

Forging a career in fashion and design is tough. For every Colette Dinnigan, Sass and Bide, Tsubi, or Marc Newson, there are a myriad of talented hopefuls who fall by the wayside.

MIEKE LEPPENS

PRO
FILE

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There is, however, someone who is trying to help. Sydney's Mieke Leppens has established the Australian-European Culture & Design group (AE CUDE), which aims at creating opportunities for Australian designers to achieve success, particularly in the notoriously difficult European market. Using Mieke's extensive network of contacts in the fashion industry, AE CUDE works as an agent for designers, providing them with entry points into overseas markets and training them in the art of marketing their products and turning great ideas into successful businesses.

Originally from Antwerp, Belgium, where she studied at the renowned Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Mieke has worked in the fashion and design industry since the late 1970's. Despite starting out as a designer herself, she says that, because of her personality, she "always ended up in managerial and business roles." She worked at all levels of the fashion industry, from mass production right through to the exclusive world of Haute Couture. "This was invaluable," Mieke says. "It gave me a unique insight into the industry and to see the power that lay behind accessing different levels of the market."

Mieke believes that a very important part of becoming a successful designer is the ability to diversify. She says that top designers, especially in Europe, are able to "capitalise on their name and diffuse that into other areas." It is something that appears to have become a must for fashion houses, all of whom seem to have a fragrance, line of luggage and even homewares as part of their label. This is just one aspect of the "professionalisation" that Mieke says Australian designers need to embrace if they are to achieve success internationally.

A professional approach was what Mieke identified as missing when she moved from Paris to Sydney in 1991, to find a fashion industry that was very inward-looking. "I looked around and saw people following design-trends from Europe, and focussing only on mass-market production," she says. It initially led her to the belief that there was a scarcity of talent in Australia, an opinion that changed quickly once she started teaching at the University of Technology in Sydney. She says she realised it was simply a lack of confidence and knowledge of how to market and run a design business. This prompted her to write a PhD on the topic 'Factors Affecting the Australian Position in International Design', which she completed in 1999.

Mieke's study confirmed her belief that Australia could utilise its talent much better and that its designers are in a unique position to capitalise on the fact that they are seen as fresh and exciting by the more established markets. "Australia's relative isolation means they are not overly influenced by trends in Europe and America and, while it sounds like a cliché, the multicultural nature of society means that designers are broadminded when it comes to form," she says, adding that "Europeans are very attracted to Australia's exoticism."



"ALL THE WORK IS DESIGNED IN 3D ON THE MANNEQUIN, SO THAT PROPORTION, LINE AND STYLE OF THE DESIGNER CAN BE FULLY DEVELOPED. I AM A MASTER AT THIS TECHNIQUE AND HAVE TAUGHT IT ACROSS AUSTRALIA AT UNIVERSITY, TAFE AND PRIVATELY. INITIALLY I WAS MET WITH SOME RESISTANCE. THIS TECHNIQUE CALLED 'MOULAGE' IS TYPICAL OF THE EUROPEAN DESIGN SCENE BUT VERY UNUSUAL IN AUSTRALIA. IT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COPYING AND PRODUCING ORIGINAL WORK - WHICH IS WHAT I AM TRYING TO ACHIEVE. FOR AUSTRALIAN DESIGNERS TO PARTICIPATE ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE, THEY HAVE TO HAVE AN INDIVIDUAL STYLE."

It is because Mieke believes that she can seriously improve the chances of Australian designers making it big at home and overseas that she has established AE CUDE. In addition to establishing industry contacts and providing training in business and marketing, AE CUDE creates an environment where designers, fashion and otherwise, can meet, establish networks and exchange ideas. "I have already found many talented people," Mieke says, "and while their aims vary greatly, we are already having success." It is surely only a matter of time before this initial success translates into the next crop of famous Australian designers. [080](#)

