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Putting the haute in high-street fashion



Karen von Hahn

What does a white shirt share with a mid-century sofa? Both are functional design classics with an understated, minimal silhouette that, according to Karin Gustafsson, head of womenswear design for London-based retailer Cos, elevates them both into style icons.

"We look toward architecture, art and furniture design for inspiration," says Gustafsson, who just happens to hail from design-for-forward Sweden and has headed up the women's line for Cos since its inception in 2006.

"Each of our stores, for instance, always has a Finn Juhl sofa. There is a functionality and design quality to the mid-century-modern era that we try to bring to fashion."

This fall, for instance, Gustafsson's esoteric influences range from the Japanese Mono-ha movement (a 20th-century art movement that explored the poetry of natural and industrial materials, such as stone, steel, wood and wire); the work of the late Brazilian architect and furniture-maker Oscar Niemeyer; the "serenity" of the performance art of Marina Abramovic; and Oyvind Tangen's photograph of a multi-hued iceberg — quite the heady mix for what is essentially a high-street fashion brand.

"We see ourselves as designing for someone who is very aware culturally," Gustafsson says.

Little surprise then, that since word got out that Cos was headed our way, its opening was as eagerly anticipated by design and art-world types as fashion insiders. And that just a week after since opening its doors in the former home of Tiffany's on Bloor St., now handsomely re-clad with an elegant Japanese minimalist charred wooden exterior, the lineup for the cash at Canada's first Cos location now regularly stretches toward the front entrance.

Many of the patient shoppers in the queue are laden with the kind of



Karin Gustafsson, head of womenswear for Cos, at the London-based retailer's new store on Bloor St. W. "We see ourselves as designing for someone who is very aware culturally," she says.

TODD KOROL PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR



Gustafsson likes this dress for its architectural A-line silhouette, which is enhanced by the combination of the knit body of the dress with its stiffer, pocketed cotton hem. She also loves the colour. "This fall we worked with a lot of pinks, from rose to blush, almost like makeup colours. They are pretty, in a good way."

classics Cos is known and loved for (now at 131 stores across 27 countries around the world) — black, grey and white basics with a design-



Gustafsson admires the clean versatility of this piece, which can be worn outdoors as an overcoat, or indoors as a knit jacket or sweater. "I like that you can fold back the cuff and show a contrasting colour. I also like the pure simplicity of the pin closure."

savvy twist that makes them look a lot more expensive than they are. "We like the understated versatility of black, white and grey," says Gus-

tafsson, herself dressed merely in a simple black merino V-neck and a sleek pair of black wool trousers that somehow manages to look

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fresh and modern.

"Quite early we realized we wanted to come up with silhouettes that were understated, but founded on certain essential elements like design quality. A key piece for us, for instance, is the white shirt. We always offer a variation on it every season. It's a timeless classic, but also we like to reinvent it."

So certain does Gustafsson seem about the DNA of her larger vision that I can't resist posing the perennial question: When it comes to style-versus-fashion trends, which is more important? Gustafsson quickly answers that in her opinion, it's style that is the clear winner.

"Style is about personality, and expressing yourself and what you feel about the world," she says. "What we are trying to do is to offer the elements to make that effortless."