

# Q+A: Eckhaus Latta

**MIKE ECKHAUS AND ZOE LATTA** DISCUSS HOW THEY TOOK THEIR BICOASTAL FASHION BRAND FROM PROVOCATIVE ART-SCHOOL BEGINNINGS TO THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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Steven Perloux



When she was growing up in Santa Cruz, California, Zoe Latta's introduction to fashion didn't present itself inside the pages of *Vogue* but rather in the bins of the local Goodwill. "All the stuff that didn't sell would go into these piles, and I'd buy them for a dollar a pound," says Latta, who would find everything from Hermès sweaters to handmade batiks to mattress pads with mesmerizing textures. "At the time my friends and I were really into playing dress-up. I made this prom dress that looked like a nude condom." Meanwhile Mike Eckhaus, who grew up between Chappaqua, New York, and Manhattan, got an early insider's look at the industry as

a 16-year-old intern for *The Daily Front Row*. "I would cut school and go to the tents and see all the runway shows the editors didn't want to go to," recalls Eckhaus. "I remember seeing AsFour, and the energy was a real shock to the system."

Eckhaus and Latta went on to study sculpture and textiles, respectively, at the Rhode Island School of Design, but they eventually re-engaged their interest in fashion. A few years after graduation, the RISD alums moved into a loft in the Brooklyn Navy Yard with some friends: he designed accessories for Marc Jacobs; she started a textile company that sold intellectual property to brands like Calvin Klein, Urban Outfitters, West Elm and

Proenza Schouler. "We had these creative jobs, but they were not fulfilling in the way we wanted them to be," says Eckhaus.

In 2011 they decided to concentrate their efforts into designing a debut collection, completing it in two months on a four-figure budget. While they photographed their models in a grimy shower and hardly any industry people attended, Opening Ceremony placed an early order, and slowly but surely the high priests of the fashion (and art) world came a-calling.

Depending on your perspective, Eckhaus Latta has become the most art-centric fashion brand, or the most fashion-centric art collaborative, in the U.S. (and beyond). Not only have their sculptural knits inspired such artists as Dora Budor and Bjarne Melgaard to commission one-off garments for exhibitions at the Venice Biennale and Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Not only have their runway shows become must-see spectacles featuring artist friends as models (like painter Torey Thornton, the R&B artist Kelela and Nepalese multimedia maven Maia Ruth Lee) strutting through museums or warehouses. Not only have they reconfigured our notions of viral marketing (their first major ad campaign in Spring 2017 featured models performing sexual acts in their clothes). In the process their practice has become the subject of numerous museum exhibitions, including MOMA PS1's Greater New

York survey and the Hammer's Made in L.A. biennial—both in 2016—as well as a new solo presentation, Eckhaus Latta: Possessed, that runs through November at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the duo is creating a first-floor shop that functions as a critique of the retail experience, complete with a capsule collection (of made-in-L.A. stone-washed denim, upcycled tees and sweatshirts featuring poems and drawings of dogs as well as a few one-of-a-kind jeans with custom beaded legs or sweaters woven from plastic bags) sold by performance-artist associates who will guide visitors (customers?) around sculptural displays (made from ceramic, upcycled rugs, cardboard boxes and flagpoles by 14 artists friends like Susan Cianciolo, Martine Syms and Amy Yao) and a surveillance room fitted with two-way mirrors and live-feed video from retail locations across the globe.

As they prepared to ship their designs to the Whitney, DesignLA sat down with the L.A.-based Latta (with the New York-based Eckhaus on speakerphone) at their artist-designed West Adams retail flagship for a firsthand account of their unlikely journey into genre-bending success in the highest climes of the art and fashion worlds.

**Michael Slenske:** Why *Possessed*?

**Zoe Latta:** I didn't want a really long title. We usually write poems as our press releases. Most of the text we have is this poetic vague situation, that's our preferred form of communicating. But for this we wanted it to feel concise.

**MS:** What's the idea behind the show?

**ZL:** It actually came from the Hammer. We wanted to have all these products in the gift shop of the Hammer. We wanted to engage with the show itself, what showing clothes on a mannequin means. We had this idea that if we made this fake retrospective a la Costume Institute, then when you go into the gift shop you could buy your Eckhaus Latta retrospective T-shirt. Things you get when you exit a Monet show at the Met.

