

Haute Designer Orsola de Castro's Fast-Fashion Antidote

by Stephanie A. Blanchard



Orsola de Castro, photo by Merie W. Wallace

"For beautiful eyes, look for the good in others; for beautiful lips, speak only words of kindness; and for poise, walk with the knowledge that you are never alone."

—Audrey Hepburn

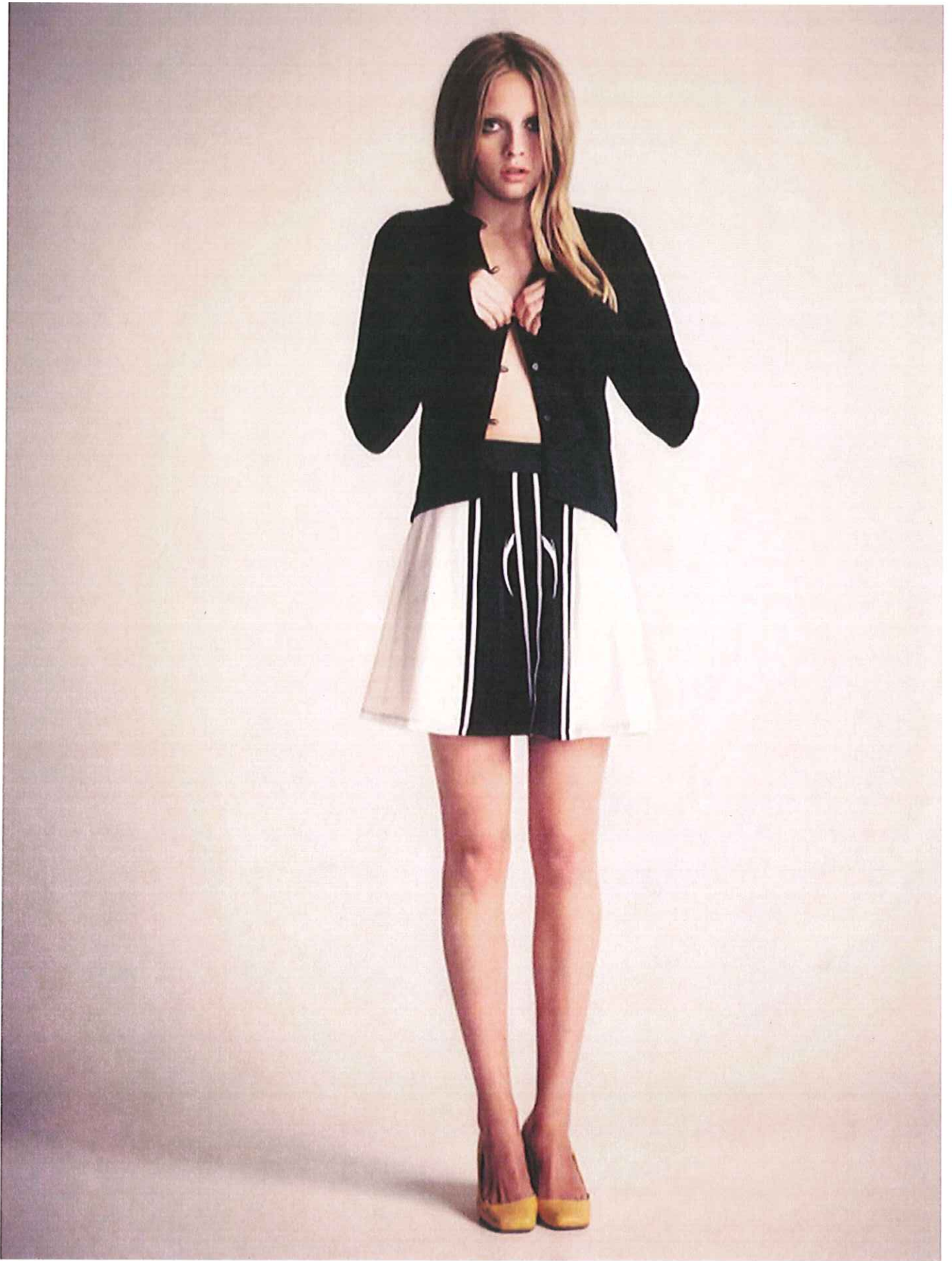
These days, Audrey might have added, *for fashion, walk softly to reduce your carbon footprint*, as the fashion industry becomes more earth-friendly. Orsola de Castro, who is the founder of the UK fashion label, From Somewhere, is a pioneer of the eco-fashion movement. She and her partner, Filippo Ricci, create couture collections from luxurious remnants that have been discarded during the manufacturing process. Some of the fabrics are reclaimed from Italian factories that make apparel for labels such as Yves Saint Laurent. The practice of upcycling, taking waste and remaking it into something superior, is common in other trades, but relatively new in fashion, especially at the couture level. But From Somewhere has been upcycling in its design work since the company was created in 1997.

