

MADE TO LAST

As we enter the defining decade in our fight against climate change, the fashion industry is under the spotlight.

The UN estimates fashion alone generates nearly 20 per cent of global waste water and about 10 per cent of all carbon emissions. Vast numbers of trees are cleared to make space for plants and animals needed for the production of fibres used to make clothing.

Farming fabrics like cotton, particularly the non-organic variety, strips soil of its nutrients and biodiversity, and uses high levels of pesticides and antimicrobials, which poison water supplies.

The rise of 'fast fashion' has contributed significantly to the industry's staggering carbon and landfill footprints; not to mention supply chains notorious for exploiting workers in the world's poorest countries.

Amelie Marie Gaydoul, a 2019 graduate of Westminster's Menswear MA, does not mince her words when it comes to fast fashion on the high street.

"I'm just very... I think I can say the word 'disgusted' now, by the sheer amount of clothing they produce and the whole availability of clothing they give to the customer," she says. "I just find the whole approach devalues clothing so much, I mean this is why they call it 'fast fashion' – it has this throwaway culture."

"It's something that I've struggled with," says Manimekala Fuller, founder of the eponymous Manimekala clothing brand, who graduated from Westminster's BA Fashion Design in 2018. "More so at

the beginning, when I wanted to start a brand and I was struggling with the responsibility of putting more stuff in the world.

"We have too much stuff and so much of it is going to waste."

So how does any young designer entering the world of fashion in the 2020s reconcile their hopes and dreams with the industry's darker underbelly?

Students can get "overwhelmed" by the enormity of this task around sustainability, Professor Andrew Groves, Professor of Fashion Design at Westminster, says.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, Westminster's Fashion courses aim to help students align a sustainable mindset with their own personal professional goals.

"There's no right and wrong answer for fashion," Andrew says. "Which means you could want to do high street or high-end couture or mass market or bespoke. You can do anything or everything."

Sustainable and ethical practices – and the impact they have – can look very different at all these different points of the pendulum.

Andrew believes Westminster's strong focus on industry experience is essential to helping every student decide for themselves how to approach sustainability. Students, Andrew adds, are often surprised by what they find.



"I think someone telling you something isn't as powerful as experiencing something yourself," he says. "I think internships are vital for that, because honestly the number of students who go back to that same designer and are all horrified by their processes... we know that's going to happen, they don't."

"You're suddenly aware it's not as clear a picture as you might perceive."

Manimekala agrees Westminster's industry focus gave her invaluable insight – particularly on issues like fashion's complex and notoriously opaque supply chains (which are, in her words, "ripe for exploitation").

She has put ethics and sustainability at the heart of her brand from its early inception; working with organic, recycled and upcycled fabrics, using non-toxic dyes and making small batches.

Though it is primarily a clothing brand, Manimekala also has a zero-waste accessory range: a selection of

scrunchies and handbags made from leftover and donated fabric.

"I take steps to mitigate my brand's environmental impact," Manimekala says. "But I really believe that the pieces we create are full of meaning and that our customers appreciate that meaning."

Manimekala works with social enterprises like Saheli Women to source textiles responsibly and support the workers who create them.

She strongly believes that human welfare must be considered alongside environmental sustainability.

"Something can't be environmentally sustainable if it exploits the people that make it," Manimekala says. "There are a lot of big companies right now that are pushing their eco-credentials, but their product is still being made by, essentially, slave labour."

"That is not 'sustainable' in the wider definition of sustainable – sustainable means environmental, economic and social sustainability."

At the heart of Manimekala's work is the vibrancy of her prints. She describes her aesthetic as "very colourful, very printed, very joyful, whimsical in a way, and very, very maximalist".

"There's so much misery fashion causes," she says. "I want to bring the meaning and the joy and the life back into it."

As a designer, Amelie's aesthetic could not be more different. She has focused on menswear throughout her career, working for the likes of Givenchy and Danish brand Norse Projects.

