

W

The New Guard

In this most inauspicious of economic moments, it takes major guts to launch a fashion collection. Meet a crop of freshman hopefuls who have the creative chops—and business savvy—to pull it off.

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The Lake & Stars:
Nikki Dekker
Maayan Zilberman

Bensoni:
Benjamin Channing Clyburn
Sonia Yoon

Matthew Ames

ASSEMBLED FOR THIS STORY: 11 ASPIRING FASHION designers representing seven upstart companies, all determined to parlay their considerable talents into viable businesses. Recent history indicates that under any circumstances, this group would face overwhelming odds; the past quarter century has launched relatively few designers working under their own labels to rock-solid security, let alone household-name status. Now, given the recession-wrought havoc, the likelihood of success is even slimmer. Whereas once the fashion world's obsession with what's new and what's next included endless musing about the future generation's potential superstars, today conversation is more likely to focus on whether there are still enough moneyed, interested customers out there to support the legions of already established houses.

Yet the economy has no stranglehold on creativity. To the contrary, tough times have often led to great artistic bursts, in fashion as in other arenas. And if tough times have discouraged some onetime designer wannabes from forging into the fray, those who remain are likely the Darwinian

stalwarts, the most ambitious, their devotion to fashion genuine and fierce. For this story, *W* editors reviewed scores of collections, ultimately choosing the designers not because they're all great-looking themselves (although clearly they are) but for their work. The group represents considerable aesthetic diversity, if less diversity where price is concerned, a matter we discussed at length. We ultimately went with the collections we found most distinctive, fashionwise. (In the crowded contemporary area, there are plenty of appealing clothes, but too many lines lack design distinction.)

The collections selected range from Matthew Ames's regal draping to Bibhu Mohapatra's lavish ladylike clothes to Bensoni's standout feisty contemporary, and from innerwear (The Lake & Stars) to outerwear (Nonoo Lyons). The designers are just as diverse. Though they're primarily based in New York, they hail from Maryland (Michelle Ochs) and Nepal (Prabal Gurung) and cite references from Japanese warriors (Mohapatra) to the Battle of Waterloo (The Lake & Stars) to an erotic novel (Bensoni). But we found similarities as well, starting

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Cushnie et Ochs:
Carly Cushnie
Michelle Ochs

Prabal Gurung

Bibhu Mohapatra

Nonoo Lyons:
Deborah Lyons
Misha Nonoo

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with designers they admire—Alexander McQueen (Mohapatra, the Ladies of The Lake & Stars and those of Nonoo Lyons), Marc Jacobs (Gurung, the Bensoni duo), Proenza Schouler (Mohapatra, Gurung) and Geoffrey Beene (Ames, Gurung). But the biggest similarities are that they all claim dedication to their craft and are ready to face the myriad challenges ahead.

Here, designers with looks from their collections. **From left:** Cushnie et Ochs, Prabal Gurung and Nonoo Lyons.

THE LAKE & STARS It's not surprising that Maayan Zilberman and Nikki Dekker of The Lake & Stars chose lingerie for their entrée into fashion. The partners exude cool-girl glamour, an aura apparently not lost on the mutual friend who introduced them when each was working elsewhere designing undies. Is the friend in the industry? "No, he just likes the ladies," Dekker says, giggling. "He thought we'd hit it off—our affinity for underwear and all that."

Hit it off they did, and if they haven't exactly hit the big time yet, they are on an upward trajectory, selling at Barneys New York, Lane Crawford and Holt Renfrew. They have also created a collection for the Smile, on Bond Street in Manhattan, and they're launching swimwear this summer. Yet they didn't rush into a professional partnership to please their randy friend. Rather, the alliance took a couple of years to form once they realized that they shared a vision of lingerie that "wasn't so boudoir and that

was more geared toward sportswear," Zilberman explains. The two approach design as if working in ready-to-wear, creating a different look each season. Their fall collection incorporates military and armor motifs, the items named after battles fought at night—Barnet, Franklin, Sedgemoor, Waterloo. "There's definitely a darker, more mysterious feel than in previous collections," says Dekker. "It's called A Shot in the Dark."



BIBHU MOHAPATRA Probably more than most aspiring designers, Bibhu Mohapatra knows what he's getting into. Prior to launching his own collection, he spent nine years at J. Mendel, eventually rising to design director. He also worked at Halston while a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology and has followed that house's struggle to reclaim its identity and clout.

Mohapatra comes across as a deep-thoughts kind of guy. "Women are best," he says, "in looks that bring out both their natural beauty and inner self." And if his fall inspirations sound imposing—Frank Gehry and 18th-century Japanese warriors—he translated them into dressed-up clothes that are lavishly embellished yet manageable, stylewise, albeit with tony price tags (up to \$17,000 for a mink coat). For fall, his first season, he picked up only two retail accounts, Dighton Rhode in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Adresse in Philadelphia. "Everyone is excited, but they don't have the budgets," Mohapatra says, noting that "some major target venues came and saw it more than twice. One has to do the groundwork. I'm paying my dues. It's been super-exciting, but it's a little tough."

NONOO LYONS Gotham is known to breed fast friendships, especially among the young and newly arrived. "When I moved to New York, we became very close friends," recalls Misha Nonoo, who hails from Bahrain and London. "And then one day Debs [London native Deborah Lyons] just came and said, like, we should do a line together, and I had the idea of jackets, and within two weeks we had sketches."

Parsons grad Lyons also has a fledgling shoe line, while, in New York, Nonoo found her way to fashion via Jovani, where designer Saul Maslavi "basically taught me everything." Now she and Lyons work

together on "literally every single piece." Outerwear just made sense: "You throw one on over a skirt, a pair of pants, jeans. That's the way we dress." Their debut fall collection is available at Takashimaya, Intermix, 66 in London and Sophie's Choice in Lebanon.

The designers' apparent nonchalance does not extend to finances. (The label is currently backed by their families.) Lyons cops to being "like the grim reaper" when it comes to focusing on the bottom line: "You've got to find new ways of doing things and make sure you work with the right people," she says. On the Nonoo Lyons to-do list: a jeans collaboration to facilitate retail merchandising. Otherwise, these coat ladies have no desire to jump into full-on ready-to-wear anytime soon. Says Nonoo, "We like being niche at the moment." —BRIDGET FOLEY

Prabal Gurung says he designs for "the thinking man's sex symbol, dare I say, the anti-Paris Hilton."

