

## Forever young

Janice Breen Burns, The Age, 23 February 2008

Driving next week's L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival are people who are twice to three times the age of their typical customer. In an industry obsessed with youth,

Janice Breen Burns finds out why the eternally hip are far from replacement.

BETTINA LIANO has sparked on all cylinders, designing hot-ticket items for fashion's 16-24-year-old front-line market for 20-odd years. She's in her 40s but doesn't look or act it. In an industry that seems obsessed with youth, she designs clothes for the young, but she is not. She transcends expectations about her age. She's irritated by the subject: "I don't think about it. I don't remember it. I've absolute friends who are 12 and 60. I'm not interested in how old they are; why would you bother?" Nagged though, she says: "All right, yes, in an average week, every room I walk into, probably everyone's younger than me." She acknowledges that only because she was asked. Age is my figment, not hers. Fashion - even cutting-edge, young, new fashion - isn't about age, she says, it's about art and popular culture and that's what her life was always and is still, about.

"I'm into art but I can't paint - but I can make clothes. I might be a guitarist but I can't play guitar, or a singer, but I don't sing. I'm a frustrated artist, I'm into what's happening now; I want to make some noise, I want to give people something that counts."

Liano rails against an assumption, not quite driven from our global psyche, that as we age we'll withdraw from the now or the Zeitgeist - that vague, universal current of ideas that triggers similar design movements on different sides of the planet - and find another, more "mature" way to live. Her unerringly fashion-accurate collections prove she's still deeply plugged into the Zeitgeist. Even 20 years ago, she might be expected to have peeled off fashion's front-line by now and, like many of her peers, have aged with her market and be churning out classic frocks pitched at "women of a certain age". But teens today get the same kick out of wiggling into their Lianos as their mothers did and 20-somethings keep hip with the brand's party and better day wear.

"I keep changing," Liano says. "I'm always changing because why do people not change? That's what I don't know. How can you keep doing the same thing, be the same year after year and expect people to care, to stay interested?"

Liano is one of the youngest among mainstream fashion's older generation, which is more graphically illustrated by the line-up of creative powers behind international catwalks. Most of the coolest dudes on the planet - at least, in the planet's mainstream - are over 50. Most fashion people are sensitive about their ages but Wikipedia says Miuccia Prada, for example, is 58, Jean Paul Gaultier, 55, Dame Vivienne Westwood, 66, Karl Lagerfeld, 74 (or 70, depending on whether you believe him, or Wikipedia), Donatella Versace, 52. The online encyclopedia says that even Louis Vuitton's Marc Jacobs, to whom as many front-line fashion trends are attributed as Miuccia Prada, is 45 in April and John Galliano, the kooky creative genius behind Dior, is 47. The flow of mainstream fashion trends into world markets is also moderated by fashion editors such as US Vogue's Anna Wintour, 58, and International Herald Tribune's Suzy Menkes, 64, according to Wikipedia.

In some ways, fashion is a microcosm of the wider, ageing society. Its most powerful, persuasive and cashed-up lieutenants are getting on a bit and could probably ease up to make way for a new generation to throw their weight and ideas around; maybe even change the world. But they won't, or can't. Some critics say it's time. Sydney research company **McCrindle** says those aged 12 to 26 and 27 to 41 constitute 20.5 and 21.5 per cent of Australia's population respectively, compared to 17 per cent aged 61 plus, and 26 per cent in the boomer age bracket of 42 to 60. There is a mix of myth and research to suggest a jumpy queue of ambitious, want-it-all-now generation Ys and Xs who could slot into the roles of matriarchs and patriarchs of this highly creative, youth-oriented industry by lunchtime tomorrow.

But there aren't many powerbrokers on fashion's highest echelons willing to call it quits. And for good reasons; none of them as selfish as you might think, according to three of those lieutenants who will play crucial roles in next week's L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival.

Like Liano, festival director Karen Webster, 47, publicity director Ann Morrison, late 50s, and fashion buyer and retailer Christine Barro, mid 50s, have aged well beyond the days they could just state their age, and be done with it. "I'm 47, but I don't think of myself as 47. I'm one of the oldest but not THE oldest," says Webster, a cheerful, ma'amish fashionistocrat with a staff mostly half her age. "Well, I'm, well, mid 50s - do you have to say that?" worries Barro, whose underground boutique, Christine, exudes a cultish hipness among as many iconoclastic 85-year-olds and artful mid-life intellectuals as aspirational teens and 20-somethings.

