

Butterfly Effect – Interview with Summer Rayne Oakes

Bamboo Magazine, August 16, 2010

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If you read about Summer Rayne Oakes, you will learn about her various careers as a model, social entrepreneur, consultant or host. But there is always one aspect missing: Summer Rayne Oakes is also a priest, a priest for the eco-minded: “People either confess how green they are not or how green they are becoming”, says the 26-year-old.

Obviously, Oakes did a good job so far in developing the infrastructure to make sustainability more mainstream. This is what she describes herself as her core passion driven by an entrepreneurial spirit. As the media refers to her as the “Eco-model”, she is way more than a beautiful face with a faible for green lifestyle: The Cornell Alumni is a sustainability strategist with a convincing and inspiring talent for marketing – and a love for insects. She shares her New York apartment with several insects in terrariums. As a little girl in her hometown in Pennsylvania, Oakes grew up loving insects and later studied entomology in college.

She came a long way from where she started nine years ago as a model, meeting fashion photographer John Cooper, who planned to publish his mesmerizing organic portraits in a book and give the proceeds to rainforest relief. Organic Portraits then turned into an artistic project promoting ecological awareness and conservation through avant-garde photography and sustainable fashion. Oakes on the other side developed her own image of what sustainability design is and could be. She chose to work with and for ecological brands and designers only in order to make a statement. Well, which model in New York’s big fashion shark pool can afford to do that? Oakes explanation for that sounds simple in words but hard to follow in real life: “You don’t have to be big in order to create change or to choose but you need to be scrappy and bullish, and you have to learn the ability to say no to things that don’t sue your needs, and reality is not many people are going to do that.”

Oakes' strategy of mixing fashion and ecological thinking in order to make sustainability mainstream works, and her career proves that you don't have to compromise your values to be successful, as her campaigns for Levi Strauss & Co., Nicole Miller, Replay Jeans and her two-page spread feature in the second issue of Vanity Fair's Green Issue in 2007 show. Although her mindset may be years ahead of the common one in fashion business, there is a shift happening within the industry, says Oakes. All brands meanwhile start having some type of sustainable program, even if this means different things to different brands. "These days, it's not enough to do an organic T-shirt once in a while," so Oakes. Seeing more brands focusing on educational campaigns, energy efficiency, waste management and purchasing are actions Oakes has in mind when she talks ecofashion.

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Her newest brainchild is a business-to-business marketplace named Source4Style. Oakes and five others created the start-up business to allow designers and retailers to search and find sustainable material within a global network of suppliers. As Source4Style addresses the designers and retailers on their end, the consumer's way of thinking has to change little by little as well. Oakes advice is, to go with the low hanging fruits and identify the things you do on a daily basis: what you eat, how you transfer yourself, how you use energy and what you wear. "I want to create a new kind of perception. People shouldn't relate to ecology with abdication but with fun and quality of life", Oakes explains. Living a sustainable lifestyle doesn't have to feel like detention, it can feel like you are playing cookie, she says with her sweeping enthusiastic voice. And it doesn't sound one single bit preachy.

About Tanja Matuszis, Freelance Writer

Toronto-based writer Tanja Matuszis divides her time between assignments in Canada and Germany. Working for print, radio and online media for more than 15 years, Tanja covered stories of the life and culture as well as the political beat. Her every day eco-commitment is riding her bike: "Despite the risk of getting door-kissed and ignored by drivers, I still love it."