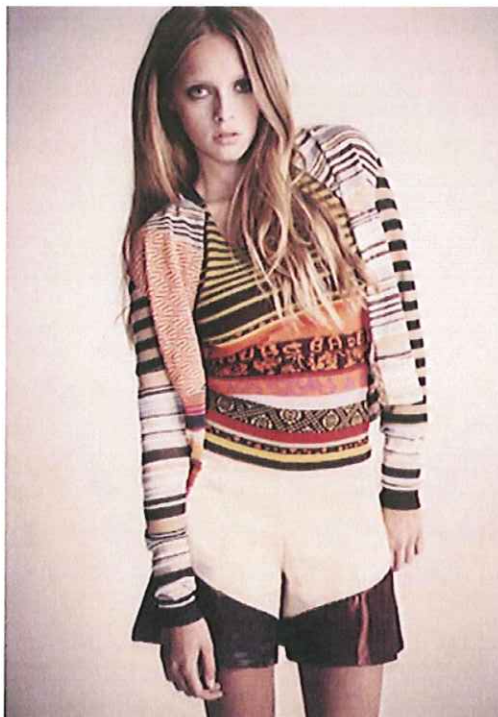
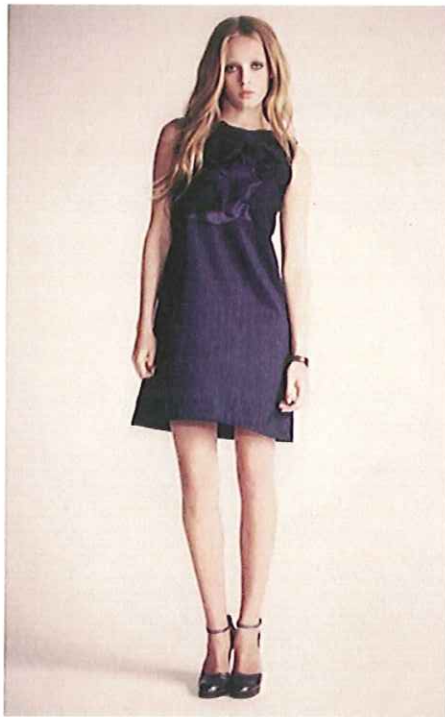
To fully appreciate Orsola and Filippo's genius, a little history about the apparel

industry's transition—from producing made-to-last clothing, to throwaway wear, to contemporary practices—is necessary. Before the 1920s, designers were inclined to create pieces with as little fabric as possible, and no decorative trimmings. Clothing was more utilitarian; people wore hand-me-downs, patched-up the holes in their garments, and kept their clothes for long periods of time. After World War I, industrialization took place. Enter globalization and synthetic fabrics, which led to cheaper apparel. Because of reduced clothing prices, style became a prevalent consideration and consumers grew accustomed to buying inexpensive but fashionable clothing, wearing it for a season, and then tossing it away. The industry dubbed it "fast fashion," and the mindset is now embedded in contemporary fashion culture. Environmental Protection Agency statistics indicate that more than *thirteen million* tons of textiles were consigned to landfills in the United States in 2010. Although fifteen percent of textile waste was recovered for reuse, it's still a startling statistic. And when Orsola started From Somewhere in the late nineties, there would have been less recoverage of textile waste—another reason she wanted her couture designs to consider environmental impact.

