

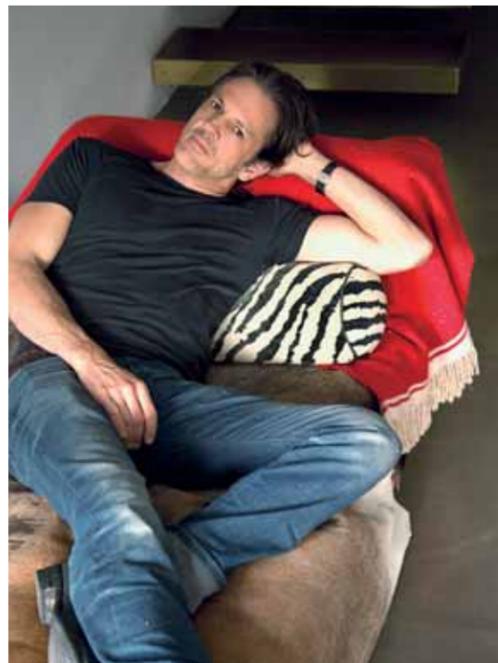
Waste not, want not

Ronald van der Kemp is on a mission to slow down fashion. Using found fabrics, the Dutch designer is creating unique, covetable pieces with the exclusivity of couture, but not the price tag

"I KNEW TOO MUCH ABOUT THE FASHION INDUSTRY - I wanted to go against it," says Ronald van der Kemp. After 25 years working for fashion houses including Michael Kors, Céline, Escada and Wolford, the Dutch designer launched his own demi-couture label, RVDK, creating one-off garments using fabrics from vintage stores, old couturiers and leather manufacturers.

Van der Kemp does not want to contribute to the growing stockpile of unwanted clothes; he wants to slow the fashion system. Rather than be confined by the traditional seasons of autumn/winter and spring/summer, he produces a number of pieces to create a 'Wardrobe' for any time of the year. For Van der Kemp, it's about curating your closet to project your image. "I want it to have this feeling that it's made especially for you," he says.

Interview by Janine Leah Bartels



Despite Van der Kemp's efforts to go against the grain, the fashion press are homing in, and retailers are on his tail, too. But he won't bite just yet. Content to work with his intimate team of skilled artisans, Van der Kemp plans to keep RVDK close. "It's nice to find your own voice again," he says.

You received a lot of buzz after Inez van Lamsweerde photographed Kate Moss wearing your coyote fur and leather jacket. Inez is an old friend from your time at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, right?

Yes, Inez ended up doing photography and I did fashion. We got along really well. She used to take pictures and I used to make clothes. It was a good combination. It was great that Kate Moss loved my jacket. I made it for Inez, then Kate put it on and ended up buying it. It was great for me! She's somebody who has personal style, which is so rare nowadays.

You've presented two Wardrobes so far. When do you plan to show another?

During the Couture show - I'm going to be in Paris again in January. I don't want to do Fashion Week, because there is so much going on at that time. During Couture, it's much more sophisticated. The people who come really take their time, they listen to what you have to say, and they look at the clothes up close.

Why have you decided to make your line demi-couture? There are only very few people who make couture. It's so expensive. I still want the exclusivity that you get when you buy couture, but not the high price points, because then you cannot dress anyone. I want it to have this feeling that it's made especially for you.

You're trying to slow down the fashion system. Why? I wish people would save up for fashion. I remember when I was young and sometimes I had to wait a month before I had the money to go out and buy an item. But then it got a special place in my closet, because it was something I'd saved for. If you can buy a dress for the price of a cappuccino, something is wrong. Right now, everything needs to be fast. People are being clothed by a stylist who's pampered by the big brands. It's just one big advertising campaign. That's something I want to go against. Back in the day, you had muses: Paloma Picasso, Catherine Deneuve or Loulou de la Falaise. These were women who had so much style and class.

What is different about your brand? I worked for 25 years for different brands. I've seen it all. At one point, you think, 'So, what do I have to offer?'

In the last couple of years, especially, I've thought about where all the clothes are going. A lot of clothes don't get sold in the end and are destroyed. I feel like I need to do something that's different. I've always collected vintage fabrics and pieces of material and wished I could do something with it. So I just started making clothes. I feel much better now doing this than I have in the last 10 years, working for other people. It's nice to find your own voice again.

You started with a collection of vintage fabrics. Where are you sourcing your materials now?

Wherever I travel, I try to look through interior stores, vintage stores or flea markets, and I always find stuff. There's an old couturier here in Holland with a whole archive of fabrics I can freely use. I work with a factory that makes bags in Italy. They use a lot of skins like python and crocodile, and when they cut their bags or their belts they have a lot of leftovers. I asked them to send it to me. For example, in my last presentation, I had a dress that was made out of leftover python and a skirt that was a mix of lace and crocodile. It's a challenge, but it's inspiring.

You always focus on the shoulders. Why have you made this your signature silhouette?

What bothers me when I look at how a lot of women dress for red-carpet events is that they all wear these corsets that make them stand in a certain, unnatural way. I like women to feel a little more sensual. I prefer to have the shoulder as a structure - you see the body in a more natural way.

How do you plan to maintain the craftsmanship and ethics of RVDK as it grows?

It's going to be a challenge. I've been approached by retailers, but for now I want to keep it close to me and exclusive. The other idea I'm already working on is producing limited-edition clothes with new materials. I would wait until they sold out and then create the next limited-edition piece, so I would never produce too many things.

Tell me about your team...

It's very small. I have one lady who helps me with everything, and also a designer who works with me on the decorative side with beading and fabric treatment. I work with various artisans in and around Amsterdam who have great skills: there's one who's really good with tailoring and can do buttonholes by hand, and then there are others who have worked in theatre and opera. There are people who still have a very old-fashioned way of working. In Amsterdam, it's easier to find them; if they were in Paris, they would already be working for everyone else. Here, there aren't so many people who do what I do.

What are your aspirations for RVDK?

I started this without a plan. Right now, I feel like there's a need for something else, and every week it all becomes clearer. It's very rewarding for me. But where it will all lead, I don't know.

Photos: (portrait) Sofie Coreymen; (fashion image) Marijke Aerden

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