

STYLESETTERS

'Effortless is more important than making statements'

Karin Gustafsson, head of women's-wear design at COS, shares her thoughts on the power of understated fashion



JEANNE BEKER
jbeker@globeandmail.com
@Jeanne_Beker

With so much noise on the fashion front these days, an increasing number of style enthusiasts are craving a simpler, pared-down sartorial approach. Enter COS, a Swedish women's and men's line of modern, minimalistic garments that oozes a gentle sensibility, walking the line between fast fashion and haute luxury. Inspired by architecture, art and music, the upscale, grown-up sister brand of the highly successful and accessible H&M, COS – which stands for "Collection of Style" – has been winning stylish hearts the world over since it first launched in 2007. There are now stores in over two dozen countries, and COS recently made the foray into Canada opening a tony new emporium on Bloor Street West. Karin Gustafsson, the 38-year-old head of women's-wear design for the label, who studied design in London and was brought on board to help conceptualize COS, stresses that it's play with volume, proportion and fabrications that drives the brand, rather than a mere take on trends. I spoke with the London-based designer about the appeal of COS, its brand identity, and how women might go about establishing their own signature looks.

You've been part of the brand since the very beginning. What's it been like for you to watch COS being embraced all over the world?
It's been a really exciting journey. I think from the beginning, we set ourselves a DNA that was very strong. For example, with our fabrics, we worked a lot with new techniques. We are very much pushing ourselves and on the forefront when it comes to fabrications and cutting garments. That is something that has evolved from the beginning and that's very exciting.

There's just such a forward feel to the line—like we're being catapulted into the future to a certain degree. What was the initial mission statement of the brand? Why did you think there was a special niche that COS could fill?
From the beginning, it was the H&M business group that spoke to the gap in the market for a brand like COS, where the product would have amazingly high qual-

ity for the very best comparable price. That was the initial brief. Then the conceptualizing started, about finding a wardrobe for every occasion for both men and women today who want some type of easiness in their lives, like good quality, essential everyday garments that they can mix and match and wear in many different ways. We also work a lot with draping and creating silhouettes that are a bit bolder.

It seems to me that the clothes are really great for people of all ages because it's much more about a mindset than it is about a chronological age demographic.
We really see that we have an ageless customer. We see the same piece being picked up by someone who's 18 as well as someone who seems more mature. It's the fact that we offer timeless and understated fashion that can be worn in so many different ways. Therefore it works for many different ages and many different personalities.

Fabrications are very important to you – almost like the final frontier. How inspired are you by the fabrics themselves?
We are really into fabrics. They can often start off the design process. We always go to Paris to the fabric fair, and we pick up a lot there. We also feel that it's important to test the fabric straight on the dress stand or on the person straight away to see the way it performs at an early stage, because the right cloth in the right style can be amazing. But if you get it wrong, it can really kill the whole design. Also, it's often the fabric that creates the interesting silhouette.

Japan played a great role in influencing this fall collection. Why Japan and why now?
When we do our research, we're very open-minded and we came across this art movement called Mono-ha, which was the first independent art movement in Japan. It started in the sixties and we came across a few artists and their work is very



IN THE FOLD
As head designer of women's wear at COS, Karin Gustafsson's goal is a balance between calm and dramatic. The pieces from the current collection (below) are an example of this aesthetic. PHOTOS COURTESY OF COS

minimal and, at the same time, natural. But it has this drama behind it. The compositions in the pieces are calm but, at the same time, dramatic. That really hit us and we thought that could make for a beautiful collection. Then it started to evolve from there. The kimono is a very familiar and interesting piece and we fell for that traditional Japanese dressing and that type of layering. That's how it all started.

You fell in love with fashion as a young girl. Why was that such an important part of your life from the early stages?
I was never good at drawing in art school, though I did enjoy it. So I started to model more with materials, and started putting garments and silhouettes together and found that extremely exciting. From there it just sort of evolved and I took the next step to formally study design, even though the drawing wasn't my strongest field. But I found a way to work around that and still be able to communicate ideas. It was the whole idea of building things and putting things together that really appealed to me.

What did your fashion studies in London ultimately give you?
I think London is an amazing place when you're creative. That's why it's so great for us to be based here. There are always really good art shows on there and then there are the street markets and the young fashion designers, and a great music scene. We have a very international team but everyone who's creative at some point ends up in London. It was eye-opening for me to study there because I came from a small city initially, and coming to a place like this really made me feel even more that everything is possible.

Things are really exploding on the retail horizon in Canada, with so many

new options. What do you say to women who really need to focus on what's right for them? How would you guide women who want to establish a signature look for themselves?
I think you should always build your wardrobe out of good basic essentials. If you have that kind of base for your personal wardrobe collection then you can wear those things on their own, in many different ways. Then add on a few seasonal highlights. In terms of dressing, you should always dress within your own comfort zone. And never force anything that you don't feel comfortable with. Effortless is more important than making statements.

COS has really become about a way of moving through the world. It's more than a clothing brand: It's really a lifestyle brand because it's about an attitude. How would you describe the essence of the brand?
What we stand for is modernity. We want everything in our collection to always feel modern. We like the aesthetic to be timeless, and we like our customers to buy things that they would wear for a couple of seasons. We also love playing with materials and with our hands. We drape a lot. As I said before, sometimes it's the fabric that starts off the design process. So we have this tactile element, and that's super important. And then there's functionality. We think of that all the time. We think of function in simple garments, like the little black dress. We like if it can have a pocket because I think that is adding that perfect everyday function to it. We think of the way our customers' wardrobes function and like to offer something for every occasion.

Do you dress in COS exclusively from head to toe?
Yeah, I do actually. I know it sounds really corny, but I do. And it's not because I have to, it's because I actually really, really like our product. Obviously it's important for me to do that, but that's not why I'm doing it. It's a good way of getting to know your customer and getting to know the garments. You see what works, and how it feels to wear it. That's important.

This interview has been condensed and edited. Special to The Globe and Mail