

Breaking

the Mould

Ph5's fun and functional knitwear is part-skincare secret and part-cool party trick.



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Recycled viscose and
nylon Jasmine tank top,
and recycled viscose
and polyester Kazia
briefs [Ph5](#)

Ph5 isn't on a mission to make the next viral face mask or lip gloss. While its hit offerings use hyaluronic acid to keep skin moisturised and colour change in the sun, knitwear is the name of the game for founder, Wei Lin, and designer, Zoe Champion. Remember those good ol' chunky sweaters that could've been your grandma's? You won't find that in the New York and China-based label's evolving arsenal of surreal and functional knit pieces. Imagine activewear with optimised compression for different muscle groups and skirts with wavy wire-lined hems for flexible styling. The duo has also brought new meaning to denim, bow and sequins with colourful trompe l'oeil prints. What's the backstory? For starters, Lin's mother went from working in a knitwear factory in Southern China to owning one herself. Today, the facility is Ph5's experimental playground. "[My mother] still challenges us to this day," Lin said. "She's always like: 'What is new?' or say that something is 'too easy'." For the Parsons-trained Champion, it's "almost like having our own atelier". To bring the brand's whimsical designs to life, they collaborate with in-house engineers to program the factory's knitting machines. "This gives us the opportunity to push fabrics and techniques further," Champion shared, "From the start, this puts us a step ahead." Technology, however, isn't the only thing that the pair puts an onus on. Rich storytelling also grounds Ph5's designs. Titled *Life in the Factory*, the brand's spring-summer 2024 collection sheds a humanist light on manufacturing facilities. According to Champion, the exterior of the Ph5 factory is surrounded by fruiting and flowering plants first nurtured by Lin's mother. You can also find a small dog running about. First captured in still image, these scenes were then transformed into the collection's prints. "It's not this cold and technological space people imagine for a factory," Champion shared. "It's lived-in and there is energy here." For them, the collection's a celebration of their facility and its engineers. "I think people really romanticise Italian factories in fashion," Champion said. "Chinese factories are absolutely at that level... We want to show that they are leaders and experts in knitwear too." Environmental concerns are another topic on their radar. For example, Ph5's last two ready-to-wear collections spotlighted the negative impacts of microplastics on marine life. On the production end, the brand's garments are constructed from 90 per cent responsibly-sourced materials and a tree is planted for every piece sold. The team also issues sustainability reports and has invited thought leaders like climate activist Sophia Li to discuss how fashion can do better. "We really push ourselves in sustainability not because it is a trend or because we have to anyway," Lin shared. "We really care and want to make sure we are part of the solution." However, Ph5's ambition to upheave knitwear norms and do good for Mother Earth has not been without setbacks. "We have all of these different innovations but it can be so hard to educate and tell the story in a way that people actually care, understand and want to buy," Lin said. According to Champion, social media hasn't always helped. "It's so visual and a fleeting moment... it can be a struggle." Yet, the brand continues to march at the beat of its own drum. Last November, the debut of *Life in the Factory* at New York

Fashion Week also marked the brand's first runway show. Recently, Ph5 also launched at American luxury retailer Neiman Marcus, expanding its global stocklist that already includes SSense, Holt Renfrew, Selfridges, and Harvey Nichols. But for them, it's connecting to consumers who genuinely believe in their designs and what they stand for that is the most rewarding. Lin recently stumbled upon an unsponsored YouTuber who openly shared her love for Ph5. Apart from feeling confident in the brand's hallmark UV-reactive and wavy hemmed looks, the content creator took time to discover Ph5's past collections on its e-commerce site and even read through the sustainability reports. "We're not a gimmick and we're not just throwing millions of dollars in social media hoping that sales will grow," Lin shared candidly. "For people to appreciate, pay money, love, study and care about us means a lot."



MANIFESTO: Was there a formative moment that sparked your love for fashion?

WEI LIN: My mom owns a knitwear factory in Southern China. Growing up, I saw millions of sweaters being made and sent to the rest of the world. I also really like the brand Alaïa and so this inspired me to think: What is the next Alaïa and what is the future of knitwear?

ZOE CHAMPION: Early Alexander McQueen shows were very formative to me. They were emotive, had so much passion and used clothes to tell a story. I found it so fascinating.

M Why knitwear and what about it inspires you?