"Just say mid-to-late 50s," says Morrison, a PR consultant renowned for bulls-eye fashion campaigns and a dynamic, young staff. It seems reasonable to assume their hem-and-hawing responses are symptomatic of a culture that, despite plenty of contrary evidence, clings to the myth that "out of youth" means "out of touch".

"The day I feel I've no longer 'got it'," says Webster, "I'll know I've got to be prepared to step aside." She envisions the moment will be like cricketer Adam Gilchrist's, when something clicked and he "just knew" it was time to retire. "In his heart, he knew; 'I can't give it the energy and passion any more'," interprets Webster. "I think I'll know, too." In the meantime; "I'm too inspired. I feel more creative than I ever have." She speaks about fashion as an amorphous, adaptable, universal thing and her relationships with it as pragmatic, expedient. Her role is to overview and she trusts the stylists and staff she employs to plan, say, a teen-based Dotti show, or a more sophisticated \$100-a-ticket designer extravaganza. "You need people who 'get' those markets."

Morrison also employs noticeably young staff and is candid about why. "When your fashion aesthetic evolved 35 years ago, well, what's happened to your eye now?" She is circumspect; acknowledges her take on fashion trends will be different to that of a 24 or 26-year-old. Her generation, for example, had no aesthetic tools to deal with the initial 1990s explosion of ripped, frayed, slashed and patched, inside-out "deconstructive" fashion.

"I get it now," she says, fluffing out her chic little cropped box jacket in frayed black canvas. "But I still drive the girls (staff) mad, snipping off threads everywhere and I scream inside for a neat hemline sometimes. That's just the way I was taught (tailoring)." Morrison says she relies on staff to sign off on her fashion judgements when they involve particularly youthful, front-line trends. But, at least one of her gen-Y staff reckons she doesn't need to. Not really. "I don't think we know trends any better," says the 26-year-old tactfully. "But we do wear them more, so it seems we do." But, Morrison is adamant: "My own eye, my aesthetic, is not redundant but I do have to adjust all the time to young ideas and young looks. I employ young, intelligent, creative women. They help me. I trust them. They keep me young. I learn from them and they learn from me."

Barro is at the creative helm of a boutique recognised as one of Australia's chic-est so can't afford the same luxury to delegate. Deciding what's hot or not, is her call. "Deconstructivism? A good designer will still do it beautifully," she says. "It's a refinement they bring and the story behind a design; where it's coming from, the ideas of art, fashion, architecture that came to a crescendo and produced this thing."

Good design, she says, transcends anything else you might feel about a trend, so is the key to recognising good fashion produced in any era. Her shop is a temple to the theory.

Liano is equally passionate that artistic sensibilities - and by default, fashion sensibilities - can be sharpened, not dulled by years. "Reinvention; it's part of the challenge, part of the art. I kept my teenage angst, I suppose; I still think it's important to question things and make things better, different, all the time."

Her two teenage daughters, aged at the lower end of her core market, might seem an on-tap godsend to any other designer pitching to a young market. But she consults them carefully: "Yes, well, we don't always see eye to eye," she says. "They're 'underbaked' - that's natural - or, not quite so sophisticated as they think. They're kids and sometimes," she adds wryly, "I might know more than they do."

Barro also employs and consults young people - but carefully: "I'm interested in those, believe it or not, who have good home skills because they've been taught the detail. There are things you can learn from a book and things you can only learn by osmosis, by working beside an older (person) of experience and knowledge and wisdom. The ability to read the world doesn't come straight up."

Her theory flies in the face of corporate thinking that young, fashionable staff are vital radars and when you net one, they need their ego massaged and regular enticements to stay in a job. "I realise this new generation is aggressive about developing their skills and getting what they can out of the system but I think it's so sad, that so many businesses chop out (older people) and leave these eager little 'yes' girls and boys with no one to show them the subtleties and things you learn over years of daily survival."

Morrison agrees that her own vast fashion knowledge is vital but her young guns' fashion radar is integral. She recognises their need to shoot forward, early and fast, in their careers. She compliments and promotes and, last year, awarded two of her best equal partnerships in her company, AMPR.

"They more than earned their stripes," she says. "But it was selfish, too; I had to make sure they stayed with me." The ploy isn't foolproof. New partner Kate Keane, for example, who has worked for Morrison since she was 20 ("My old other job was at McDonald's during uni") recently resigned. "My main reason; well I've been here seven years!" The very idea seems preposterous.

