Photo courtesy of Gabriela Hearst

A SIMPLE PLAN

By Anne Slowey

The quest for perfection is as much a blessing as it is a curse. At worst, it robs you of the pleasure of discovery. At best, it puts you on a path to excellence. To designer Gabriela Hearst, the concept takes on a more aspirational application—one that redefines luxury to include exquisitely rendered (and admittedly expensive) clothes manufactured with a best practices philosophy that she hopes will revolutionize the way the fashion industry does business.

"I didn't set out to change the world," says the 41-year-old mother of three. "I just kept finding that there were small choices I could make as a business person and a designer, so why wouldn't I make them?"

In the big picture, sustainability is hardly breaking news. You'd have to live under a rock not to know that fashion is second only to the auto and fossil-fuel industries in terms of water waste and pollution.

Companies who have made billions in the fast-fashion sector have seized upon sustainability in recent years with the fervor of a sinner seeking redemption. A cynic might see their motives as an appeal to millennials who put ethics before spending habits, but it's unfair to label all the efforts as mere marketing tricks. It's simple logic that larger brands have greater opportunity to effect real change, from environmental concerns to labor rights.

Even at a time when luxury values are at odds with the political and economic climate, there is a balm in Gilead watching brands do the right thing for all the right reasons. Kering, which owns Gucci, Stella McCartney, Balenciaga, and other big-name European brands, open-sourced its Environmental Profit and Loss methodology in 2013 to help fashion companies track the footprint of their operations and supply chains. H&M promises to be climate-positive by 2040, while Eileen Fisher vows to make her company 100-percent sustainable by 2020.

But how can small-scale start-ups stay afloat in the crosshairs of a shrinking retail marketplace and the demand of costly environmental reform? Hearst, whose eponymous high-end line of impeccable tailored separates is rendered in the finest of fabrics, never conscientiously identified as an environmentalist, though she easily could have, as her work ethic is deeply rooted in her upbringing on a sixth-generation ranch in Uruguay. "I learned at a young age about quality," she says. "Everything on the ranch was built to last hundreds of years. Every penny made was reinvested in the genetics of the cattle or the horses. When you are in the presence of that type of raw beauty, you learn how to appreciate the rare essence of something pure and real, and do everything you can to preserve it."

Hearst, who is nominated for the CFDA 2017 Swarovski Award for Emerging Talent, is no stranger to fashion. She spent 12 years working for various fashion companies before starting her own line, Candela, with $700 in savings.

Candela proved to be a successful branding experiment for Hearst, though she didn't know it at the time. "I made enough to live and pay my rent in New York City doing something that I love," she says of the company's first year, which garnered $1 million in sales. But competing against fast-fashion companies didn't allow her room to explore her perfectionist nature. "It was a rat race," she says.

When her father died in 2011 and she inherited the ranch, she hit the reset button. "I had to start over and look inside myself to figure out what I was most passionate about in order to continue."

Her mother was an iconoclast whose feminist principles stood in stark relief to the conservative ethos and dictatorial politics of Uruguay of the 1970s and '80s. "My mother broke every stereotype of what a woman was supposed to be. She was a rodeo champion by the time she was 18, then she went on to become a black belt in tae kwon do," Hearst recalls. "She became a Buddhist and shaved her head, not once but twice. She brought Zen meditation to Uruguay, and then in her 50s, became a weight-lifting champion. "She was a radical who was very hard on my sister and me, but she wanted us to understand that a woman had to be independent—both emotionally and financially. But she was also incredibly generous. It's no surprise I ended up marrying the man I did," Hearst says.

The man she married, Austin Hearst, is the grandson of William Randolph Hearst. Such a legacy carries obvious benefits and drawbacks, but like her mother, "the man she married" has defied convention in his own right. An adventure enthusiast (Hearst calls him the Crocodile Dundee of Manhattan), he quietly works behind the scenes with the United Nations on the distribution of mosquito nets to fight malaria. "He's fully engaged but is not a public person, except when I ask him to be there for me," she says. "When I had my doubts, he was the one who encouraged me that I had the focus and determination to see this through." Full disclosure: Hearst stepped up to invest in his wife's company, but the downside is that when the Netflix movie ends, the conversation often turns to

business. “When your husband is your investor, it doesn’t go away,” she says. “No one wants to lose money, even if he is your husband.”

Hearst took inspiration cues for her new line from the gaucho style of dress she experienced growing up and her mother’s closet: “All the necessities were there, but exquisitely wrought and steeped in tradition,” Hearst says. “I realized I had to reach for the most impeccable materials to fully express what I wanted to create.”

Her first collection included a tailored wool suit modeled after one her mother owned, as well as a quilted denim vest, a merino wool sweater with tulle inserts, and a pleat-front chiffon shirtwaist dress. “I designed 18 looks that would give a woman everything she needed, even the shoes,” the designer says.

Barneys New York picked up the line, and now, two years later, the brand is in more than 50 stores worldwide. “In this age of excess and overexposure, I wanted to perfect what was necessary. It is really about my love of quality. There is nothing ostentatious or self-promotional about it,” she says. “I would call it anti-luxury luxury.”

When she returned to work after the birth of her son, she began to question the way she’d run her business. “I had this line that was more about tradition than trends, where I took such care in the selection of fabrics and hardware and buttons, and I found myself making decisions based not just on what felt good to the touch but what was good for you and the environment,” she notes. To that end, she started researching anti-radiation fabrics to line all the pockets in her collection’s clothes, and as luck would have it, she was introduced to a manufacturer from Germany that works with NASA. “I thought What the hell, I’ll include it, and they can prove me wrong later.”

She began researching and then developed the most lightweight merino wool ever made so she could forgo the use of cotton to conserve water, which in part contributed to her winning the Woolmark Prize this spring. At her husband’s behest, she is working with Loro Piana to manufacture wool from the sheep on her ranch.

For her fall 2017 collection, Hearst approached Swarovski to use leftover crystals instead of new ones (“They said no one had ever asked to purchase existing materials”), and she included limited-edition pieces from dead-stock fabric houses. She’s also in talks with Levi’s to rework used 501s instead of purchasing new denim, and wants to use recycled cashmere to cut back on using dyes. “I want to clean up what’s out there as much as I can,” she says. For fall orders, she plans to use TIPA, a new biodegradable plastic, for garment bags and hopes to initiate an industry-wide switch: “Can you imagine the impact if the entire industry used biodegradable plastic?”

This past spring, Hearst held her first fashion show—which she wanted to be waste-free. “I mentioned this to the production company, and Alex [de Betak] immediately understood what an important step this was,” she says. “He organized everything from the food to the staging without using any plastic and creating as little waste as possible. Hopefully this too will catch on.” When the couple purchased a home in upstate New York this past spring, they decided that everything in the home would be used—minus the sheets and towels.

Hearst is quick to point out that she’s not defining herself as a sustainable brand, per se: She’s just trying to make choices she can live with. But she does say that as the company grows, she plans to hire a director of environmental sustainability instead of a CEO. “I want someone asking the right questions: ‘Where do the fabrics come from? Are they drought-friendly? Are the people I work with honest? Do we share the same values and ethics?’” she explains.

“Sustainability is really about making small, simple decisions that make sense about the food you eat, the waste you create, and what you put next to your skin, and how to run a sustainable business across the board in every sense of the word,” she says.

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