Amber Jae Slooten

Co-Founder and Creative Director of digital fashion house The Fabricant

Lee Anderson (LA) *I think I understand this correctly, but The Fabricant was inspired by your graduate collection from Amsterdam Fashion Institute. Is that correct?*

Amber Jae Slooten (AJS) I graduated from there for fashion design at the beginning of 2016. And at Amsterdam Fashion Institute is where I started experimenting with digital fashion and what it could mean.

I've always been fascinated with digital fashion in general. I always used to dress up my SIMS characters and download special edition things that you can only find in special places on the Internet; always trying to hack the software to dress my characters. But I lost all of that in doing traditional fashion design.

During my studies, I realized that the fashion industry was extremely polluting and toxic. I started thinking, is there any way that we could use new media or new ways of wearing things to express ourselves? Since half of our life is lived digitally anyway, can we use it to dress ourselves?

Those ideas started to roll in 2014 when we did our first big experiment with a VR fashion show on the Oculus one, which was a multidisciplinary project. I ended up researching 3D and what it could mean for fashion, and creating the first digital collections.

In the end, I had to say, "I don't want to create any more physical clothes. I'm really done with this fashion industry system." And I asked my teachers, is it possible to graduate like this?

At first they were really hesitant, and a lot of them looked at me like I was crazy. (laughing) In the end, they said "Okay, go ahead; you can try." And that's when I developed the idea of wearing digital clothes in the future, like sort of a hologram around you. My teachers didn't expect that at all. They were really shocked and happily surprised by this new future vision.

At my graduation event I met Kerry, my co-founder at The Fabricant, who had his own motion graphics studio. He immediately saw the business opportunities. And started doing technical and business development for about two years. And we talked for a very long time about these projects and at the end, The Fabricant was born. So that's how it all started.

> **"All of my classmates were in the hallway showing their clothes on models and I was the only one with a laptop."**

LA *It seems like your professors and all the faculty must have heard you responding to the state of the industry as well. So it wasn't just a novel idea. It was something that actually fits with the direction that the industry was going.*

AJS Definitely; It's just that nobody could see it. Everybody was looking at me like I was nuts for saying that people would wear digital clothes in the future. All of my classmates were in the hallway sort of showing their clothes on models and I was the only one with a laptop.

From the beginning onwards I said, "it's gonna happen. The industry is going to become digital because our lives are going to become digital."

Two teachers really believed in the idea and that actually really inspired me to continue and really motivated me. But back then it was not so visible

> **"The industry is going to become digital because our lives are going to become digital."**

that the industry was going digital. There were just a couple examples of software out there that we could use and everything was still very much in its infancy. But in the last few years it's been developing like crazy.

LA *The Fabricant made headlines by selling a dress via a blockchain auction in 2019. What did that moment signify for you? I'm curious whether the response was what you expected. Were you surprised by some of the conversations that were spurred by that visibility?*

AJS That was huge. Since the beginning of the work that we do, we've been shouting: "Digital clothes are the future. People will start wearing them, people will start paying for them. It's going to be a thing."

So it was again this game of "Yeah, okay. Sure. At some point it will happen, but it's super far in the future. We should look into it, but it doesn't matter so much." We decided to team up with this blockchain company (Dapper Labs) who completely believed in the idea from the start. Blockchain items are digital items that get sold and that have value. When we teamed up with them, it was also a way of proving that there was worth in this digital item.

The model who wore it on our Instagram, Johanna Jaskowska, is a digital artist who was creating face masks for Instagram at that time. And normally during the day, maybe you see 50 or 100 people in a day if you walk on the streets, but on Instagram there are maybe millions of people who saw her wearing that garment. And so, for us it was really like what is the difference? And asking this question in the day and age where our identity becomes more digital every minute.

When we sold the look, we didn't expect that it would sell for so much. We were thinking, $200 would be nice, maybe $900. And then it sold for $9,500. Normally you would pay that much for a physical couture look, if you have one made for you. In contrast, it was almost nothing compared to the year before. The crypto company that we worked with, one of their pictures actually sold for $130,000. So that was completely insane. In the end, it ended up being in a price range that people actually still felt was relevant.

I think it was exactly in the price range which makes people really raise their eyebrows. Like, "Oh, is this what we're paying for right now?" And "is this what life has come to?" A lot of reactions were like that: "Is this where the world is going?"

