

MADE IN L.A.

BY KATIE McCARTHY

As romanticized as the world of fashion may be, operating a fashion house is business, and for practical reasons, American designers have traditionally established themselves in the center of commerce: New York. But there is a growing number of bright fashion talent who are changing the game—living, working, and producing their lines in sunny **Los Angeles**. Here are three designers—an in-demand couturier, an acclaimed shoemaker and a champion of ecofriendly handmade accessories—who are taking on the industry from the Left Coast. They explain how they do it—and why they wouldn't want to be anywhere else.



A decade or so later, he's a certifiable darling of the fashion media, calling *Vogue* editor in chief Anna Wintour his "No. 1 supporter." He's toying with expanding Esquivel to include accessories, as so many high-profile clients have begun to request wallets, bags and belts. He continues designing shoes for stylish celebrity clients including musicians Ben Harper and Janelle Monáe, and he's collaborating with friend Juan Carlos Obando on a ready-to-wear collection of clothing, shoes and accessories for men and women.

Esquivel still lives in Orange County with his wife and children, commuting to his showroom during the week. The lifetime California boy muses that his shoes "have a California aesthetic." And Esquivel's designs have a literal West Coast stamp: The inside of each shoe reads "Esquivel handmade in California." He sees in his shoes a "rebellious" quality that's in line with the culture: "When you think of California, instantly it's the surf culture, it's rock 'n' roll, it's 'free spirit.'"

The artist also has practical reasons for sticking with Southern California. "My family's here, my friends are here, other musicians I've always worked with are here. People have always said, 'You should move to New York.' 'You should go to Europe.'" He shuns these notions. "Business has been good for us being in California. I think beautiful things can be made anywhere in the world."

CALLEEN CORDERO | THE NATURAL

From the outside, Calleen Cordero's tucked-away North Hollywood factory looks like a relic of the past. Artisans can be seen working in the open air, stenciling forms in plywood and skillfully cutting them out by hand. It's one step in a long process of assembling Cordero's handmade, ecofriendly footwear, one division of her emerging accessories line.

Upstairs is where Cordero—who is petite, tan and toned from years of yoga practice, with a cascading mane of sun-kissed ringlets—manages her 45 employees, her desk sitting "in the middle of the action," as she puts it. In an adjacent room, a handful of artists are deeply focused, carefully punching rows of geometric studs into handbags and belts, while in the next room, others toy with leather samples in a variety of colors. Downstairs, they shape plywood forms into the base of platform heels and affix the leather uppers.

"Ever since I was young, I've been in love with shoes," says Cordero. A look at her résumé reveals this love affair with footwear. She began working at a Marin County shoe boutique at the tender age of 15, becoming a shoe buyer in short order. Later, she handled West Coast sales for a number of major companies such as Dr. Martens, Steve Madden and Kenneth Cole. But working for giant manufacturers didn't satisfy Cordero. "I was like, 'I'm selling my soul. I've got to work for myself,'" she remembers.

In 1999 she established the Calleen Cordero brand with dreams of creating handmade women's footwear in Los Angeles, where she was raising a family. Producing the line locally was of paramount importance to Cordero, having worked in corporate America. "I have always been against China because I've seen it just destruct Europe and take away business from all these countries," she explains. Naysayers told her it was a bad business decision. "People were like, 'It's so expensive, you're never gonna make it here.'" But she insisted: "I really wanted to create my collection [here] and have control over it." Practically, it also allowed the mother of two to stay at home with her young sons.

Besides, she insists, there is no way to replicate her careful technique in a country like China. She calls her "old-school shoe cobbling" technique a "lost art": As many as 20 artisans might work on a single design, from sole sculpting to leather sewing and studding. (Many of these skilled artists have been with Cordero since the company's founding.) Prices range from about \$370 for an embellished flat to \$680 for a studded lace-up boot. The line has since expanded to handbags, belts, cuffs, rings and other accessories, and they're sold at major retailers such as Barneys as well as 200 boutiques, including her own flagship store on L.A.'s Beverly Boulevard.

Cordero represents a growing number of designers who have begun moving toward using environmentally friendly materials and sustainable practices. Long before "eco-friendly" became a buzzword, Cordero used natural materials and vegetable dyes in creating her products. Her design ethos has been embraced in L.A., a city whose progressive denizens are more frequently shopping at farmers markets, outfitting their homes with sustainable materials and clothing their tots in organic cotton onesies. "This whole 'green' thing has been really kind of great for us," she says. As a testament to her line's natural materials, she maintains, "You can pretty

much bury a shoe and it will decompose. It's pretty raw and simple and beautiful."

Cordero's ecofriendly impulse arises from a deep connection to nature, making L.A. an ideal home base; the designer lives in a remodeled 1927 bungalow in the earthy enclave of Laurel Canyon. "I love L.A.... I'm a real serious nature girl. I have to be surrounded by fresh air, trees and clean energy," she says. She cites this locale as well as Calliote Canyon, her retreat in nearby Ojai, as the places that inspire her work the most. "When I'm in nature, it's like I can see things, you know?" she says. "I'll see a hummingbird [and think], 'Oh my god, I need to do jewel tones. I need bright green and purple in the collection.'"

When asked why she chose Los Angeles to execute her lofty business idea, Cordero becomes spiritual. "I mean, there was a voice in my gut that told me that it was time for me to find my land and build something on it. It was like the ark, you know? And I did, and it was miraculous.... If I actually was a level-headed person, probably I would be like, 'What? Are you crazy?' But ... I follow my instincts, and I knew that I wasn't gonna give up, and I was gonna create my shoes here in Los Angeles."



OPPOSITE PAGE: SELF-PROCLAIMED "NATURE GIRL" CALLEEN CORDERO.

ABOVE: THE "SNAKE" CUFF, ONE OF MANY PRODUCTS IN CORDERO'S BURGEONING ACCESSORIES LINE.

BELOW: THE SLEEK CALLEEN CORDERO BOUTIQUE ON BEVERLY BOULEVARD.

