The Sunday Times Style

CHANGEMAKERS

The cover star of American Vogue's September issue (perhaps the biggest coup in fashion), James — the woman behind accessories label Brother Vellies — spent lockdown rallying Fortune 500 retailers to ensure 15 per cent of the brands stocked on their shelves are black-owned businesses. "We launched the 15 Percent Pledge not as a Band-Aid, but as a long-term strategy for big retailers to rethink their business strategy and what brands they invest in," she says. The beauty behemoth Sephora and homeware chain West Elm are signed on, but the likes of Amazon, Whole Foods and Net-a-porter have stayed silent. "The silence from some of the brands we have called on is surprising. However, the incredible response and support we have received from the community is always a surprise," she says. James's loyal community is at the heart of her label, as is sustainability. Her accessories are handmade using locally sourced materials and animal by-products. Brother Vellies also pays its artisans across Morocco, Ethiopia and South Africa a living wage.

@aurorajames

SAUL NASH Designer

A trained choreographer turned designer, Nash recalls a childhood spent dancing across the living room to his mother’s music. "Not much has changed today," laughs the 24-year-old, whose signature brand of sportswear is designed with movement in mind. His seminal AW20 catwalk show, featuring his community of friends and fellow dancers in combative dance, was designed to tackle the stereotyping experienced by black youths growing up in London. "I strive to make things better, so seeing everything come together last season really moved me." His future's bright, but Nash is taking it at his own pace. "This year has been humbling. The turn of events, it reminded me to be patient and to remember it’s OK to pause. It’s time to identify the things in your surroundings that you want to positively change." @saul.nash

IB KAMARA Stylist

Born in Sierra Leone, Kamara grew up in the Gambia, before moving to London aged 16. His parents’ plan for him to pursue medicine was sidetracked when he decided to enrol at Central Saint Martins after three years studying science. "I had to decide what I wanted to do with my life and what would bring me happiness," he recalls. "Going to an art school and finding my way to styling brought, and still brings, a sense of fulfilment. In the end it all boils down to happiness." Widely regarded as one of London’s most distinctive and exciting stylists, the 30-year-old has worked with the likes of Stella McCartney and Dior. For Kamara, fashion magazines have a crucial role to play in tackling issues such as race and gender. "The power of imagery is very moving. It can inspire you, break you, rule you out, discriminate against you. But it can also bring out a range of emotions you never knew you had. That’s how powerful images can be, and why representation is important." @ibkamara

AURORA JAMES Designer and founder of Brother Vellies

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It was a trip home to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2007 that inspired Musunka to found the Malaika Foundation, a non-profit organisation that educates girls in the DRC. Thirteen years later, the mother of two — for whom fashion and philanthropy are first nature — has more than 300 female students enrolled, with 30 girls added each year. The foundation, which is in the village of Kalebuka, has also established a community learning centre, built and refurbished 20 wells to provide clean water to 35,000 people and supplied 11,000 malaria nets. “I am proud of the fact that we have built a community-driven ecosystem that can be duplicated in any other country,” says Musunka, who put together a Congolese team of staff and an international team of volunteers to turn her dream into a reality. “[The students’] education doesn’t just serve the purpose of improving their health, financial wellbeing and opportunities, it also contributes towards the development of Congo and Africa. We want to instil leadership skills and a sense of responsibility into the communities and country.”