But we saw it as a huge milestone for proving that there was a market for this. And the buyer who bought it, we could dress her without ever leaving our studio here. And she didn't even have to come by. She just told us her measurements and she took pictures in Tokyo, and we were able to dress her from our computers here in the studio.

This laid the foundations for the proof of what we're trying to tell. And immediately the media took us seriously; everybody took us seriously. And it was a really big milestone in sort of the progression of digital fashion.

Iridescence, Digital Fashion Design by Amber Jae Slooten, The Fabricant. Model, Johanna Jaskowska, Photographer, Julien Boudet. The Fabricant x Dapper Labs

LA *On a skill level, is it something where people can dress themselves as well? Or does it depend on what software you have on hand? What does that look like?*

AJS Ever since we started The Fabricant, the question has been how can I wear it? And how can I express myself using your clothes? How can we dress ourselves? There is a sense this is a really cool new thing to do, and especially more sustainable.

About one year in, we started dropping our files so all of our files are for free to download on our website and if you have 3D knowledge, you can dress yourself. We were also trying to figure out, how can the masses dress themselves? We were researching how we would be able to give people the chance to create a digital version of themselves and then be able to dress themselves in the clothes that we put on some sort of platform. And this ended up becoming Leela, which is our digital fashion platform.

The idea is that you would take a selfie and choose your body type or whatever gender or size you would like to be. Right now it's very limited, but in the future, we want there to be any type of body you would like because we believe in the fluidity of identity.

People will be able to choose for themselves what kind of looks they want to wear and they could wear it instantly. No more waiting for the mailbox or having to pay for the shipping and wait for the shipping. It was an instant way to wear the garments. That is still our vision: that in the future, you'll have a digital version of yourself and you'll be able to dress it. And in the far future, we'd love to see that as a digital layer on top of the real world. That's the bigger vision. But the idea is that people will be able to dress their digital identities on this platform.

LA *In an interview with friends of friends, you described a future where expression and functionality were taken apart, and that we could have*

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Digital Fashion Design, Amber Jae Slooten, The Fabricant

a physical suit to keep us warm, and then a virtual expressive layer on top of that, that would be visible with AR glasses. So I feel like you're breaking the boundaries there, where it's not just behind the screen; it's also out in the world.

AJS That was the whole vision I had when I was still studying: the idea that you would be able to wear that digital layer on top of your physical self, and you'd be able to change your outfits with the click of a button. Or maybe even measuring your brainwaves and knowing what your feelings are, and then translating that into a digital expression you could wear immediately.

For me, it was always really questionable, why do we need such a big closet? It's the same as what music had. People used to have 100 CDs lying around and now everybody has Spotify. We believe that, in the future, you will be able to creatively express yourself with all of the means that are out there.

And the functionality thing is a big one because a lot of times you're going to an event and you look really beautiful but you feel really shit because it is so uncomfortable. So my question is, why does this image have so much to do with uncomfortable experiences?

The fact that you would be able to express yourself endlessly, that's a whole new level. In the digital world, you can be anything. Especially with these new AR layers. I think it's going to be a really nice and creative way to re-envision fashion.

LA *In terms of space exploration, what if what people wear in space could be simplified from a manufacturing and construction standpoint, focused entirely on the health of the body, with the aesthetic overlaid?*

AJS Exactly. That is the idea. The fact that there will be a suit that's created out of the waste that we've left behind, all the clothes that are still lying around in landfills. And it could be regenerated into body-fitted 3D knitted suits because in fact, a 3D knitting machine is like a 3D printer. I envision printing all of the suits to your size and then projecting that layer of expression on top.

"That's the direction that we're heading: that within the computer simulation, you can create any reality that you like."

Talking about fashion in space, as in the space around you, I think what could be very interesting, for instance, is if my outfits would interact with yours. Right now it's not possible, but when it's digital, maybe certain things are attracted to each other, or they're similar materials used and then the dresses talk to each other.

These crazy ideas of what interaction between humans could be like, because right now, we dive into this world and there's not much interaction. But I really believe that the virtual world gives us a lot of opportunities for interaction with strangers. And even if it combines the virtual and real, there's so much possibility.

LA *What do you think is a really meaningful example of fashion*

technology, in the physical world?

AJS Definitely 3D knitting. It's one of the most promising technologies because it creates garments without waste. It makes the garment into the shape that it needs to be and I think that is really beautiful. Also anything related to the creation of fashion-tech glasses. I see it as a lens, in the future, that we would wear.

