



Model Evanna Mills and designer Claire O'Connor



Model Tanya McMenamin and designer Lisa Shawgi

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Fashion Break Through is a new initiative aimed at promoting emerging Irish designers. Four of the designers taking part reflect on the challenges facing them in today's economy

Words: Gillian Nelis and Tina-Marie O'Neill
Pictures: Maura Hickey

ity silks and cottons in really interesting shapes." She concedes that times are tough for young designers. "It can be hard to even get boutiques to look at your collection, because at the moment they feel that they need to focus on designers they already stock and who they know will sell," she says. "But some are willing to take a chance on someone new."

As this is only her second collection, Doyle says it's too early to pinpoint her typical customer. "So far it's been quite varied," she says. "A lot of fashion is aimed mainly at people in their 20s and 30s, but my pieces seem to suit customers from their 20s right up to their mid-50s."

Doyle's collection is stocked at Blonde Gemini in New Ross, Co Wexford; Miriam Halley's in Clonmel, Co Tipperary; Regis in Galway; Tiger Lily's in Dublin; and Beri in Kilkenny.

Yvonne Ross

Yvonne Ross is a contemporary Irish jewellery designer from Gran-

geon in Co Wicklow. She graduated from DIT Mountjoy Square in Dublin with a degree in fine art, and after a year travelling overseas, returned to Dublin to work with a jewellery designer before setting up her own business two years ago.

She sells her pieces at the Loft Market, the New York-style fashion market on the top floor of the Powerscourt Townhouse Centre in Dublin, and specialises in sterling silver and hand-picked, semi-precious stones sourced from around the world. Ross also takes commissions, and designs silver and pearl jewellery for weddings.

"Turquoise and gold is a popular combination for Irish skin tones," she says. "I work with different shades of pearls for the summer, but I love to use materials with bold colours like onyx and coral. My designs are uncomplicated and clean, and they appeal to a wide range of customers, especially young professionals and people looking for statement pieces."

Ross believes that designers need to cater for a wide range of budgets.

"If I make a heavy piece, I will re-create a lighter and more affordable version of it to make it more accessible to clients," she says. "I could showcase a heavy, bold piece in the window which gets lots of admirers but which might not sell, whereas a smaller or lighter version of the same design sells very well."

Ross's pieces range in price from €39 to about €280. "People are still shopping and browsing despite the downturn, but they take their time and think about what they're buying now. It is a challenging time to be a young designer and I waitress a couple of nights a week to keep the pressure off. I'm a small enough business so I've been careful to keep my overheads low," she says.

"I expected clients to be more conservative in their tastes when I first started. But Irish people have a flair for colour and design, and have an individual style which is really visible on the street."

Claire O'Connor

DUBLINER Claire O'Connor stu-

died fashion at the Grafton Academy before working with a number of well-known Irish designers, including Jen Kelly, Paucie Sweeney and Marc O'Neill. She set up her own business in 2004, and sells her contemporary womenswear under the label Lil' Couture.

"The ready-to-wear label marries hip-hop influences with elements of high-end couture, and is geared towards women in their 30s to their 60s," says O'Connor. "The current range is inspired by US urban culture, so it's a street look mixed with quality fabrics like lace and silk. There's a lot of attention to detail."

O'Connor has noticed a drop-off in the amount people are spending on fashion, but believes the recession has also changed buying patterns. "During the economic boom, people were more willing to buy disposable fashion. Now they want value for money and are more inclined to buy better quality, functional clothes and investment pieces," she says.

The Lil' Couture range includes

tops, skirts, dresses, jackets and coats. Prices range from about €55 for a T-shirt to €400 or €500 for a silk dress or a coat.

O'Connor has been invited to showcase her label at A-Wear's Henry Street flagship store as part of a programme designed to boost the profile of young Irish designers.

The high-street chain is providing space in the store to two new designers every Saturday for the next few weeks to allow them to test out their pieces on the public, and give shoppers the chance to buy one-off designer pieces at reasonable prices. The Lil' Couture collection will be on show on Saturday, May 30.

Make-up: Siobhan Boyle and Naomh Geday from LA Make-Up Academy.

Hair stylist: Isis Godfrey-Glynn.

Models: Martina, Evanna, Alex and Tanya from B scene The Agency.

Location: The Loft in Powerscourt Townhouse Centre.