

[Interviews \(https://Cultbytes.Com/https://Cultbytes.Com/Interviews/\)](https://Cultbytes.Com/https://Cultbytes.Com/Interviews/)

This Eco-Friendly Innovator Is Never Done Learning

[Taylor Engle \(https://Cultbytes.Com/Author/Taylorengle/\)](https://Cultbytes.Com/Author/Taylorengle/)

January 1, 2020



New York City is arguably the fashion capital of the world, and although it seems that trends and ideas begin and end in the Big Apple, much happens beyond it. Behind the glitz and glam is a barrage of social repression and environmental abuse. These are issues that eco-friendly designer Isabel Varela has set out to both shed light on and tackle through documentary film, exhibitions, and upcycling workshops.

After a twenty-one year career in the fashion industry, the designer has retreated to a studio in Harlem to further explore how to educate and create within the topics of zero-waste and sustainable fashion.

One of her recent accomplishments is “Fashion Addict,” the six-part documentary that charts her journey from fashion addict to fashion advocate. While living in Lake Charles, Louisiana, 15-year-old Isabel developed a fashion addiction: a vicious cycle of intense consumption fueled by low-self esteem and the search for comfort through instant gratification. Her unhealthy obsession with fast fashion spiraled her deeply into debt, forcing her to confront her issues.

Varela has held multiple positions in the fashion industry, ranging from designer to retail manager at Nordstrom, Balmain, Saks Fifth Avenue, Suit Supply, Pink ShirtMaker, among others, and her latest feat has been to create and manage Pink’s first Corporate Social Responsibility under the LVMH portfolio. She has also worked in film wardrobing and has dressed celebrities including Lady Gaga, Ryan Seacrest, and Jennifer Lopez.

Needless to say, Varela has been exposed to many facets of the fashion industry. The artworks she now creates are vivid abstract reflections of these lived experiences that provide poignant commentary on an industry where creativity is heavily reliant on consumption.

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Varela to talk about her recent exhibit “Clothes Minded,” what she is working on now, and what’s next on her agenda.

Your eco-friendly awareness exhibit “Clothes Minded” took place last fall, featuring “National Geographic” artist Asher Jay. Can you talk to me about the exhibit and what went behind the concept?

Yes, so it was a three-day exhibit that aimed to shed light on the malpractices found within the fashion industry. When I first began working in fashion I was really swept in by the glamour of it all, but the closer I looked, I began to see the cracks. This exhibit focused on the mistreatment of employees, the psychological and physical damage that fashion has on humanity and the environment, and most importantly, the insurmountable waste found within the industry.

I worked with [Asher \(http://www.asherjay.com/\)](http://www.asherjay.com/) to display pieces that looked at fashion in an honest way. She exhibited a small display of her “Message in a Bottle” which was part of the National Geographic Encounter in New York. She also displayed a piece representing the wastefulness of the industry with a large hanger holding textiles, along with a pizza box that she had created to represent the amount of trash on our planet and the importance of recycling. I showed three works, among them “10,” two 10-foot dress forms sustainably-styled. I used over 100 pieces from my wardrobe to signify the importance of upcycling, which saved these garments from going into landfills.

That's so interesting. You've explained that "Clothes Minded" made you want to start working on projects that aren't necessarily fashion-related. What are you working on now?

Well since the exhibit, I've acquired studio space in Harlem, which is really exciting! I've been doing a lot of sewing and upcycling workshops – teaching people how to work with eco-friendly textiles. This concept has led me to do a lot of presentations on my documentary.

Ah, yes. "Fashion Addict." Let's talk about that!

It was written and produced by me, and filmed and directed by Jonathan Vargas. It basically goes over my history with fashion addiction and debt and brings light to the idea that fashion can be toxic when abused. I've presented at NYU, Columbia, and LIM. I'm actually going to be presenting in Dallas next.

It sounds like you're shifting much of your focus to present the film.

Yes, I definitely want to focus more on showing the documentary and having open discussions. I was recently on a panel in Chicago with three other sustainability-focused people, and I want to keep doing that sort of thing.

Do you see yourself doing more films on the topic?

I've actually been working on my next video, and it's going to be all about upcycling. I also see myself speaking more about mental health and tying in fashion addiction with plastic surgery because that is an issue in itself. I have an idea that would revolve around the concept of shedding your skin and becoming yourself again.

Most conversations about plastic surgery focus on the physical, although the body is invariably linked with the mind.

Yes, lately, a lot of health issues are coming out of the woodworks from women who've gotten breast implants. So many people are dying and getting cancer. To investigate the emotional aspect, I want to go through the removal process myself and discuss it in the video. It's going to be more intimate, like a film diary.

Why do you think that's important to share?

Because the fashion industry markets to the insecurity of women, and it isn't fair. I bought into it. I thought if I put a certain mask on, I'd feel better about myself. But we forget to find the beauty in ourselves along the way. There is a beauty in the fashion industry if you focus on the art and design, but there needs to be a balanced perspective. I had a lot of self-hatred, and it just wasn't healthy for me.

“ Before coming to the City, I wasn't in fashion for the right reasons. I was harming the environment, and it was time to move forward.

Isabel Varela

That's really important to discuss. How do you think your perspective has shifted over the years?