Also, health tracking: anything that you can put into that body suit that will tell you what nutrients you need, what sort of mood you're in, or that measures your chemical levels. We're all based on chemicals and all of our chemical reactions inside our body creates our moods, our thoughts and a lot of different responses. So if we could monitor that and be aware, that would really help us out. Conductive threads can be very useful, too.

LA *If you buy a look or one piece from The Fabricant, can you personalize it? Or can it be modified based on some of these things you just described based on mood? Is that the vision?*

AJS It's completely part of the vision; you already see it, because we put our outfits Online and people can just download it and create their own textures, their own colors, anything that they like.

We have a lot of users who know how to use 3D and they actually create all sorts of new colors and new textures, things that we wouldn't have come up with. We really believe in the idea of co-creation and customization.

For the younger generation as well, you can see it in games like Animal Crossing that people like to create stuff, they like to be creative.

It's good to put a framework out there because design doesn't exist for nothing; designers have an idea and a story to tell, which I think is beautiful. But then how does it live on?

With physical fashion, it's rigid. You wear an item for a couple of days and then get sick of it. But, because in the digital space you can endlessly change the color, I think products will also be way less in and out of fashion. It is fluid, so it can evolve with the time. It's no longer a rigid product, instead it can evolve itself endlessly and repeat itself endlessly without needing to destroy it and create it again.

LA *It's like the new version of buying a pattern, where the more that you know about sewing or knitting, the more you can modify it based on fit and details. Also, when you can change things and adapt them so quickly and it is so personalized, we're almost talking about an era beyond trends.*

AJS I think so, too; my ultimate vision is that we get away from trends, and really express who we are, and who we want to be. To have the freedom to explore your identity, without feeling like you need to belong to a certain group or like you need to show off how many products you have because of this capitalistic ideal of showing your wealth.

Can we move beyond that and use fashion as the communication that is meant to be which is a language without speaking. And I think that

would also bring our evolution way forward. Because right now it's not about creativity anymore. And that could be very beautiful new exploration.

LA *I wanted to ask you also about the environments around the wearer in the digital reality. In some of the scenarios that you've set figures in, it looks almost otherworldly. You see a lot of movement in the renderings you produce, and I was thinking about the effects of the environment on the wearer, like if there's wind or the effects of heat and even microgravity.*

AJS I've been working with the digital tools and the amazing thing is that you can adjust the gravity to whatever you want it to be. I was doing some experiments with avatars and I was dressing them on Mars gravity and then dressing them on moon gravity. I looked up the gravities of all the planets, and I was

able to create drapes and see what they look like on all the different planets. It's incredible how you can see that the drape of the fabric changes and it completely behaves in totally different ways.

That's the direction that we're heading, that within the computer simulation, you can create any reality that you like. You could of course experiment with all types of wind, with rain, with anything. Within the CLO 3D software itself, you can experiment with wind and gravity.

But within software like Houdini, you would be able to experiment with anything that you like.

LA *You interned for Hussein Chalayan back in 2015. I wonder if, in the studio, there was a way of thinking that influenced you at all?*

AJS Hussein Chalayan has been my hero from day one, going into fashion school. He was one of the designers that I really believed in and one of the only designers that really inspired me. I felt like a lot of the other designers we're just repeating things that were already done and recycling history. But then he came around, and especially his early work from the 2000s.

What I love about it is that it's so conceptual, and tells this gigantic story that is then translated into, beautiful garments. The concept leads the way and then translates

"I think that is what fashion should be about: telling that story and about having an identity that can shift."

into form. And the stories he tells are incredibly inspiring. And I've always felt that was also my way to go, to tell those huge, gigantic stories, and then translate it into beautiful shapes.

His use of technology also really inspired me. I definitely got into fashion tech, because of him. I experimented first with physical garments, with lights in them and those kinds of things. Eventually I delved into digital worlds because I felt more acquainted to that, and that was more of my medium.

But it was always my dream to intern at his studio. It was super inspiring to be around a man like him, especially the conceptual way that he worked. But his studio was still very much working in a traditional couture way. So he had all these really nice, amazing inventive ideas and everything. But still, all the patterns were made by hand, all of the things were drawn, all the things were cut all of the things were and toiled in-house, which is a very traditional practice. I wouldn't say that's bad. It has its own beauty.