ZC My undergrad years didn't offer a knitwear specific programme and yet, it was always my passion. I love that you build it from the ground up. You choose



Cotton Protea Mixed Media shirt, cotton and cashmere Rabenda Tree crop top, and recycled viscose and polyester Elia skorts [Ph5](#)



Recycled viscose and polyester Lotus dress [Ph5](#)

the thread and you can even customise the yarn. There is so much more control and creativity.

WL For me, passion runs in the family. My mom is so passionate about knitwear. Growing up in this environment, I celebrate knitwear more than I know it. I live and breathe knitwear so much that it doesn't make sense to not leverage my knowledge and passion. It's in my pocket – I should do something about it.

M What stereotypes about knitwear does Ph5 aim to shatter?

ZC We want to shatter the idea that knitwear is old and traditional. It's not just a *crafty* thing. Also, we want to challenge the idea that knitwear is a complement to a great clothing collection. It's not just extra sweaters to fill merchandising.

WL When we first started, we faced a lot of setbacks. Buyers did not see us as designers producing ready-to-wear but as a single category knitwear and sweater brand. It felt like because we chose to do knitwear, we were limiting ourselves. That was really hard. Now that it's been 10 years, we have shown what we can do. We have made puffer jackets, suiting, denim and even activewear out of knit. We've taken knitwear to a level no one else has in order to prove to ourselves and to buyers that [knitwear] can be everything. As a matter of fact, our spring-summer collections have always performed better sales-wise.

M So, what does building a new collection look like for Ph5? Does it start from brainstorming new innovations?

ZC It tends to start with a story or a message we want to convey. If you're just approaching it from "Oh, this is something new we can do with knitwear" it can turn into making things for the sake of it. Since our process is grounded in a concept, it opens up the doors to think about how we can create something that functions or looks completely different from what people assume about knitwear. That's where we can have a lot of fun.

WL Whenever I'm in China, I'm 40 minutes away from the factory. I go two to three times a week to check on the swatches, the development, the fit and to talk to the engineers. Zoe is constantly brainstorming. We've made the factory process seamless, allowing us to have two or three more rounds of development.

M The spring-summer 2024 collection is a tribute to Ph5's factory and its workers. Why is this element of storytelling important to you?

ZC We have so many friends, family and people that we work with around the world, so we are aware that there is so much happening everywhere. We're not disconnected in this fashion bubble. We're not just playing dress-up and having fun. We are people living in this world. Even though we love fashion and we love

the excitement that it can bring, it has the power to be a positive influence.

M How did Ph5's use of technology evolve for spring-summer 2024?

ZC Our UV programme was a huge part of our spring-summer 2024 collection. It is this yarn that turns from beige to pink when it is out in the sun. We brought in this technology previously but we found new ways to play with it. For example, people have always said that they'd love a wedding dress version. We also wanted a wedding dress moment for the runway show. So, we created a few gowns. UV-sensitive fabrics were also a part of our denim programme. So we have these pieces that look like denim shorts or tops that also change colours in the sun.

M There are multiple pieces of knitwear stacked on a single design. Why surrealism?

ZC Even though we have these issues that we're passionate about, we're not coming at it from a doom and gloom way. We are a light, colourful and happy brand. We love to have a sense of humour and I think people who gravitate to us don't take themselves too seriously. Surrealism plays into this as it is a bit tongue-in-cheek.

With the sweaters laying on top of each other, I like to have a touch point where people can understand a piece of clothing. You can feel joy coming from it because it's a very strange way of doing something you may recognise.

M Feng Shui elements were fresh ideas on your runway. Tell us more about this.

WL Celebrating a Chinese factory, and factories in general, can be a bit political and uncomfortable for people. It's our inspiration but we don't want people to feel uncomfortable and by all means, we don't want to be a political brand. So when it comes to these serious topics, we want to have our twist and angle on it. In this case, it is a personal angle. My mother is a female business owner from Southern China. She's super superstitious and *feng shui* is a huge thing. It impacts the placement of everything in the factory, the direction of her office space, the *feng shui* bamboo, the goldfish... it's a part of the Chinese factory that nobody knows.

ZC It was also our first runway show so we felt that any good vibes that we can bring won't hurt. *(Laughs)* We had a little frog with a gold coin to bring wealth and money. We joked that a model carrying it with the gold coins facing out to the audience was also bringing everyone else good fortune. We're a community – we have to help each other any way we can.

