

About Fashion

The Cult of Personality

Independent, understated, anonymous, even: A growing tribe of small-scale designers are creating clothes for life — not the runway.

BY AMANDA FORTINI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM JOHNSON



The designers Sofie D'Hoore, Gareth Casey of Casey Casey and Maureen Doherty of Egg, photographed in London, all embrace a slow-fashion philosophy.

THERE'S A CERTAIN TYPE of woman who is always dressed in something stylish but not fashionable, expensive but never ostentatious, exquisite yet hard to place: some thoughtful, meticulously cut piece of clothing that channels the contemporary moment while remaining aloof to trends. It's made of pure, papery crisp cotton, supple linen or the softest Italian wool. It's capacious and effortless, since anything too structured, too clingy or contrived, would be trying too hard. This woman tends to work in a creative field — she's a chef, a landscape architect, an artist, a curator, an editor — and her personal life, too, has a certain ease. She spends weekends in the garden and throws impromptu dinner parties and would rather wear a roomy dress than forgo a homemade piece of rhubarb pie. You'll never see her wearing visible logos (or even identifiable trends), but if you ask her what she's wearing, she'll likely name one of a cohort of independent designers who have built a business for themselves, in some cases over decades, by quietly and consistently working outside the realm of mainstream luxury fashion. These designers don't hold runway shows on the fashion-week schedule ... if they hold them at all. They don't advertise or market themselves. Most of them

avoid press entirely. (You get the sense that promotion, like tight clothes, would be in poor taste.)

These labels are part of a movement that's been happening for some time now. You might call it slow fashion, or conscious fashion, though its participants would just call it a return to an older way of making clothes — a reaction to the much-discussed fatigue over the fashion industry's relentless pace. These designers don't want to be tethered to its hectic production schedules or cater to its appetite for trends; instead, they focus on creating timeless pieces that are nearly anonymous by design.

But the status these labels enjoy is as much about the clothes as it is about the women who wear them: loyal, sophisticated customers who renounce fads as resolutely as the designers themselves. Both the designers and their clients see each piece in each collection as a continuation of a focused aesthetic; everything can thus be worn with everything else. So while the clothing is no less expensive than that from a luxury fashion label, it is also meant to endure, to be worn season after season and even be handed down. After all, clothes that are never quite in style never go out of style, either.

EGG

ASK MAUREEN Doherty, founder and owner of Egg, the 23-year-old cult clothing shop in

London, to describe the philosophy behind her boutique and the clothes she sells there, and she'll demur. She'll tell you that philosophy is too heady a word and, in any case, she's "not a designer" but "a shopkeeper." However she labels herself, the 65-year-old is deeply respected among independent designers. She is a designer and boutique owner, yes, but also a curator, connector and mentor. In her 700-square-foot Belgravia store, she displays the voluminous dresses, sweaters and tops she creates for her label, Egg, layered one over the other on hooks around the serene white space, as if part of an art installation.

Doherty — who is known for bringing Fiorucci, Valentino and Issey Miyake (the last of which she worked with for 20 years) to the U.K. — avoids the fashion world, calling it "vacuous," and instead prefers to work with artisans, or "makers," as she refers to them. She also likes to work slowly, "in decades rather than years," and is inspired by workwear, often reimagining classic silhouettes like a 19th-century car coat in linen or billowy Belgian army trousers in earth-toned canvas. An Egg ensemble is one that accommodates one's life, not the other way around. "I've bought lovely dresses that have fit a huge pregnant tummy three times over," says Egg loyalist Lady Frances von Hofmannsthal, the daughter of the photographer Lord Snowdon and editor in chief of the semiannual art and culture magazine *Luncheon*. "Now I layer them on top of each other." Tilda Swinton, Maggie Smith and Diane Keaton are also fans. Despite such an illustrious group of patrons, Doherty has never even sewn labels into her garments. It's "a relief," she says.