If he would have graduated at this point in time, he would have probably investigated this digital space. Back then it was just not possible.

LA *It really does depend when you come of age and what is available to you.*

AJS His collections were, for the time being, revolutionary. And he inspired minds to think completely differently about clothes. And I think that is what fashion should be about: telling that story and about having an identity that can shift. And I think he was the first one of the first designers who created that shifting identity, even on the catwalk itself.
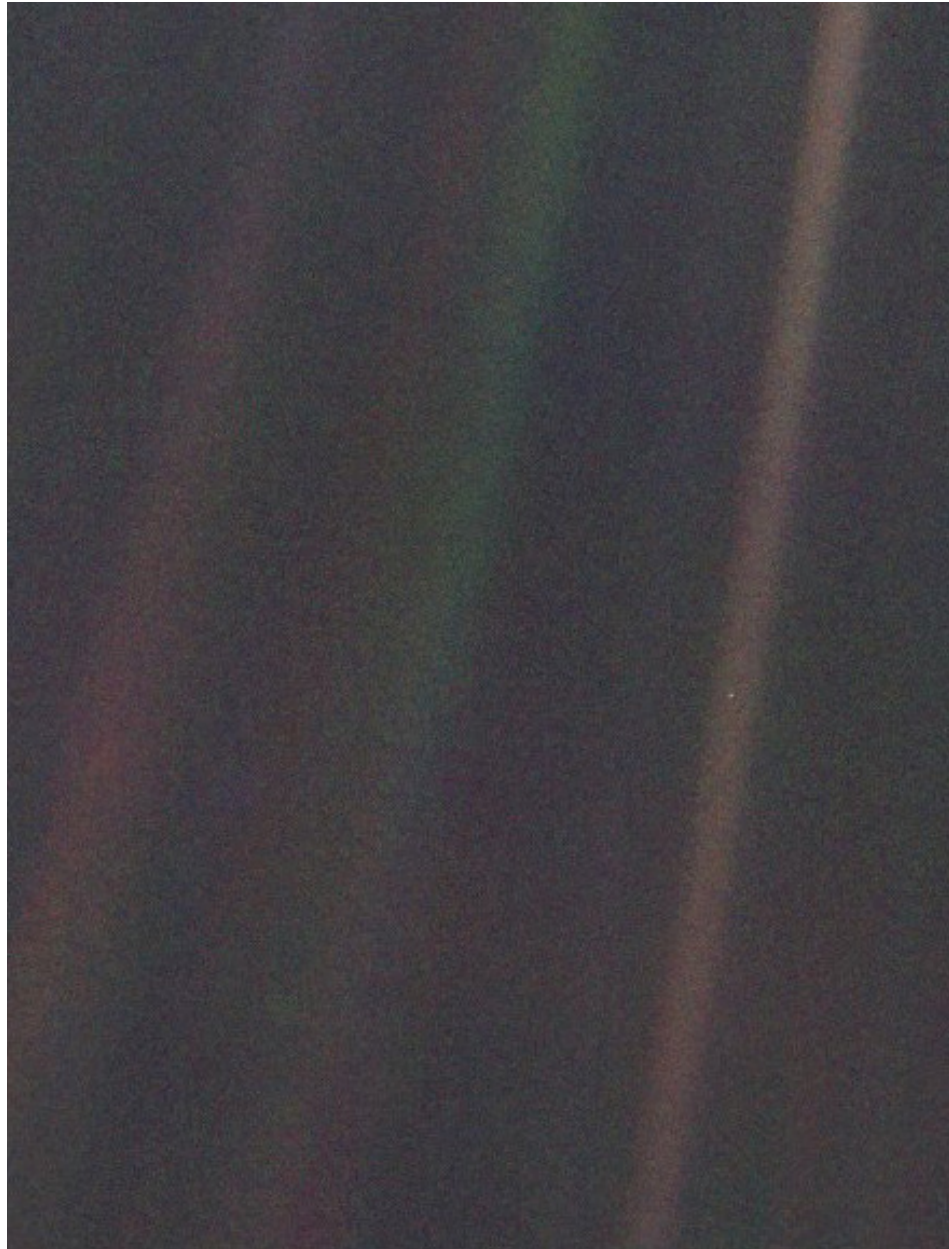
Solar System Portrait - Earth as 'Pale Blue Dot,' NASA, February 14 1990

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