It all goes back to the intention behind what you're doing. My intention in fashion was always more negative than positive. I wanted attention, or I didn't like how I looked so I wanted to cover it up. A turning point came for me in 2015, when I got the call that my car was going to be repossessed because I had such a massive amount of debt. It woke me up and forced me to start working on my issues, which made me realize that I was always looking for validation, even in my career. I realized if I was going to stay in fashion, I wanted to be part of the solution rather than the problem. Before coming to the City, I wasn't in fashion for the right reasons. I was harming the environment, and it was time to move forward.

When did you found Isabel Varela the brand and how does it operate in terms of design and production, do you have collections?

I first started a fashion brand in 2012 based in Dallas manufacturing and producing locally with twelve different styles featuring ready-to-wear pieces for the modern woman on the go. At the time, the designs were carried by five different stores in the South and we produced both fall and spring lines. In 2016, I rebranded the company to be more sustainable and eco-friendly. I designed five styles of athleisure wear to be made out of bamboo and Lyocell for the health-conscious woman on the go. Slowly I moved towards seasonless, iconic, made-to-order pieces all constructed in New York City.

Essentially, it sounds like you have been slowly moving away from clothing design.

Kind of. My focus now is to bring more awareness to the psychological toll that the fashion industry has on the environment and humanity through my public speaking, film, and art. I have taken a sabbatical from designing a new line of clothing because I want to focus on creating from what we already have rather than buying new fabrics to sustain a brand. But as I am researching and developing the next generation of advanced fiber my days as a designer are not over—just on hold.

Who is your fashion icon and why?

That's definitely changed over the years, but I'd have to say Stella McCartney, who I prefer to think of as a global change maker. She has been leading the luxury sector of apparel by being one of the top sustainable companies. She has done everything from powering all of her stores with renewable energy, committing to using vegan leather, launching the first organic cotton denim, and launched McCartneys' Meat Free Mondays initiative, which encourages people to forgo meat for one day a week to improve their health and reduce their carbon footprint. She received the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) Award in NYC for her support to environmental causes. She walks her talk, which is something I admire.

What is next for Isabel Varela?

Right now, I'm focusing on getting this story out and helping others. I want to find better options for making clothes – healthier fabrics, simpler methods. I want to take a break and not contribute to more waste, because right now the message is what's important. I've been focusing more on art. The last painting I did was upcycled and based on the rivers in China and how toxic they are because of the artificial dye. I want to do something else related to that theme – bringing attention to different areas in the world and expanding on the opportunity to upcycle.

It sounds like the path you've taken towards art is one that is going to stick for you.

Definitely! I'm also going to start working on my book next year. It's going to be about fashion addiction and my entire experience: the bad, the good, and all of the ways we can improve our future as a community.

We look forward to following your progress. Thank you!

Related Articles

[Survival Kit 9: Exhibiting Radical Solutions for Survival in Latvia \(https://cultbytes.com/all/survival-kit-9/\)](https://cultbytes.com/all/survival-kit-9/)

[Quick Guide: Visual Arts, Science, and Climate Change \(https://cultbytes.com/all/visual-arts-science-climate-change/\)](https://cultbytes.com/all/visual-arts-science-climate-change/)

[An Overview of Virgil Abloh's Work That Extends Far Beyond Fashion \(https://cultbytes.com/all/virgil-abloh-beyond-fashion/\)](https://cultbytes.com/all/virgil-abloh-beyond-fashion/)

TAGS

[#FASHION \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/TAG/FASHION/\)](https://cultbytes.com/tag/fashion/) [ACTIVISM \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/TAG/ACTIVISM/\)](https://cultbytes.com/tag/activism/)

[CLIMATE CHANGE \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/TAG/CLIMATE-CHANGE/\)](https://cultbytes.com/tag/climate-change/)

[CONTEMPORARY ART \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/TAG/CONTEMPORARY-ART/\)](https://cultbytes.com/tag/contemporary-art/) [TAYLOR ENGLE \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/TAG/TAYLOR-ENGLE/\)](https://cultbytes.com/tag/taylor-engle/)

[TAYLOR ENGLE \(HTTPS://CULTBYTES.COM/AUTHOR/TAYLORENGLE/\)](https://cultbytes.com/author/taylorengle/)

Guest Contributor, Cultbytes (<http://www.cultbytes.com/author/TaylorEngle/>) Fashion assistant at Harper's Bazaar and freelance writer with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for fashion and how it relates to other industries. Engle has a B.A. in Communications and Journalism from California State University-Fullerton. Her work has been published in The OC Weekly, La Habra Journal, Forever Twenty-Something, among others. | [instagram \(http://www.instagram.com/taylorfengle/\)](http://www.instagram.com/taylorfengle/) | [contact \(mailto:taylorfengle@gmail.com\)](mailto:taylorfengle@gmail.com) |

f [SHARE \(https://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/\)](https://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/)
[\(https://twitter.com/share?text=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning&via=fuel_themes&url=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/\)](https://twitter.com/share?text=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning&via=fuel_themes&url=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/)
t [TWEET \(https://pinterest.com/pin/create/bookmarklet/?url=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/&media=https://cultbytes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/IMG_9667-copy-scaled.jpg\)](https://pinterest.com/pin/create/bookmarklet/?url=https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/&media=https://cultbytes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/IMG_9667-copy-scaled.jpg)
[\(mailto:?subject=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning&body=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning%20https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/\)](mailto:?subject=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning&body=This%20Eco-Friendly%20Innovator%20Is%20Never%20Done%20Learning%20https://cultbytes.com/this-eco-friendly-innovator-is-never-done-learning/)

