

Becca McCharen-Tran for Chromat

MarVena M. Bhagratee & Isabel Lantigua

Introduction

Becca McCharen-Tran is a Queer contemporary designer based in Bushwick, New York. She is the founder and designer for the brand Chromat, which is known for their cage-like garments and 3D printing. Chromat has appeared at New York Fashion Week in 2015, 2016, and is expected to present for Spring, 2017. McCharen-Tran's runway and print models typically consist of women who are transgender and plus-sized; designing for these women as well as having them model her clothing on the runway is what she is known for. She is also known for having an architectural eye when it comes to her garments. She has a deep love for scaffolding and looks at the body as a worksite, just like an architect would look at an unfinished building. Furthermore, McCharen-Tran is now experimenting with fashion technology which combines fashion and communication that is responsive to movement and/or the environment.

Who exactly is Becca McCharen-Tran?

McCharen-Tran is a small town girl from Lynchburg, Virginia. She was born on May 27, 1985. Today, she is the designer and founder of Chromat. She is just as surprised as anyone that she has made it this far in her career, considering she never intended to become a fashion designer. She has experience with designing garments and also has a solid background in architectural design. McCharen-Tran studied architecture at the University of Virginia. During this time, she had no major fashion influence around her, so one may wonder how her love for fashion came into being. Here is how: at the University of Virginia, McCharen-Tran took a costume designing course, which, in turn, helped her to get a part-time job as a seamstress in the costume shop. While there, she sewed Victorian corsets and made Shakespearean costumes. Little did McCharen-Tran know that this was one of the biggest steps she would take towards her career in fashion. After McCharen-Tran graduated from the University of Virginia with her architecture degree, she moved to Portland, Oregon, where she worked for architects. She loved it there because "it was like this hipster Utopia— with bikes and good coffee" (Cross, 2012). After her adventures in Portland, she joined the Peace Corps and was stationed in El Salvador, where she worked in urban planning and development. Unfortunately, her trip was cut short after contracting dengue fever due to a mosquito bite. She was in the hospital for about a month until she was able to go home to her parents in Virginia (Cross, 2012). McCharen-Tran recovered, and eventually she got a job at City Hall in urban development. After work, with a lot of free time on her hands, she decided to start creating garments.

She would sew garments for her friends and herself for fun. She played around with fabrics she gathered from the bridal section of the Goodwill store located not too far from where she lived. McCharen-Tran even staged a fashion show which she entitled “Indigenous Lynchburg.”

The Inspiration for Chromat

McCharen-Tran’s designing talent is pure and raw. She never attended a fashion institute or had a mentor to walk her through it all. According to a *New York Called* interview, McCharen-Tran said, “I think Chromat is such a different kind of garment and the fact that I didn’t go to fashion design school reflects that we don’t design traditional fashion garments. It helped me to differentiate the brand” (Cross, 2012). McCharen-Tran also believes that the process between architecture and fashion is not all that different. During her architectural days, McCharen-Tran developed a deep interest in scaffolding, which definitely shows in her design— in that most of her garments are surrounded by a black, cage-like structure around the bodice of the wearer.

Introduction into the Fashion World

How did McCharen-Tran take her first step into the fashion world? Well, it all started with something as simple as one of her co-workers from City Hall introducing her to his daughter, who was a designer residing in New York City. At this point, McCharen-Tran was very interested in seeing where her designs could take her, so she paid his daughter a visit. McCharen-Tran’s new friend was opening up a pop-up shop called International Playground, and McCharen-Tran took a few of her pieces to the shop and placed them out to sell. After a short period, her pieces became a hit and were written about on blogs. They continued to be sold through International Playground, which eventually became a retail store. International Playground kept receiving orders for McCharen-Tran’s garments. While she continued her job at City Hall, she was still able to pack and ship orders she received via International Playground. She still sells through them today.

The Ultimate Commitment

In 2010, McCharen-Tran moved to a small apartment in New York’s Chinatown. At this time she was jobless, so she continued to make and ship her designs to buyers through International Playground. While she was doing this, she was still looking for a full time job. She searched for months until, finally, she realized that fashion was an actual job! That was when she decided to take her passion for fashion and make it into her career. In order for her to grow her business, she moved to Bushwick, New York, where Chromat is still based today. Chromat makes swimwear, sportswear, lingerie and signature architectural cages. “Chromat is focused on empowering women of all shapes and sizes through perfectly fit garments for every body” (Chromat, 2016). Most know McCharen-Tran as “one of the wildest designers who makes sexy pieces using straps and braces that look more like scaffolding than clothes” (Adams, 2014). Chromat appeared for the first time at New York Fashion Week in the fall of 2015, and in

March, 2016, McCharen-Tran worked with Intel to prepare her spring line. McCharen-Tran is a member of the LGBT community and identifies herself as Queer, refusing to conform to any specific gender. Today she is married to Christine Tran, who produces all of McCharen-Tran's runway shows.