M The finale's look, featuring a model carrying an enormous pile of garments, went viral. Did you anticipate this reaction?

WL People interpreted it in ways that we didn't

expect! Some people said it reminded them to do laundry. (*Laughs*) Others said that it showed that there is so much waste in the fashion industry. But for us, our original message was that for a factory worker, piles of clothing are your day-to-day. These are all good messages.

M *Life in a Factory* was Ph5’s first runway show. What are your thoughts on this experience now that a few months have passed?

ZC It’s really hard... and it’s really expensive. (*Laughs*) It’s like putting on a wedding. It takes months of planning but then it’s over and the work is done. Though, for people to see the clothes move and experience this whole thing we put together with the music, casting, styling and this big viral moment at the end – there is a level of extra interest that people take. It’s more of a recognition than just being on social media and doing lookbooks. But yeah, it’s not for every season.

M For fall-winter 2024, Ph5 opted for a presentation rather than another show. Why?

ZC In the winter, the idea of having people sitting in a big space waiting for a show to start didn’t feel like what we wanted to do. We wanted to bring people together and take a look at the clothes at a slower pace. It’s nice to be able to show different facets of your brand and give people different experiences each time to keep things fresh.

M Ph5 has also shown a genuine commitment to sustainability from using 90 per cent responsibly-sourced materials to sharing annual sustainability reports. What’s next?

ZC Honestly, I think we feel a bit stuck. We hit some of our key milestones early and it feels like, what now? We’re always looking to the industry for new options but all these technologies are at their beta stages. They’re so hard to get a hold of and use on the scale our brand needs.

WL In the next two years, my goal is to close the whole circularity loop. We’re pretty good with the raw materials, packaging and design. A lot of our design inspirations also have a sustainability-oriented message. But from a business standpoint, I want to find partners to help us establish an exchange or resale platform to recycle our pieces from consumers. It’s really tough. We don’t have a physical store to collect pieces and our market is so global that to ask customers to ship things back to us will probably cost more and do more damage to the environment than the actual recycling. This is a big part of sustainability that we haven’t even touched on yet.

M Still, Ph5 is pretty ahead of the pack. Do you ever have to go the extra mile just to educate your partners on these issues?

ZC It’s a little bit of that but people also want to put a stamp on something and just say it is or isn’t sustainable. We know it’s a spectrum. You can be recycling garments but still ship them across the world three times – the emissions are still super harmful. It’s about doing the best with what we can and have. It’s nuanced and it can be hard to explain.

WL Personally, I’m constantly struggling with the idea that I’m talking about sustainability but we’re still a brand trying to get people to shop. How sustainable are we, really? 10 years ago, I went to a sustainability fair in Brooklyn. I wanted to support local businesses but walked out being disappointed. I genuinely didn’t like anything. I realised that I don’t want to buy for the sake of buying. So for Ph5, I don’t want sustainability to be a marketing thing and become the only reason why people come to us. Sustainability is just the cherry on top.

M Why use fashion as a vehicle for change?

ZC It’s such a huge part of day-to-day expression. More people want to feel connected to what they are wearing and really support the ideas coming out of the brand. It’s also about giving people insight into who we are. Our designs don’t just come from nowhere. It’s not just some incredible stroke of genius that we had one night. They come from the stories we want to tell.

M What next for fall-winter 2024? Anything you can tease?

ZC Hyaluronic acid-infused turtlenecks and underlayers! This is going to be an amazing functional aspect along with knit puffer jackets. Ironically, we’re also doing more chunky and true knit pieces with the fun and flair of Ph5. We’ve shied away from this for many seasons.

M What message do you hope Ph5 conveys to the fashion industry at large?

WL I want to see us continue to be a small and tasteful brand that is doing something very original, genuine, and innovative.

ZC That there is more experimentation that we can do and more we can push!
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Recycled nylon Olivia
crochet shirt, recycled
viscose and nylon Kiri
top, and recycled nylon
Lennox crochet trousers
Ph5
[Opposite] recycled nylon
and recycled spandex Gen-9
Eco-Compression dress Ph5
Hair TOMOAKI SATO
Make-up TAKAMASA NAKAMOTO
Model JIAYUN XIE AT NEW
YORK MODEL

