

Could cashmere become sustainable fashion's next big thing?

The garments made by Himalayan weavers for Elaine Briggs' brand Cusi are the epitome of slow fashion, and could be a new forefront for sustainable knitwear.



Elaine Briggs is a lifelong Buddhist with strong family ties to the Himalayas. "From the outset I wanted daylight working conditions, chemical-free dyes, fabrics washed in natural soaps, sick pay and holiday pay." Photo: **Louie Douvis**

Susan Owen Jun 1, 2021

Persian rose, Tibetan orange, Parisian red – the jewel colours of Elaine Briggs' cashmere collection, Cusi, reflect the eternal modernity of a Himalayan weaving tradition that has warmed the hearts and elegant shoulders of luxury lovers for centuries.

In the spring of 2009, her scarves and throws – worn over the years by the likes of Mick Jagger, Kate Bush and conductor Sir Simon Rattle – were the first and only, according to Briggs, sustainable luxury collection to be presented at Premiere Classe in Paris, the world's leading accessories trade show.

But not to wild enthusiasm. At the time, the words "sustainable" and "ethical" had barely entered luxury's lexicon. "They were not words you blasted from the rooftops," says Briggs. "So,

I spoke of 'purity', 'quality', 'integrity'."

Buyers from Harrods and Browns in London and boutiques in Paris, Saint- Tropez and Tokyo all put in orders for her lighter-than-air, rainbow-hued pieces.



Elaine Briggs: "I had reached a point when my ethical values and beliefs did not match my day-to- day working life."

Briggs, who started Cosi in London before returning to live in Sydney in 2011, had seen the future. As a long-time fashion director with Condé Nast in Britain and Italy, she was "travelling the world 24/7, trained to predict fashion three years ahead". But she was also increasingly disillusioned by the ethics of a business she loved but saw changing dramatically.

"The growth of Zara and H&M and fast fashion's wasteful contribution to landfill was beginning to be abhorrent," she says. "I was very aware of the influence I played as a fashion director – whether it was with images of girls who were too thin, promoting something unattainable, or my carbon footprint as I jetted from one country to another. "I had reached a point when my ethical values and beliefs did not match my day-to-day working life."

Simultaneously, cashmere, made with the wool of goats that roam the Mongolian steppes and once the preserve of the wealthy, had escaped its gilded cage and was finding a new home on the shelves of fast fashion's emporiums around the globe. But with that came an awareness of the complex issue of sustainability.



Briggs wanted to preserve the tradition of Himalayan hand-weaving.

As cashmere snared almost \$US5 billion of the \$US71.2 billion global luxury spend, according to a 2020 Bain & Co report, Briggs decided Cossi textiles should be produced using strictly sustainable practices.

“I decided to align my career and my value system and do a cashmere collection because I know colour and I know quality, and I was known for creating editorial stories with a visual narrative, irrelevant of the labels. But since I’m not a designer it would have to be scarves and wraps. And because of my skill set, I had to go in at the top of the market and bring along my ethics.”

Briggs is a lifelong Buddhist with strong family ties to the Himalayas. Her English grandfather was a tea planter in Northern Bengal, her father was born in India, and she has a Tibetan daughter, Tashi, adopted in 2004.

In 2007, she started to travel to Nepal on field trips that allowed her to better understand sourcing and hand-weaving, supporting an equitable and sustainable business model benefiting local communities. These early trips would inform her commitment to best practice. “The key players are in Nepal, but on that first visit I saw workers in terrible conditions, in darkened sheds with no natural light.”

So, she marked time until a friend introduced her to the production manager for Hermès Paris in Nepal, who with her husband was concurrently running her own business, employing three weavers. It was a fortuitous meeting. She would become a lifelong friend of Briggs, and

eventually work full-time for Cosi.



Briggs insists on using chemical-free dyes.

“From the outset I wanted daylight working conditions, chemical-free dyes, fabrics washed in natural soaps, and sick pay and holiday pay,” says Briggs. “We’re the only artisanal, hand-weaving atelier to offer that in Kathmandu.”

She also wanted to preserve the tradition of Himalayan hand-weaving. “The word ‘hand-made’ covers a lot, and usually means electrified looms, so the weaver is managing the engine and the loom. We make far fewer pieces a day than the industrial looms.”

It took Briggs almost two years to perfect her palettes (which she mixes herself), choose weaves and test the quality. “I can do absolutely any colour and I take inspiration from paint libraries, from nature.”

A self-confessed perfectionist, she rejected half the first samples. “I had to be tough, I was paying for excellence. But since that first collection, when I established the quality, I have rejected fewer than 11 pieces in the same number of years.”

She also appointed a former creative director of Ralph Lauren in New York to develop the branding, and each Cosi piece comes wrapped in Nepalese *lokta* tissue paper, sustainably made from the bark of a common shrub, with a linen label giving the brand’s history.

Cosi was awarded the Butterfly Mark in 2012, the luxury industry certification for brands that meet high ethical and environmental standards. And from the outset it has sold to a handful of top boutiques in Australia – Riada Concept in Sydney, Samantha Ogilvie in Brisbane and Christine on Collins in Melbourne, where prices start at \$390.

Overseas, the brand can be found in The Conran Shop in London and Paris, Petersham Nurseries in London, Wako, Takashimaya, Beams and Isetan in Japan and selected Monocle’s bijoux boutiques – in Zurich, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, London and Tokyo.