"I find womenswear too fast," Amelie says. "It's extremely trend-driven and, for me, womenswear is also... how can I say... too frilly?"

There is a lack of functionality at the heart of traditional women's clothing like dresses, Amelie explains.

She likes pockets, superior tailoring, material that will survive the elements and – crucially – clothes built to last. At the heart of her philosophy, much

like Manimekala, there is a sense of meaning, permanence, and a need to make clothes 'special' – the very antithesis of fast fashion.

Amelie came to focus on sustainability for her final collection at Westminster, "by accident", she says, when she created garments from older, reclaimed material.

Sustainability is an important issue to her, she says, but she gets frustrated by how it can be manipulated by marketing teams. At its darkest edge, "greenwashing" – the practice of falsely presenting a brand as environmentally friendly – is a growing problem in the fashion industry.

"A lot of fast fashion high street brands are greenwashing now," Amelie says. "It's hard for consumers not to fall into the trap of buying fast fashion but with a sustainable lie on top of it."

As a freelancer, Amelie says she tries to ask the right questions before she agrees to work with clients and pushes for sustainable options while she is working. In the future, she hopes to reach directorship with the right brand, where she can make meaningful changes to their sustainability policies.

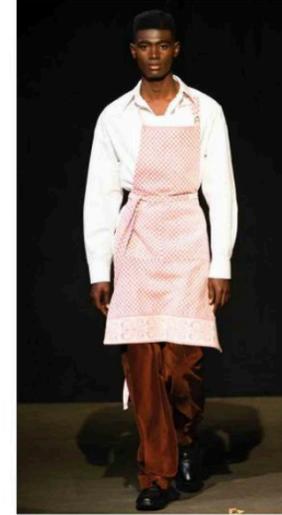
"I really hope to find this one place I can give my soul and creativity to and fully agree with what they're doing," Amelie says.

Does she feel working for a larger brand would allow her to make a bigger impact? Yes and no.

"I mean of course if you're able to change things in a huge company like LVMH," Amelie says. "Of course, you then reduce the imprint of the company... the bigger the company the bigger the changes, the bigger the results out of it."

"But then I also feel like the bigger companies take the ideas from the smaller brands because the smaller brands are the ones who can make the change a lot faster."

When it comes to the future of the fashion industry, Andrew, Manimekala and Amelie all believe clothing needs to become more special and harder to come by.



Andrew's great wish is for fashion to turn back towards a bygone era of semi-bespoke clothing.

"I've wanted this for ages – where the customer is actually part of the design process," he says. "You can decide what colour it is and what finish it is and it's for your size because they've got production that can do that. I think people want the intimacy of that relationship."

Manimekala already offers some customisation within her zero-waste collection and agrees it makes items more meaningful.

"We've found it's something people are really interested in – particularly with accessories," she says. "We've had requests to make bags in a different colour, which makes it so much more personal to the customer. They've had a creative say in their product, so they value it more." She is hoping to explore this kind of customisation of her main clothing line in the future.

COVID-19 and lockdown have inevitably changed things, at least in the

short-term. Andrew and Manimekala both feel it has encouraged people to support and connect with local brands.

With business as usual on hold, Manimekala has put together a spontaneous capsule 'loungewear' collection, inspired by the 2020 lockdown experience.

"When I say loungewear it's very much Manimekala loungewear," she laughs. "There's no point designing party dresses because nobody's partying. Everyone's focusing on taking care of themselves."

But is this all a blip, or could COVID-19 really change the way we dress and consume clothing? Could it really be a vehicle for positive long-term change in the fashion industry?

Manimekala, Andrew and Amelie see real potential for seismic, positive change, though Amelie's optimism is qualified.

"I really hope it's going to help and it's going to change thanks to COVID, and I see a huge potential there," she says. "But I am also very aware of how the industry – the huge machinery of it – makes it really hard to change gear."