You might call it slow fashion, or conscious fashion, though its participants would just call it a return to an older way of making clothes.



Clockwise from top left, Egg loyalists wearing their own pieces from the label: chef Skye Gyngell of Spring restaurant at her home in London; a sketch by Doherty of a blouse from her spring 2018 collection; Luncheon magazine editor in chief Lady Frances von Hofmannsthal in her studio at the Rochelle School in the city's Shoreditch neighborhood; the architect and interior designer Zoe Chan Eayrs with her daughter Max Lila Rose.

CASEY CASEY

THERE ARE PIECES of clothing you wear to the point of downy familiarity, the ones you can't imagine you once lived without: the cashmere cardigan you've had since college; the velvety-soft trousers you're never, ever throwing out. This is what Gareth Casey wants to achieve with his clothes. "It's not about being new," he says of the generous, unstructured pieces he creates for his Paris-based label, Casey Casey. "It's not about being flashy or surprising. It's just about: 'Oh my God, that feels so good.'" He achieves this effect by hand-finishing, washing and dyeing his fabrics to give them what he calls "a lived-in feeling" and a matte patina. But the textiles he chooses are also key: "tightly woven, very structured fabrics" — Egyptian cotton, crepe linen, worsted wool, and never anything synthetic — that warp when hand-washed, dried or twisted, giving them an artfully rumpled appearance.

It's a labor-intensive process, as are Casey's fittings (he and his employees test-drive the clothes themselves over an extended period of time, making incremental tweaks), which is why he releases small collections of clothing throughout the year. These are wardrobe essentials with a consistent sensibility: a navy herringbone greatcoat in a wool-linen blend; trapeze blouses and nightgown dresses in washed cotton poplin; a candy-pink tent-dress with oversize pockets. Casey trained in fashion and textiles at the University of Brighton, and his financial and creative independence has taught him to design with thrift in mind ("We never throw fabric out," he says), as well as according to his whims ("I can do whatever the hell I want"). Last year, he opened a brick-and-mortar store in the Seventh Arrondissement where he says he'll continue to "make small test runs and play."

The 51-year-old is clear, however, that he's not rebelling against fashion. Instead, his creations arise from the rhythms and pragmatic needs of his own life: weekends spent working in his garden's vegetable patch, cooking for friends and playing with his dogs. "My designs are a reflection of the way I work," he says. "And the way I want my life to be."



Casey Casey patron Jinny Blom, a British landscape designer, shot in London at the Art Workers' Guild, where she is a member; the label's sky-blue shirt.



SOFIE D'HOORE

THE BRUSSELS-BASED designer Sofie D'Hoore was a pupil of Walter Van Beirendonck at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, but before she was a designer, she studied medical dentistry, and her clean, modern, quietly sculptural clothes — loose cotton tunics; slouchy trousers; shift dresses that skillfully graze the contours of one's body — are as technically and conceptually rigorous as they are artful, characterized by an almost mathematical purity when it comes to cut and construction.

The 55-year-old often works with factories in Italy to develop her own textiles in an understated palette of neutrals such as navy, white or moss, with the occasional flare of a floral print or plaid. She almost always uses natural fibers — 100 percent cotton, wool, silk or the finest double-faced cashmere — because over time, they "keep their authentic characteristics," she says.

When she started her business in 1992, she did everything herself, but now, 25 years on, she still works "as if I do it myself," paying obsessive attention to every element as she refines and executes a piece. It's obvious why creative types for whom success lies in the details — architects and art-world types, designers, directors — gravitate toward her clothes. But though her work is meticulous, it's never fussy: These are clothes for women who do things in the world. (She also designs a much smaller collection for men.) "I want people to feel strong and self-confident," she says. "I want them to feel that the clothes are an inseparable part of themselves." ■

Art curator and Sofie D'Hoore client Abaseh Mirvali at a friend's home in Paris; a down kimono coat by the designer.