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Fashion Week Has Designs on Up-and-Comers

Apparel: Producer hopes fresh focus can help boost status of low-profile event.

By **SUBRINA HUDSON**

Monday, October 6, 2014

Los Angeles is home to plenty of big-name designers, including Rodarte, Jeremy Scott and Saint Laurent Paris' Hedi Slimane. But with Los Angeles Fashion Week about to start, they've all skipped town in favor of presenting at the recently ended shows in New York, London, Milan and Paris.

Fashion insiders have long criticized L.A.'s semi-annual fashion weeks as nonevents that are unorganized and disappointing, and fashion week organizers don't completely disagree. Which is why they're trying to carve out a different – and realistic – niche for the show.

Instead of competing for the big names and haute couture on display in New York, Kelsi Smith, founder of apparel organization Los Angeles Fashion Council, said she's trying to focus L.A.'s fashion week on up-and-coming designers and new talent. Those are the kinds of designers who likely can't get an audience at New York's glitzier Fashion Week.

"Our goal is to really sell L.A. as the emerging platform because I think that's what it is and what it could be," Smith said.

Many of the designers preparing to showcase their collections this week fit that description. Downtown L.A. brand Stella Proseyn has only been around for two years. William Bradley relocated from Alabama to West Hollywood last year.

Another exhibitor, Elana Joelle Hendler, founder of luxury candle and stationary company EJH Brand of Venice, is participating in L.A.'s Fashion Week for the first time this year.

She can't show her products off on the runway, but she's renting a booth where she'll debut a new collection. Hendler said the event is a good fit for her boutique business.

"We're an L.A.-based emerging brand in the luxury candle space, and there's a lot of synergy there," she said.

Hendler, a native Angeleno, said she views Fashion Week like a startup – one that's still developing an identity.

"I think that's what we're seeing with this event – this evolution of identity in L.A. saying, 'Hey, we're here too, but we're going to do it our way,'" she said.

Still, Ilse Metchek, president of apparel trade group California Fashion Association, said the new focus on small-time designers follows a series of failed attempts to reposition the local Fashion Week. Those failures, she said, boil down to the difference between the fashion business in New York and Los Angeles.

New York's fashion industry is about haute couture and clothing as entertainment. L.A.'s fashion industry is decidedly commercial – denim, sportswear and other clothes worn by the masses. Think big L.A. companies such as Forever 21 and Guess Inc.

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Those kinds of clothes, she said, simply aren't runway fare.

"Los Angeles makes garments that are profitable and make money," Metchek said. "If you saw a runway filled with denim or sportswear, it would be boring. But New York makes runway clothes – that's how they get the press."

Tangled threads

Fashion Week isn't a single event but a collection of shows put on by several producers at different venues. This year's Fashion Week will run from Oct. 8 through Oct. 14. There's a second Fashion Week in March.

Show producers this year include downtown's Fashion Council and Concept, and Hollywood's Project Ethos.

While there isn't an organization or company that controls Fashion Week, the Fashion Council has become one of the driving forces.

Council founder Smith, who owns downtown public relations and marketing firm Stylesmith, started the organization in 2011 and has been running it with the help of her company's staff.

The organization functions as a support group for local designers, providing mentorship and education tools. Smith said the council is not profitable but has been able to break even. She's invested her own money and gets fees from designers who participate in its Fashion Week shows. Yearly expenditures are about \$40,000.

One of the common complaints about L.A.'s Fashion Week is that it's unorganized, with events at locations spread throughout Los Angeles. Trying to fix that, the Fashion Council announced in July that it would partner with Jen Uner, founder of FashionWeekLA.com, a website that aggregates the plethora of Fashion Week events and posts them all on a single calendar.

The website was redesigned two months ago and offers a more streamlined registration process as well as a list of events to be held during Fashion Week.

The show also runs on a shoestring budget. Smith said the Fashion Council expects to spend about \$5,000 on its upcoming show. She was able to save money this year because Maker City L.A., a collective workspace downtown, donated its building as a venue.

That's helped keep fees low for exhibitors. Designers showing at the Fashion Council's runway show pay about \$500. Other shows charge as much as \$15,000 – still a discount compared with the six-figure fees charged by New York Fashion Week events.

The bargain-rate L.A. shows make sense for the kind of small, local designers the Fashion Council is trying to target. Debbie Talanian, founder of Stella Proseyn, is showing for her third time at this year's Fashion Council show. While it doesn't provide the sparkle of New York, she said it's been a good investment because it's given her exposure at a low price.

"Participating in larger-scale fashion weeks is cost-prohibitive to the point of not being an option for a lot of emerging brands," said Talanian. "The L.A. productions offer a very accessible way for smaller designers to spend some time on a stage, in the spotlight."

But low fees also mean money is tight for show producers. Smith said she has plans to bring in more revenue next year, such as seeking corporate sponsorships.

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But pulling in enough money to even throw a fashion show is tough, said Mike Vensel, designer and co-founder of Concept. That production company's Fashion Week show, also called Concept, will be held at the Ace Museum in Hancock Park.

"When we started Concept, the idea was to get sponsors to pay the production costs," he said. "But after five years, we're still looking for those people."

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