

ELLE

CANADA

APRIL 2020

Eco Era

THE IMPACT *of*
CLIMATE CHANGE
on WOMEN

CAN FASHION
ever BE TRULY
SUSTAINABLE?

YOUNG ACTIVISTS
AND *the* RESULTS *of*
ECO RAGE



ELLEeco

CANADIAN DESIGNER SPOTLIGHT

Olivia Rubens

How the designer is redefining knitwear with an eccentric eye and a commitment to using sustainably sourced materials.

By ERICA NGAO

ARMED WITH BOLD PALETTES and quirky concepts, Olivia Rubens is creating space for conversations that are important to her, from local production to inclusivity. After studying design at Ryerson University in Toronto and becoming a fellow at the Suzanne Rogers Fashion Institute, she moved to London to tackle a graduate degree in womenswear. To support the relaunch of her label and a new collection coming this summer, Rubens plans to consult on sustainability practices for other brands. “I don’t want to just make a positive impact with my brand,” she says. “I want to help others become better too.” Here are eight things to know about this up-and-coming Canadian designer.

HOW IT BEGAN “I was bullied when I was younger, and I think a huge part of that was my style and self-expression—I was the only little weirdo in my school. I come from a metal and punk background and always dressed colourfully in a band T-shirt, skinny

jeans and a zip-up hoodie [and wore] tons of eyeliner and eyeshadow. Near the end of high school, I was obsessed with buying only from thrift stores—which continues to this day—and would often push boundaries. [While working on a school fashion show], I discovered it was more than just clothes—it was a passion.”

TURNING POINT “I participated in a design competition where you could only use eco-friendly fabrics. Now it’s ingrained in my standards. Using the fabric itself isn’t challenging—it’s finding a variety of it that’s difficult, especially in Canada. Once you’ve gotten over the initial hurdle of sourcing and developing a diverse library of materials, it’s much easier to continue.”

THE PROCESS “I love doing research, especially on anything to do with human nature. I’m drawn to photography from the 1970s to the 2000s and contemporary work that’s reminiscent of those eras. It usually amounts to some form of collage afterwards, which then turns into design. Since I’m also a knitwear designer, I’m attracted to textile design, which necessitates a lot of experimentation.”

BEHIND HER KNIT MASKS “[Masks can] hide who you are, but they also create a sense of unity. You can be anybody you want to be.”

STAYING CREATIVE “When I’m in the middle of designing a collection and feeling a bit stuck, I get out of the studio and into the outdoors—either I’ll get on my bike or go to a museum or an art gallery. After I finish a collection and am exhausted but need to move on to the next project, I make sure I keep exercising to refresh my brain. I keep myself busy just to get back to the pace I was at before, and the rest usually follows slowly. It can be terrifying to be stuck, but just know that it is temporary, and treat your body and mind with respect and love when you need it.”

DESIGNER IDOL “I really enjoyed working for my old boss [Toronto-based designer] Hilary MacMillan. I admire that she’s very strong and outspoken.”

RETHINKING FASHION WEEK “I believe in education, especially concerning sustainability, and I think that Fashion Week and showrooms can be good platforms for those topics. However, I believe that the traditional runway is unnecessary as it uses up so much energy, money and resources. What kind of message does it send when we are promoting the ‘necessity’ of newness every six months or more? Collections are getting bigger and bigger, and we need to start moving toward responsible consumption.”

THE BEST ADVICE SHE HAS EVER RECEIVED “Make sure you do your research and experimentation on finishes and construction techniques. In the luxury industry, that can mean the difference between a garment looking really cheap and thoughtless and a garment looking exactly like what it’s said to be worth.” ♦



AGE
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HOMETOWN
Ottawa

CURRENT STATUS
She recently completed a master’s degree in womenswear at the London College of Fashion.

KNOWN FOR
Eccentric luxury knitwear