

By Rebecca May Johnson

*Kiev's cutting-edge: the designers ignored by Ukrainian fashion week
The so-called 'new east' is home to the most talked about creatives in the industry. So
why weren't they showing in Kiev last month?*

*Ультрасучасний Київ: дизайнери проігнорували Український тиждень
моди.*

*Так званий «новий схід» є домівною для обговорення найбільш резонансних подій
у цій галузі. Так чому ж вони не показали нічого у Києві минулого тижня?*

*У статті йдеться про перешкоди для молодих талановитих дизайнерів на Українських
тижднях моди, які сприймаються митцями скоріше як місце показу корупції як організаторів,
так і відвідувачів.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/mar/01/kievs-cutting-edge-the-designers-ignored-by-ukrainian-fashion-week>



Hanging from the snow-covered roof of Lesnoy fleamarket in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev is a fur coat, identical to that seen on the catwalk of trend-setting label Vetements in Paris in January. Suspended alongside it are oversized padded coats, sportswear, bootleg brands and washed-out denim – the sartorial tropes by which the post-Soviet world has come to bewitch the contemporary fashion world.

The “new east” – which typically comprises Russia, Georgia and Ukraine – might not be one of the industry’s so-called fashion capitals, but in the past 18 months its designers, models and aesthetic have burst on to the fashion scene, way beyond its borders.

Demna Gvasalia, fashion’s golden boy, is a Georgian who grew up in Ukraine and is now revolutionising traditional Parisian label Balenciaga (as well as being head designer for Vetements). From Russia, Gosha Rubchinskiy is the current darling of streetwear, while Ukrainian designer Anna K is a favourite among the Kardashians set and Vogue Ukraine is fast becoming a reference point. However, while the 1990s Soviet aesthetic that designers such as Gvasalia and Rubchinskiy champion is on the up around the world, many of them have yet to find success in their home countries.

Lesnoy fleamarket is a good place to find out more about Ukrainian fashion. It is packed with Kiev’s models, designers, stylists and photographers – a new generation resurrecting the 90s aesthetic of their youth. For them, of course, the post-USSR fallout – the corruption, economic chaos and Ukraine’s ongoing war, which has killed more than 9,000 people – is a reality as well as an aesthetic.

For up-and-coming stylist Stas Soulkeeper, everything that went along with the fall of the Soviet Union forms a kind of moodboard. Dressed in a death metal T-shirt tucked into his high-waisted jeans, he cites: “my friends’ sex stories, vintage porn, common things from our part of the world post-USSR – films like Lilya 4-ever – that kind of social situation” as influences. His editorial in February’s Vogue Ukraine is an exploration of all of the above.

But despite the popularity of this aesthetic, and despite the international success of some homegrown talents, many of Ukraine's talented new wave of designers, such as draganddrop and Masha Reva claim to be priced out of the official schedule of their domestic fashion week, due to the fees it charges for a fashion show – although many of them work at the event as stylists or models.

Others do not feel it's the right context to share their designs – despite the region's current global reputation for cutting-edge cool, Ukraine fashion week is more about plastic surgery and diamonds than the experimental Vetements aesthetic. And given the link between wealth and corruption that persists after the 2014 Maidan revolution, it's no surprise that some young designers feel out of place. “We don't feel comfortable there, we don't go there,” said Yulia Grazhdan – the founder of womenswear label draganddrop, she is one of the new generation of Ukrainian designers who is better received outside of her homeland.

But of course there are exceptions. One designer at Ukraine fashion week whose work has some of the edge the “new east” has become known for is 23-year-old Ivan Frolov. His collection explored themes of religion and sexual taboo. Incense, candles, stained-glass windows and a large male-voice choir framed clothes that featured kink, nods to 1980s jumble sales and churchy silhouettes in garish jacquard silks and knits. Frolov is attracting international interest and is soon to be stocked in Opening Ceremony, the American boutique label famous for collaborations with the likes of Chloe Sevigny.

Nikita Sereda, a 21-year-old model and arguably the best-dressed man at fashion week, cast and styled Frolov's show. Dressed head-to-toe in second-hand finds from Lesnoy, he is a regular at the underground techno club Closer. Like legendary Berlin club Berghain, Closer has become a hub of Kiev's counterculture, where anti-corruption crusaders such as Serhiy Leshchenko (now in government) party to the cream of contemporary techno alongside the city's fashion underground. Based in a former factory, its unadorned walls are the opposite of the veneered, glitzy venues preferred by Ukraine's wealthy socialites. And where the official fashion week fails, Closer succeeds – this is where the city's true catwalk lies.

Given the fuss around the former Eastern bloc, organisers of Ukrainian fashion week need to find a way to harness the creativity of the underground scene – and bring the country's prolific young talent in from the cold.