LET’S SAY COVID-19 WAS THE CATALYST FOR A LONG-TERM PROJECT,” SAYS KNITSTER LDN’S EMMA MCCLELLAND, WHO ALONGSIDE AYSEN BAYRAM, GRAPHIC DESIGNER KAYSHA SINCLAIR AND LOOP STUDIO’S NORA WONG AND BEN MCKERNAN, FORMED COMMUKNITTY, A COLLECTIVE OF LONDON-BASED KNITWEAR DESIGNERS AIMING TO EMPOWER YOUNG CREATIVES. “A CREATIVE FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN, ESPECIALLY IN THIS CURRENT CLIMATE. THE AVERAGE STUDENT DEBT IS £36,000,” SAYS BAYRAM, WHO ADMITS SHE WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY HAD THE SAME COSTS APPLIED 20 YEARS AGO. “IT’S IMPORTANT WE PROVIDE THE NEXT GENERATION OF CREATIVES, ESPECIALLY THOSE FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS, THE RIGHT TOOLS AND GUIDANCE TO GIVE THEM AN EQUAL FOOTING IN LIFE.” KNITSTER LDN AND LOOP STUDIO ARE OFFERING YOUNG CREATIVES EXPERIENCE OF THE KNITWEAR DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING PROCESS VIA STUDIO PLACEMENTS. SINCLAIR, WHO WAS A NEXT STEPS MENTOR FOR THE PRINCE’S TRUST UNTIL 2018, IS EXCITED THAT COMMUKNITTY IS ALSO LOOKING TO OFFER ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING TO HELP YOUNG CREATIVES START A CAREER PATH IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY. “I KNOW FROM FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE THAT WHEN PEOPLE ARE NURTURED, LISTENED TO AND INVESTED IN, MAGIC CAN HAPPEN.”

THURSTAN REDDING
Photographer

“My mother was a war refugee who fled the Vietnam War and my dad was an academic — I wasn’t privy to any sense of creative industries when I was growing up. I was actually studying politics at Cambridge in 2013 when Lily Cole, a former student herself, needed a portrait taken. At the time I had picked up photography as a hobby of sorts and got the job. She probably doesn’t even remember, but it was a pivotal moment for me,” recalls Redding, 27. Seven years later his photographic career is flourishing, and he counts Chanel and Miu Miu among his clients. “When I started out, I was interested in positioning queer and LGBTQ+ folk in classic realms of photography — traditionally it was something always focused on exclusivity and privilege. I have the idea of placing someone quite eccentric in a suburban environment. For me it’s about scratching the surface of perfection to reveal something flawed but still beautiful.” Redding would also like to photograph his parents. “It would be introspective and something I’d love to take the time to do.”

COMMUKNITTY
Emma McClelland, Aysen Bayram, Kaysha Sinclair, Nora Wong and Ben McKernan

“Let’s say Covid-19 was the catalyst for a long-term project,” says Knitster LDN’s Emma McClelland, who alongside Aysen Bayram, graphic designer Kaysha Sinclair and Loop Studio’s Nora Wong and Ben McKernan, formed Commuknity, a collective of London-based knitwear designers aiming to empower young creators. “A creative future is uncertain, especially in this current climate. The average student debt is £36,000,” says Bayram, who admits she would never have been able to attend university had the same costs applied 20 years ago. “It’s important we provide the next generation of creatives, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the right tools and guidance to give them an equal footing in life.” Knitster LDN and Loop Studio are offering young creatives experience of the knitwear design and manufacturing process via studio placements. Sinclair, who was a Next Steps mentor for the Prince’s Trust until 2018, is excited that Commuknity is also looking to offer one-to-one mentoring to help young creatives start a career path in the fashion industry. “I know from first-hand experience that when people are nurtured, listened to and invested in, magic can happen.”

NOÉLLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA
Model and founder of the Malaika Foundation

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NEW PANDEMICS
Founded by Cody Chandler in 2018, New Pandemics is a New York-based casting and management agency dedicated to increasing LGBTQ+ visibility.

MYCKY BROWN (left) The model and apprentice tattoo artist joined New Pandemics at the start of the year, but the 24-year-old has already set her sights on the top. “I would love to model for Rihanna’s label Fenty and Savage x Fenty. They represent everything I want to see in the fashion, model and make-up industry.” She aligns her work with that of an artist. “In both cases of tattooing and make-up, your body is the canvas. One is more permanent than the other, but they both tell a story without any exchange of words, just like a painting would — and I love that.”

ARIA PUGA (above) The designer and model spent quarantine sewing toiles and searching different fabrics for their eponymous collection and pondering the future of the fashion industry. “Having a more diverse staff will give brands a better idea of how to avoid cultural appropriation, which is something we have seen too often because either no one is speaking up or nobody is aware of the false narrative that creates,” they say. “The same goes for the models that are hired to represent the brand.”

