

A THRIVING IDENTITY

Dunedin's iD Fashion Week is dedicated to celebrating the southern city's style and the designers, both established and emerging, who are making their mark. We meet three creative minds who may be new to fashion, but are already upping the stakes BY ALEXIA SANTAMARIA

Jane Avery

When Jane Avery was 40 and working as an independent TV producer, she told herself she was going to have her own fashion label in five years. She said it as a passing comment, but with a feeling of serious intent beneath. It obviously cemented itself in her subconscious, because this year, aged 45, she launched her first label, Lapin. Right on schedule.

Those who took third form French know Lapin means rabbit, and in Avery's case, that's not just a cute, quirky name. Her garments are made from rabbit fur - a sustainable, plentiful and extremely glamorous resource.

"I always knew I wanted to be in fashion, I just needed to find the right concept," she says. And it seems she's done exactly that with her unique product.

Avery originally worked in news reporting before switching to TV production in 2001. In 2008 she started working consistently with cooking personality Peta Mathias. She thanks Mathias for introducing her to Indian fabrics while »



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filming a series. "I just love Northern Indian, Pakistani, Kashmiri and Iranian fabrics - I sent 37kg back last time I was in Jaipur - and I love incorporating them with the rabbit fur on my coats."

She credits Mathias as a great role model when it comes to doing different things no matter what age. "She's the mistress of reinvention and always says 'Never stop peaking!' It's helped enormously to know her when making such a big career change in my mid-40s."

TAKING THE LEAP

The seed was sown when Avery was standing on a hill, soon after she moved to Dunedin from Auckland five years ago, with her husband and now 16-year-old-son.

"I knew I wanted to have my own label but when I moved down here, strange, serendipitous things started happening which made it more of a reality. I've always gone up to Central Otago, and you stand on a bluff and you look out over the beautiful land. And when you look out, the ground kind of ripples in front of you as all the rabbits scurry around." Watching this flurry of activity, she realised she was staring at a huge, untapped resource.

"When I was a reporter I did a story on rabbit numbers in the mid-90s. I've always been very conscious of the fact that these bunnies have been a terrible strain on the land. The rabbit fur idea started to come to me as both a point of difference and a way to use a resource which isn't currently being used."

According to DOC, female rabbits, or does, may be pregnant for 70% of a year and they can breed the same year they are born. Does can produce a total of 20-50 young each.

"Left unchecked, they can multiply eight to tenfold in population in a season!" Avery says. "They can devastate the economy over the years. They eat everything - native plants, pasture - they've driven farmers off the land in the past. They're a blight and gobble up all the vegetation and compete with native creatures."

She began to seriously investigate the possibility. It seemed destined to be when

she realised New Zealand's only master furrier was based just down the road from her house "Here I am coming up with this fur thing and here's Mooneys, so close. Max [Wilson] is the last craftsman, New Zealand's only master furrier and Mooneys has been around since 1923 in Dunedin."

Since then Avery, who is a fourth generation sewer - her great-grandmother did it for a living - has been educating herself on the ins and outs of rabbit fur.

"If you'd told me some years ago I'd do work as a furrier's apprentice, I would never have believed you. Mooneys do the fur work and I do the construction with the fabric. It's been quite a learning curve but I'm really happy with the results."



FAIR TRADE FASHION

Avery found using rabbit was a good way to keep her coats high end and high quality without breaking the bank.

"I knew with my label I wouldn't want to compromise the quality of what I was using. It's a tough industry to be in money-wise, and I see designers having to compromise on the quality of their fabrics all the time."

Rabbit provides the ultimate sustainable and affordable, yet still gorgeous, resource. And by sourcing her fabric from artisans in India, she's been able to exist in the fashion industry with ethics intact and conscious consumerism at the fore.

"We want to have international pop-ups so we'll be looking at selling in places like Aspen and the Italian Alps. While that's exciting and glamorous, I equally love going to India and getting the opportunity to work with artisans at a village level. It's really important for me to source my fabrics personally, with integrity."

She soft-launched the label this year but iD will be her official entry into fashion. And so far feedback has been great, including praise from a client returning from six weeks of travelling around Europe in winter, who said she was regularly asked where her coat came from.

"She said it was so good, even on public transport. The way I position the fur panels is not by accident. I like them to help keep people warm, too, so they can be practical and beautiful. The bomber jackets are especially great for that."

She's been prepared for criticism, but it hasn't come yet. "I'm always waiting for the backlash from anti-fur groups but I don't seem to get it here. New Zealanders understand the enormity of the problem with rabbits here. So many species around the world are being hunted and driven into extinction. But here it's a bit different and we have two species (rabbits and possums) that can provide fur in a more conscious way where we can act with integrity."