**Mike Eckhaus:** Like crap ephemera that would be promotional things—a mouse pad, a mug, an umbrella.

**ZL:** We were interested in mocking how fashion is usually displayed in a museum context. The joke did not get heard, but that was the beginning of the conversation with [Whitney curator] Chris Lew, and he brought on [co-curator and Whitney retail product development manager] Lauri Freedman. We went deep into that process, and we realized we weren't interested in making these products or having our names on them. That turned into this two-year-long conversation about distilling that idea and the question we were trying to ask, which is: What is the difference between an art institution and a retail space? We've made a separate collection for the museum and designed a retail store made by artists. The clothes are for sale, not the fixtures. Some of them are one-offs, but a lot of them are production clothes. In a museum context we didn't want our price points to be as high as they are here, so we made a shirt out of found T-shirts that we refurbished. We have four styles like that. There are maybe seven different one-of-a-kind pieces that are insane labors of love over the past year. Then we'll have our jeans and some sweaters.

Fashion accessories and art objects in the Eckhaus Latta retail store in Los Angeles.

Photos: Steven Perilloux



**ZL:** It's coming from the experience of having this store and a couple more temporal spaces in New York where we have historically enjoyed working with artists to make functional objects. The chair you're sitting in is by Jessi Reeves, and her work questions, in a way similar to ours, What is the difference between a utilitarian object and an art object?

**MS:** What's the range of those objects?

**ZL:** Martine Symms is making a table, but the table surface is also a way to display a photograph of hers and a way for us to display socks. Amy Yao is making hooks and a trash can. Annabeth Marks, who is very much a painter's painter, is making a painting that is also a clothing rack. Susan Cianciolo is making a dressing room, and the curtain is a combination of her textile and collage work.

**ME:** It's about how our different modes of thinking interact with these various fashion channels, whether it's something that's really outward facing or something behind-the-scenes.

**MS:** The schematic says there's going to be a "media display" and a "surveillance room." Walk me through how those are meant to operate.

**ZL:** The media display is something we shot with Charlotte Wales, and Gemma Ward modeled it with a couple other friends of ours. The photos are like slick Avedon advertisements in these very glossy light boxes.

**ME:** It's playing with the language of fashion advertisements. You could be from anywhere in the world and look at those and they would read to you as fashion ads.

**ZL:** But Gemma's wearing a sweater set that's made entirely out of plastic bags. Then you get to have your own retail experience and you can touch and try anything on that you want for the most part. There are also two sales people in the space. There will be music playing, there's a scent, the walls will be painted. We really don't want it to feel like the gallery it is.

**MS:** What's happening in this surveillance section?

**ZL:** It's a combo of things. The spaces between the walls are two-way mirrors so you can watch the people in the store, and there's also a surveillance video of this space as well as fifteen other feeds from stores all over the world so you can watch people shopping the Eckhaus Latta racks.

**ME:** It's super passive.

**ZL:** It's more about this idea that by being a consumer you're giving your consent to being surveilled. We're holding that data, but we're not doing anything with it, it doesn't matter.

**ME:** It's like voyeurism and the inevitability of voyeurism, but not in terms of data collection like Cambridge Analytica. It's taking something that's private and then making it public.

**MS:** Will the imagery from the show be projected into the streets like the Bjarne Melgaard ads or the Sex ads?

**ME:** No, the images will be on light boxes that will seem like bus signage or a movie poster. So they'll speak to that public sense of a screen, but none of it is moving outside of the museum space.

**MS:** How do you think this show compares to something like the Sex campaign in terms of provocation?

**ME:** We didn't think [the Sex campaign] was so provocative. This is very honest and maybe it sounds dumb, but we'll do these things because they are interesting. We're obviously aware we exist in a public space, but it's not like we think about the impact it's going to have.

**ZL:** For us the Sex campaign was more about working with [photographer] Heji Shin. We totally redid it, but it was a continuation of a project she'd already worked on. It was literally a contract job she did for the German government's sex-ed book. She's an incredible photographer and the images are so beautiful and that's where it started.

**MS:** Do you think that through this backdoor way, which probably wasn't obvious during art school, you've ended up in these three major American museum shows a lot faster than you would have if you had just pursued textiles and sculpture?

**ME:** We're so lucky. I don't think it's even sunk in. We're still in the excitement of making things.

**MS:** So what do you think originally made you want to start an eponymous fashion brand? It seems unlikely, somehow.

**ME:** The fashion landscape in New York back then was really different, and the young brands at the time were like Alexander Wang and Altuzarra, so it was very gloss in a certain way. Not to say we had any type of answer, we just wanted to make things we were curious about that were not necessarily consumed by the industry around it. We didn't know what we were doing.

**MS:** So was this really more of an art project at the outset?

**ZL:** Yeah.

**ME:** I don't think we even knew what it was when it started, it was just this desire to make things that were ours, to make something we were really excited about. We were teaching ourselves how to make clothing that first season, so it was totally naive in a very special way. The way we would sew stuff was totally ignorant. A main seam would be stitched on a machine and everything would be finished by folding it back and hand sewing it. So there was just this weird absence of logic.