ANGELINA SCHMALZRIED (left) The mother of two was initially reluctant to foray into fashion. “I was scouted in my twenties, but in my mid-thirties I needed to make money. After my first job I was happy to find out it was less about me and more about working with amazingly talented and interesting people,” she says. Navigating Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter has been a formative experience for her Brooklyn-based family. “This moment has been an evaluation of privilege. Every day we talk about what we’re grateful for, who we miss and take a safe outing to get fresh air. We’ve been reading children’s books about slavery and the civil rights movement. It’s important for me that they know this fight isn’t new.”

JUNE GORDON (right) Gordon’s introduction to fashion was a baptism of fire — walking the SS20 Balenciaga show at Paris fashion week. “I’m still processing it, to be honest. I feel so grateful to call Balenciaga my introduction to a job and a world that I love so much.” With a growing spotlight on transgenders, Gordon is keen to raise awareness. “This year has felt like a huge call to action. Black trans women are responsible for creating the conditions that make it possible for me to exist openly as a trans woman in the fashion industry today.”

CORY WALKER (right) “I’m from Columbus, Georgia. Initially, I moved to Atlanta to start my journey as an actor when I was 19, which is where I stepped out on my first movie and TV sets,” says the emerging star. “It was doing extra work where I got familiar with set etiquettes, acting for the camera and all the other moving parts. It wasn’t until I moved to NYC that I started studying the craft.” For the 26-year-old, film and television projects are their goal. “I’m excited to tell disruptive, reflective, world-making and unique stories through characters that are dissimilar to yet resonate with me.”

ARIES DE LA ROSA (below) The paralegal-cum-model credits non-profit organisations Fresh Air Fund and Sponsors for Educational Opportunity with providing him with the social and educational skills needed to attend Oxford University. “Growing up in the Bronx, attending underfunded public schools and experiencing my father’s deportation first hand, my non-traditional background did not allow me to envision myself accomplishing anything outside of surviving my immediate circumstances,” he says. After initially pursuing medicine to help ensure accessible healthcare for black and brown communities, De La Rosa switched to law when he realised that equality starts with policy-making.

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“Knowledge is power,” says Joan Smalls, who in June promised to donate 50 per cent of her earnings to Black Lives Matter charities for the rest of the year. “Community empowerment programmes and educational systems in underfunded neighbourhoods require immediate action to guarantee that we are enforcing change in the right direction, and that generations will be enriched with the knowledge that has been denied to them.” The Puerto Rican supermodel is now a household name, so has she witnessed discrimination first hand? “Looking back I would say the media support and visibility for people of colour is far less compared to how much attention is paid to non-blacks,” she says. “It really is time for everyone to be represented, no matter the colour of their skin.” If models were historically seen and not heard, Smalls has one clear message for the fashion industry: “Everyone can be a pillar for change by not only understanding where the system has failed to be all-inclusive for black peers, but to also step up and be an advocate for change in their everyday life.”

@joansmalls

JOAN SMALLS Model and activist

Fashion industry titans Lindsay Peoples Wagner, editor-in-chief of Teen Vogue, and Sandrine Charles, owner of Sandrine Charles Consulting, have joined professional forces to create the Black in Fashion Council. “The goal of the Black in Fashion Council (BIFC) is to represent and secure the advancement of black individuals in the fashion and beauty industries,” they say. “The long-term plan is to drive lasting change in the industry through partnership, strategy and guidance.” The likes of Condé Nast, Glossier, Farfetch and Tommy Hilfiger have already signed the three-year commitment pledge, and the BIFC will produce a yearly public report to track the work it is doing. Aside from targeting global businesses, the duo hope to effect change at every level of the fashion industry. “Everyone can be a pillar for change by not only understanding where the system has failed to be all-inclusive for black peers, but to also step up and be an advocate for change in their everyday life.”

@blackinfashioncouncil

BLACK IN FASHION COUNCIL
Lindsay Peoples Wagner and Sandrine Charles

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