Orsola, who is an artist and illustrator, had already been practicing upcycling in her own life, and says she accidentally fell into fashion design. "I've always butchered my own clothing, since I was young." How to being a potential career, she says, had to do with a rather well-worn jumper she wanted to wear. "I took my crochet needle and crocheted all around the hole, the neck and the edges of the jumper. I wore it to a rather fancy event, and everyone commented on it." At the time, in her work as an artist, she was printing on textile and selling it at a market in London," she recalls. She showed the owners the jumper, "and they immediately ordered a collection that didn't even exist. Within a few months, we went international," she says, with the line becoming available in New York and Los Angeles.

With the first few From Somewhere collections, Orsola and Filippo had worked with secondhand clothing, but the demand for their customized recycled pieces quickly became so high, they couldn't keep up producing "one-offs." They wanted to find an equally earth-friendly way to create couture designs and decided to investigate using consumer fashion scraps. After visiting high-end apparel factories in Italy, where she





born, Orsola realized they could create entire collections from other designers' proofs, production off-cuts, fabric end-rolls, and swatches. As with other couture designers, "we start with an inspiration," Orsola says, but, "obviously, there's more adaptability, in the sense that we need to adapt our designs and our ideas to whatever it is we find." And, like their peers in the industry, "We operate in a rather mainstream way. We have two collections a year, and we work on what inspires us and follow trends," she notes. "We're like everybody else except we only use what's discarded by others."

Orsola and Filippo are well respected and sometimes even sought after in their industry—and not necessarily by couture labels. For example, Speedo (yes, as in the swimwear makers) consigned From Somewhere to make a limited edition collection from Speedo remnants. The collection, "From Somewhere with Speedo," was presented at the September 2011 London Fashion Week.

As leaders in the eco-fashion industry, Orsola and Filippo co-curate Estethica, with Anna Orsini from the British Fashion Council (BFC), at the bi-annual London Fashion Week. The BFC created Estethica in 2006 to support and promote designers who adhere to a specific set of fair trade and sustainability principles, and who display excellence in their design work. Thirteen such designers presented collections at London Fashion Week in February 2012.

Orsola and her partner also practice fair

trade. In 2002 Orsola formed a women's cooperative in Italy. *Cooperativa Rinascere*, which, fittingly, means "reborn," helps to rehabilitate people with disabilities or mental health problems by providing work. In many cases, seamstresses now employed by the cooperative had previously worked for top fashion houses, but became ill and were not able to return to their jobs. Now they are making beautiful clothes again, as seamstresses for *From Somewhere*. ❖

Go to www.fromsomewhere.co.uk to learn more about From Somewhere and to view the current collection.

Stephanie A. Blanchard is a non-fiction writer and a brand communications strategist. She also serves as Copy Chief for *StyleWeek Providence*, one of her hometown passions. With a love for creative work, especially fashion and interior design, Stephanie looks forward to styling some upcoming photo shoots for *AVALON* and other publications. She teaches Brand Writing through the Continuing Education department at Rhode Island School of Design. She will graduate with a Master of Arts in communication studies from the University of Rhode Island in May 2012, and received a Bachelor of Arts in professional writing from the Pennsylvania State University. Stephanie lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with her husband. They love to travel and learn about different cultures. The couple will be going to Peru this year. Look for a recap of the trip in an upcoming *AVALON* issue.

Tips to Reduce Fashion Waste and Your Carbon Footprint

Have a One-Woman's-Discard-Is-Another's-Gem party, where you invite a dozen girlfriends who each bring a half dozen pieces of clothing they no longer wear. Hang the clothing on a rack in the middle of the room, and you and your guests start shopping! And, of course, consider making cocktails or serving wine, tea or coffee, some treats.

Shop vintage: Thrift shops and secondhand shops can be great resources for vintage and looks. And some secondhand boutiques specialize in reselling couture.

Do some research to find labels that are recycling, and purchase from their lines.

Buy locally-made clothing. (Environmentally friendly because transportation and their emissions are reduced.)

Recycle your tired clothes, by taking them to a secondhand store or donating to nonprofits such as the Red Cross.

Shop strategically, rather than spur of the moment, choosing pieces to work with existing wardrobe. And choose quality over quantity. Think French-chic. Those seemingly "effortlessly beautiful" women fill closets with well-crafted pieces that stand the test of time. ❖