

“I Need a Few More Colleagues Linking My Arm”—Stella McCartney Sounds Off on Sustainability, Faux Leather, and the Lack of Honesty Around Both

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by [EMILY FARRA](#)

Sometimes the stories you're most excited to write essentially end up writing themselves. After a 30-minute phone call with [Stella McCartney](#), you're left with so much new information, so many incredible quotes—pages and pages of them!—that the most difficult part is choosing which ones to use. Our call began with McCartney explaining her [new collection](#) for Adidas, which is arriving in stores and online today and qualifies as the brand's most sustainable collaboration yet: The materials are 70 percent recycled, and 50 percent of that is in the footwear alone. McCartney introduced a new, 4-D printed shoe that looked sleek and upscale, but she was happiest to report that it produced almost zero waste.

Introducing new technology and creating recycled or sustainable fabrics is nothing new for McCartney, of course. She's been working toward these impressive percentages since she first linked up with Adidas, in 2008, and even earlier with [her own ready-to-wear collection](#), which launched in 2001. “We're always setting tougher goals for ourselves and [exerting] more fierceness in how we want to make changes,” she says. “The thing is, the starting point is always design—it's critical for us to design newness in a space that's now really crowded, compared to when I first started this collaboration with Adidas. So one of the things you have to do, and the most sustainable thing you can do as a designer, is to create pieces that people want and won't want to throw away.”

Are other designers following McCartney's lead? It depends on whom you ask and how you define “sustainability.” The topic was a growing conversation at [New York Fashion Week](#), with several designers (such as Erin Beatty of Rentravage) offering pieces in recycled or upcycled

materials; others highlighted the work of artisans in their collections, and some (like Gabriela Hearst) used their shows as opportunities to support nonprofits fighting for climate change recovery plans. Other designers simply spoke about designing clothes that have longevity, resisting the urge to create filler or single-use items that will feel tired before they're even in stores.

Running parallel to all of that was . . . tons and tons of leather. It was a huge week for leather pants on the runway, but also for leather trench coats, dresses, jumpsuits, boots, and bags. Did this give anyone pause? Probably not. Leather and fur are often considered just one of the many issues under sustainability's "umbrella," and they're frequently left out of the conversation entirely. When you think about fashion's impact on the environment, your mind tends to go to the unregulated factories, the piles of clothes in landfills, the toxic chemicals, the wasted fabrics, etc. Leather is rarely considered the "worst offender." There's also the common argument that leather is better for the earth because it is "natural," while its synthetic alternatives are made with polyester or acrylic.

"Quite frankly, that's rubbish," McCartney says. "An animal decomposes when it's natural, but after all of the chemical treatments [applied] to a leather handbag, it isn't going to decompose in your wardrobe. That product is staying alive because of the chemicals that have been put on it—because if you just had a dead animal in your closet, it would be a very different situation."

Chances are you hadn't thought about it that way, because I hadn't, either. It felt like nothing short of an epiphany. "People really don't want to talk about the fact that the fashion industry's biggest impact is its use of leather," McCartney continues. "The animals it kills, the toxins, the chemicals, the cutting down of rain forests, the food and water and electricity it takes to make a leather bag . . . It's way more than a synthetic bag. [And] a fur coat has a much higher impact on the environment than a fake-fur one for many, many reasons. One is animal cruelty, which no one seems to care about or want to talk about, but in my mind, that's an important part of the conversation. Fake fur isn't perfect. But the thing is, you have to have an open and honest conversation about it. We're working on a fake fur made out of

corn—it's really technical. That's where I get really turned on about what I do, because we're problem-solving every day. We've stopped using [some types of] fake fur because maybe they did have more chemicals or they weren't ideal. But they're certainly better than real fur.”

McCartney seemed frustrated—and rightly so—by the lack of honesty around this topic and the incredible slowness of other designers to join her; many of them have this information but won't eliminate leather from their collections. A few big names have announced they're cutting out fur, but McCartney believes that's more of a step in the right direction than a full-blown change. “It's one thing to give up fur, but [many of those brands] weren't really selling fur. Or to give up exotic skins when, really, who's buying exotic skins anymore? That's not really a market. It's a good message, but [those statements] can feel a little throw-away. What's the difference between an exotic skin and a cow skin? I don't get it—that's the same conversation to me. If you really mean it, stop using leather, full stop, and then you'll see a massive, massive change in the industry's environmental impact.”

Another mantle she's taken up (alone, so far) is her support of consignment and rental services, which extend the lifespans of garments and discourage people from constantly buying new items, especially at fast-fashion chains. While other designers “turned their back” on the secondhand market, likely because they feared it could affect their bottom line, McCartney became an official partner of TheRealReal last year. “If every single second there's a truckload of fast fashion being incinerated or landfilled, then I'm a big, big believer in reusing that and [participating in] the circular economy,” she says. “I know the statistics on it; I know the numbers. I'm very well informed, and I'm also a fan of wearing vintage. Other houses feel threatened, and I think it's ridiculous. It's the biggest compliment for your product to have an afterlife—to me, that's luxury. I look at luxury fashion as an investment, and when you buy a Stella McCartney product, I hope that if you don't want to hand it down to your daughter or friend, then you can let someone else use it. The key to all of these [sustainable] solutions is that they can be inspiring—they don't have to feel like a punishment. There's \$500 billion worth of

waste in the fashion industry every year, and that, to me, is a business opportunity,” she adds. “The next generation will look at all this waste and say, ‘Let’s create something new out of it.’ That’s going to be the next exciting thing.”

That won’t necessarily happen unless there’s an industrywide change, particularly at the major houses and global brands. “I just think it’s time to man up and have an element of honesty,” McCartney says. “If I could have more people join me in creating solutions, and there’s more demand, then we’re going to [succeed]. But if I’m the only one saying, ‘Hey, can I look at a corn fake fur?’ Or, ‘Can I look at fibers that are recycled or less harmful?’ then it’s going to take longer. The minute we all join hands and have the same mission and the same honest approach, we’ll get there,” she continues. “It’s just that I do need a few more colleagues linking my arm and standing shoulder to shoulder with me, because that’s how we can make significant change.”