"Gen Ys are a lot more independent, a lot more for themselves," she says, making an attempt to explain. "Initially, it was exciting to stick around and become a partner, but I read a book over Christmas about analysing your life ...." So - ffffttt - another Bright Young Thing moves on but, unlike the old days, hugs the boss goodbye.

These chummy tales of task-sharing between the fashion industry's young guns and mature power brokers sits awry with the more popular rumour of legions of gen Ys and Xs, poised, vulturish, in fashion's wings, waiting for the exit of players such as Webster, Liano, Barro and Morrison. In fact, the Ys and Xs are definitely there, frantic to get into fashion to make their mark; "I get CVs all the time, asking, 'please can I work for you?'" says Morrison. But the myth about vulturish tendencies appears to be just that. Webster recalls one of many typical wannabe fashion world-dominators: "A 17-year-old work experience girl - very bright - I asked; 'Where do you want to be in five years?' and she said: 'I want your job.' I had to take a breath. Maybe I expected the same thing when I was 17; well, you're so full of self-belief and energy and excitement, aren't you? But now I know what breadth of experience is. I'm not even sure I could do this job 20 years ago. I told this girl; travel the world, work in as many different jobs as you can, meet as many people, take as many opportunities as you can . . ."

Keane has seen the same sparky youngsters at AMPR. "Eighteen and 20-year-olds come in, think they can take over the reigns in a minute." Does she think any of them could? She pauses just long enough to make you think: "I don't think so. But they have the strong tech knowledge, and they do have amazing ideas. Probably not the background or experience to achieve it, either."

Webster says fashion's would-be revolutionaries are now conservatives comfortable with their parents' generation: "They shock us by being so conservative. They're not shunning us any more. Remember being 18? We couldn't wait to leave home, be independent. Now, there's no need."

And so, mainstream fashion tends to evolve slowly, with the mature working comfortably alongside the young. It's hard not to speculate that fashion's recent retro past, its obsession with vintage, the past two to three decades of regurgitating 20th century trends and the fact that its very DNA appears to have changed from the "youth quake" revolutions of the '60s and '70s, is at least partly thanks to the presence of so many whose aesthetic sensibilities were set in their youth - 20, 30 or even 40 years ago.

"Some of the most successful brands (in the festival) don't have an age demographic in mind," Webster says. She cites local brand Alpha 60 - hot, hip and renowned for good design - as a personal favourite and an example of how different generations are plugging into the same trends. "I love Alpha 60's play on casual wear and have a couple of tops - great shapes - but I wear them a different way to the 16-year-old girls who'll wear the same thing but with skinny-leg jeans."

Webster speculates that mainstream fashion's so-called youth obsession may have dissolved into myth. "I think the fashion industry was youth-obsessed but there's been a major shift," she says. "It's really more the images we put out around fashion that have a very young feel. You know; the very young models you see? It makes people think fashion's only geared for them."

Tony Bannister of fashion trend forecasting company Scout.com, says the co-existence of older and younger generations produces two levels of the industry: one mainstream on which they play together and one alternative, viral, in which the young play alone. He employs scouts of all ages, all over the world, to report slight, and seismic changes in the Zeitgeist and says, more than ever, they are shunning mainstream sources of information. A thousand little youth quakes are happening elsewhere.

"A lot of brands aren't interested in (international) catwalks any more. Pret-a-porter used to be the leading wholesale market you went to but now it's all the little spin-offs, the off-schedules (exhibitions and shows) that built up around it and the different markets, segregations that are more important."

Bannister says the parallel industry is mushrooming and its products invariably cooked up by the young: "It's insular, and quiet, and underground. It's a viral market; designers start by getting their friends to wear their stuff, they use blogging, the internet. It's the same way things are happening in the music industry: clever and smart and quick and fast, the gen Y way."

And where is mainstream fashion? Still strong, forever young: "Think of fashion like a family now," says Bannister. "Like a household, with mum and dad, boy and girl, living completely separate lives on separate budgets." This is the 12th annual festival, established as a public event to show winter fashions roughly around the same time as they're unpacked and racked in Melbourne shops. It's underwritten by the State Government, City of Melbourne and sponsors. It has swelled dramatically from its pure fashion base to include art exhibitions, a full-day business seminar that draws 800 participants from around the country and a party atmosphere generated by - at last count - 230,000 young, young-thinking and fashion-hungry punters.