeth Dye says her decision was based in part on budget. The fee of \$750 to \$1,500, which includes the venue, runway, models, music, lighting and publicity, is a bargain compared to New York's shows, which start at \$150,000. But Dye happily produced her own show this spring in her tiny shop using friends as models and word-of-mouth advertising.

"I don't have anything bad to say about Portland Fashion Week," she says. "I think it's awesome that they are taking it on and doing the heavy lifting."

Maybe the indie rebel spirit of Portland designers keeps some from taking part, she says. "What's so exciting about Portland is that we get to do those (small, edgy, independent) shows. It's one of the advantages of being an indie designer in Portland."

"Maybe," she adds with a laugh, "the only advantage."

Portland Fashion Week offers audiences a glimpse of several designers each night. Mayor Tom Potter kicks off opening night and Mayor-elect Sam Adams continues the week.

No air-kissing allowed. Tree-hugging welcome.

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