



AFRICAN MEETINGS

by Silvia Bombardini

Whether ethics hardly ever was one of its strengths, there's no denying that fashion may be extremely persuasive as well when headed toward a righteous path. Through intuition, contagious enthusiasm and immediate diffusion, fashion can be intimate and touching in an effective, sometimes literal way.

It was in fact with a spring collection of underpants and shirts in soft and tempting, delicate cuts that Laurence Chauvin Butaud launched her own menswear line barely a couple of seasons ago. With an office in Paris but its headquarters in Koumassi, Abidjan, LAURENCEAIRLINE begins as a collaborative project in the designer's native land, aiming to give employment, education, hope and love back to the people after the humanitarian and political crisis that has plagued the Ivory Coast for nearly a decade. Butaud's workshop gives local employees precious, reliable skills, including a keen eye for male elegance. "Everything happens at the Koumassi workshop. We educate people in constructing, cutting and sewing clothes; we develop samples; we produce our collection before delivering it worldwide," Butaud says proudly. "Educating African craftsmen to produce a high-end, locally-made product was not easy. Together with my workshop manager Christina Schatzeder, who has accompanied me from the very beginning, we transformed this challenge into success." With hard work, patience and devotion, Butaud and her crew turned an inherited, abandoned house into a studio. By reinvesting profits into the project, they hope to soon upgrade to a stable and proper school for professional development. "I wanted a tropical space that offers an energy boost," says Butaud. The name LAURENCEAIRLINE hints at her own itinerant lifestyle,

which involves frequent travel between Abidjan and Paris. It could also refer to the man Butaud designs for: a wanderer of the modern world, a curious and respectful observer. "I have been bathing in different cultures for my entire life. I consider myself an information catalyst who connects and transcribes all these varied cultures," says Butaud. "Africa's creative potential is extraordinary. With LAURENCEAIRLINE, I wanted to tell a story of West Africa meeting other continents," she adds.

LAURENCEAIRLINE's winter collection balances wax-printed peacock plumes with tartan lining and a Japanese pea motif. They look like woven souvenirs in clean, tailored lines. This season, Butaud introduces long pants, blazers and scarves; each piece is named after a port of call on her long voyage. "I like the Adzopé Shirt a lot. It was created at 4am by my hand power alone; my brain was drifting into sleep. I was surprised and taken by the result, kind of an homage to Morpheus," says Butaud. Other styles include the Awaji blazer, Fraser pants and Grand Bassam shorts.

While definitely masculine, Butaud's designs also have an intriguing unisex potential. Indeed, she says she gets inspired by womenswear and by her business partner Zohaer Majhadi, whom she describes as "a globe trotter and a modern dandy." Butaud's aesthetic is spontaneous and vibrant, cosmopolitan and tribal, visionary and ambitious. And it leaves us wanting more. "I wish for the project to continue bringing dreams into reality," she says. "I want it to open doors to the creativity coming from Africa."

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