

KALTBLUT.

In conversation with Aja, Kate Gottgens, Cinga Samson, Eli Gold, Wax Wings, Gurr, Minimal Violence and more

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IN CONVERSATION WITH ELI



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It’s so special to me when a professional encounter evolves into a genuine friendship. This is exactly what happened with Eli, the founder and the designer of the brand Masa Mara.

Not only is Eli passionate about clothes, but also about culture, and people. I think that’s where we clicked, our sociability created a great connection. His clothes tell a story about how it will feel to wear them all from the print that Eli’s designed for it. We caught up to talk patterns and process.

GOLD

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How did you become a fashion designer?

My mom sells fabric and my grandfather was a tailor, so I kind of grew up around fabric. I used to dance and play music and whenever I had a performance I would always make my own costumes. I would sometimes wear some of these pieces to school and the other kids would always ask me where I got them. I had always been sketching and at some point, I started putting pieces together. I actually did my first collection of t-shirts in college to raise money. They sold so fast, we didn't even last a week! So I made another collection and then another, but designing t-shirts forever didn't make a lot of sense to me so I started teaching myself to design and to sew. I got a sewing machine and I practised, practised! And before I knew it, I was putting collections together. When I started I had no idea what fashion was because where I'm from it was not a thing – until people started asking me questions about my costumes. Then I was like "what are

they seeing?" and that's when I made it a point to educate myself. Suddenly I realized that I was indeed a fashion designer!

What are you thinking about when you're creating clothes?

When I made the decision to go ahead and make my own pieces, I first looked around to see what was happening and who was doing what. Most people were making clothes but I wanted to make more than just clothes. Whenever I'm designing a piece, first I always come up with a story. Anything that I have been through personally, I just look into it and decide on a way to tell that story, and only then do I start looking at colour patterns. I believe that colour is a language. I will see what colours speak to me more and start from there. I put the stories together, then I start designing, but the colours usually come last, I always see them in my head first. So the clothes really don't matter, what matters is the story. Once I have the story, I can work day and night. Patterns, the rest, it always comes together. I like working that way.

What kind of stories?

For example, I did a piece about Third Culture Kids. These are kids who were born in one place but grew up in many different places, like me. People think that we are cultureless and have no roots but we're not, we're just different from them. With this piece I was trying to show people

that we are not lost, that we're actually more in tune with our world. If you believe in ancestors, which I do, I think you are more powerful. Living in South Africa for more than 12 years, it is now part of who I am, just like being from Rwanda. My ancestors will always be with me so you can't really say that I'm lost. That's what I'm trying to bring into my work.

Another piece I did was about the role played by religions, or how what we believe in influences who we become. So there are, among other elements representing Islam or Catholicism, these masks that represent the African religions and the way Africans reveal themselves to their ancestors so that they can connect and bond with them. The model on the sketch, as much as you think that he's lost, he's also in touch with all these religions.

My pieces are a mix of all the different cultures and countries that have influenced me. Xhosa, Rwandan and there are many similarities within cultures that I use when I am making pieces. Like some elements from the Zulus, you can also find in Rwanda. I did a piece with a skateboarder. There is a warrior stick, which bears a lot of meaning in African culture. Africans also believe that you can tap into the animal that you want to imitate through their skin so that's why I put Springbok skin on his sneakers, to give him lightness when he's skateboarding and moving around.

So your background really influences your work...

Yes, big time. My clothing is "African cultural inspired". So my pieces are inspired by all the cultures that I've come across. It doesn't have to be a direct influence, but it's still there. It can be shapes or colours. I never use anything as is, I always get inspired by something and then make it my own. If what I do doesn't speak to people right now, to our generation, then what's the point? I'm not making clothes for my ancestors!



And you only do menswear?

My pieces are unisex. If I do a piece I will display it both on a male and a female model. I just want people to see that there are no real differences, it just depends on how you wear it. I'm my own model when it comes to the clothes that I create. I'm looking for fluidity. And I'm not necessarily very active so I wouldn't say that my clothes are "active" wear but when you wear my creations, I want you to feel free and to look active at all times. Shoes, on the other hand, are very tricky and expensive to make so I rarely work with shoes. But the one time that I did, it was for a very specific collection and I collaborated with a company in Tanzania that does recycling. We only made 6 sizes.

And how do you pick the colours, the material, the fabric? Do you already know what you want when you start drawing?

It's all about the connection I have with the colours and how they make me feel. Once I start creating a piece, the colours tend to flow naturally. All my colours could be organic, although that would be expensive. I know how to make paint from mushrooms or charcoal. And I have used cow manure! In Africa, people use it to build houses among other things. I treat it before I use it to get rid of all the bacteria of course. I clean it with local materials and the mixture becomes hard like clay. Then I sand it and I can shape it and use it. In the end, it is just grass!

As for the fabric, African prints only come in cotton, so there isn't much to work with. But being surrounded by fabric when I was a kid, it made sense for me as a millennial to experiment with different types of fabric rather than copy how it was done in the past. I'm also learning about fabric technology so that I know how each type of fabric works and how to use it. If I try it and it feels good, then I make more.

And you create your own patterns? What's your process?

Yes, I do. Every print that we see is done by me. I work with one of my friends who is an illustrator to create the patterns on paper, then we print the first samples. I never know if I'm going to use the patterns that I make but when I'm selecting fabric for a t-shirt I need to know which one I'm gonna use: for example, it has to be breathable, to dry quickly. And different types of fabric will not react the same way to colour, some can take it, others can't. Like the more polyester you have, the more vibrant the colours can be. Or if I'm making jeans I have to do raw dying, no heat press. I need to know all of these things beforehand.

How's the feedback so far?

It's good! The thing is, what I'm doing takes time. When I started I would go to the market, buy trendy African prints, make clothes and make quick money. But at the end of the day, although I was making money, I was not building a brand, because the person coming after me would use the same fabrics I was using. I needed to educate people so that they could see that what I do feels different and that it is practical. So far the response has been great, things are definitely happening!

Do you think it is important to be socially engaged, like in the fight against climate change?

Yes, it is to me personally. I am my own brand so if something is important to me it has to be important to the brand. I'm aware that when I'm printing fabric I'm having a negative impact on the climate so it is my role to do whatever I can to restore the balance. Awareness is important.

What does the name of your brand "Masa Mara" mean?

It comes from a Rwandan proverb that means a lot to me. During the kings time, people would come and bring things to show gratitude to the King. If you had nothing to bring, showing up was enough even though you were "coming empty-handed", that's the meaning behind the name "Masa Mara". It represents the bravery, the fact that you can stand up for the things that you believe in.



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