**MS:** When did you think it might be something else?

**ME:** I think we wanted to be part of a creative conversation, and the fashion community was a place we were interested in.

**ZL:** It was product-driven, but in a very object-based way.

**ME:** This was not luxury.

**MS:** How much was even produced?



Upcycled T-shirts and sweatshirts made exclusively for the Eckhaus Latta capsule collection available at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



**ZL:** The stores bought small orders on consignment. Mike and I had to make it. Some of these pieces were made with yarn I had stolen out of school when I was still a student, and then I had to find it again and place custom orders from Italy to get enough.

**ME:** It's completely day and night.

**ZL:** If we did know what this would entail, we wouldn't have done it.

**ME:** "Ignorance is bliss" is at times a pillar of Eckhaus Latta. We had friends with tons of experience, and they were like, "I would never start a brand unless I had at least a million dollars." I thought, "What are you talking about?" We started with little bits and pieces from our day jobs for the first years, so it was very resourceful.

**ZL:** The first collection cost nine thousand dollars. The second one was probably less.

**MS:** So when do you feel that things really picked up for you in terms of exposure or brand recognition?

**ZL:** There's never been a spike.

**ME:** We never woke up one day and Eckhaus Latta was this different thing than the day before. Things have been on an exponential curve, whether it's as a business or with projects we're doing. It's been organic since the beginning.

**ZL:** The Sex campaign was the biggest spike.

**ME:** We were obsessed with [former *New York Times* fashion critic] Cathy Horyn, and still are in a way.

**ZL:** We used to handwrite her letters.

**ME:** She came to our Autumn/Winter 2015 show, and that felt really important to us. But if there's a moment when people said, "We heard of you," it was the PS1 show. It gave us a larger general awareness in a fashion space. I love that show, and people still talk about that show.

**MS:** What was so special about it?

**ZL:** It was a blizzard and 500 people came at ten o'clock at night.

**ME:** It was just one of those special moments when we put on a really good, interesting display of our work. It goes back to that AsFour show when I was young. Just the energy surrounding it, and it was not necessarily just about the clothing, even though it was a really strong collection.

**MS:** It seemed to have a more polished, directional look to it.

**ME:** Yeah, and the environment around it was very intense. It was held inside the dome and we lit it really dark and had really intense Berlin techno playing and it was all these industry people sitting in this spiral as models were

just circling them as fast as possible. It's always better to do a night show in moody weather than a daytime show.

**MS:** I know you don't write collection notes, but what would you say is the through-line connecting all the collections?

**ZL:** We always say we don't see the collections until they are off the runway. We get to see the final walks when they all come back, and that's when we get to see it all together. It takes a couple days.

**ME:** They've never been about anything in particular. With that PS1 show I remember styling it, and it was intentionally disparate, the materials we were using, and how many. There was this face print, some Flokati stuff, these rug things, but also the black dresses that opened the show felt really severe. But I don't ever try to understand the collections as what they meant as a whole.

**MS:** But there was some kind of polish to it that seemed different.

**ME:** Confidence is maybe the best way of thinking about it. After the Spring 2016 show at Ralph Pucci's [New York showroom], we had a very good sales season. Seeing the sales response, we felt like we could do what we wanted to do with Autumn/Winter 2016.

**MS:** Every critic talks about your "non-traditional" runway shows and the fact that your artist friends are the models. I'm not sure why, though, because you went to art school and these are your friends, aren't they?

**ZL:** Totally, and who we like to see embodying our clothing are the people we see in our community. We weren't trying to be "other" and toss in an old guy.

**ME:** Now it's this weird thing in terms of how people think about the value of individuals in a branding sense. I don't want to promote this influencer mentality as something to strive for. Around Fashion Week we're constantly approached by people who are like, "I have this many followers." That's never been what we're about, and it's just happenstance that we work with a few people who have large followings.

**MS:** Do artists still approach you to make clothing?

**ME:** That's how it all started really. Dora Budor was having a show at the Venice Biennale and asked us to make these uniforms for this video and performance that were happening. And then Xavier Cha approached us to do something like that and then Bjarne, and so there was a period of time where we were doing things with artists to help them realize their work. And then as time has gone on it's different because we don't operate in the same space. It's never been like Vuitton with Richard Prince or Murakami. It's not really about a marketable, tangible product but more about an experience, whether that's part of a set or in a show. We're not working with friends who are artists to design clothes together. It's working with people because it's the right time, and it's fun in the end. ●