The Target Market of Chromat

In the beginning stages of creating Chromat, McCharen-Tran designed garments in an attempt to experiment with the human body structure. She was not necessarily looking to defy odds or start the latest trend, but, over time, she did. The brand became popular and she was curious as to who her customer base was, so she moved from her hometown in Virginia to New York City to meet them in person. If one were to ask McCharen-Tran who her muse is today, she would easily say it is any woman who is strong and powerful. She would state that her muses come in all shapes and sizes and are from diverse cultural backgrounds (Deczynski, 2015). She is not inspired by one type of woman but, instead, by the various women she encounters in her everyday life.

McCharen-Tran's Muses

Chromat's target market can be described as women who are seen as uncharted. These women have body figures and lifestyles that have not necessarily been explored by the fashion industry. McCharen-Tran has said that "Chromat babes come from all different backgrounds and there are so many different looks that should be represented..." (Maiorana, 2015). She is all about the female-empowerment, positive-body-image movement and happily showcases it time and time again in her collections and in the women she casts in her runway shows and ad campaigns. McCharen-Tran likes to work with plus-size women, transgender women, and women with bionic legs because she enjoys seeing the people who inspire her on her runway (Kahn, 2016). These are the women she designs for—everyday women we come across at work, on the train, in our families and so forth. "I'm so against all white, straight, skinny girl runways. That just doesn't reflect my reality and who I am and who the Chromat woman is" (Feldman, 2015). McCharen-Tran clearly wants to show an appreciation for *all* her customers by incorporating them in her brand's image.

Fashion for All

McCharen-Tran plays a huge role in the fashion industry by supporting and advocating the movement to cast diverse models as well as making clothes for them. Still pretty new to the fashion game, she has already debuted a line for plus-size women—something that well-known brands with years of experience under their belts have yet to execute. Chromat *Curve* was introduced in the fall of 2014. It was created to minimize size-exclusivity because there is no reason why the size of a woman should dictate whether or not she is able to wear these pieces (Curve, 2014). They proudly offer custom sizing for no additional cost—so curvaceous women everywhere have a shot at being a #ChromatBabe. For Chromat to target this audience is not only a huge step but also a smart move. The average woman's

size in the United States is currently between 16 and 18, according to research from Washington State University, and plus-size women's apparel sales have outpaced total women's clothing sales for the past three years (Banjo, 2016). Therefore, the Chromat *Curve* line could definitely have a great number of followers.

McCharen-Tran has a keen eye for the future of clothing and is out to impress the world with her collections, in that she basically gives her garments a brain. For the Fall-Winter 2016 season, Chromat debuted the *Lumina Collection* which was a collaborative collection with Intel. The clothes in this collection, which showcased a mixture of athletic-wear and lingerie inspired pieces, were not only impressive but exciting as well, considering they lit up when triggered by the model's hand gestures. For their Spring-Summer 2016 collection, they debuted the Aeros Sports Bra which is the first sportswear prototype built with Intel technology. This sports bra opens vents to cool the body down when it senses heat or sweat (Anyanwu, 2015). These types of garments are perfect for different groups of people such as those who like to run at night (due to the built-in LED lighting) and entertainers.

Conclusion

The ideal Chromat customer, according to McCharen-Tran, is someone who is fearless and bold. To wear her designs, one must be confident and cannot be afraid to stand out. McCharen-Tran is out to change the future of fashion. Her audience consists of those who are not afraid to try new things and anyone curious about how technology can be incorporated into one's garments to help one function better. Chromat is supported by those interested in a brand that is out to break the mold. Feminists can appreciate a brand that is relevant to the times and whose owner foresees a future where there are as many female designers as there are male ones. The LGBT community also recognizes McCharen-Tran's passion to include them in the brand as opposed to just allowing them to be an inspiration to her. Her collections are mostly inspired by the city she lives in— New York City— a fast, active, and creative playground, and the Chromat collections definitely express it. McCharen-Tran handmakes most of her garments in her Brooklyn studio; the rest are made in the Garment District of Manhattan. And yes, you read that correctly: to date, she still creates most of her pieces by hand. This is done because the designs can often be so complex that factories aren't confident enough to produce them. But that's exactly why the Chromat brand is as popular as it is today— McCharen-Tran and her team are willing to go the extra mile to create intricate pieces for the world.

Works Cited

Adams, S. (2014, January). 30 Under 30: The Best of Art and Style. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2014/01/06/30-under-30-the-best-of-artstyle/# 432357672a60>

- Anyanwu, O. (2015, September). Chromat unveils smart sports bra and dress at NYFW. Retrieved from [http://uk.fashionnetwork.com/news/Chromat-unveils-smart-sports-braand-dress-at NYFW, 571570. html#. V_8rBegrI2w](http://uk.fashionnetwork.com/news/Chromat-unveils-smart-sports-braand-dress-at-NYFW,571570.html#.V_8rBegrI2w)
- Banjo, S., Molla, R. (2016, May). Retailers Ignore Most of America's Women. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/gadfly/articles/2016-05-10/plus-size-could-save-retailers>
- Chromat. (2016). About Us. *Chromat*. Retrieved from <http://chromat.co/pages/about-us#awards>
- Chromat. (2016). AW16: LUMINA COLLECTION. Retrieved from <http://chromat.co/pages/lab#mindfiles-3D-printed-dress>
- Chromat. (2016). LASER BRA & HARNESS. *Chromat Lab*. Retrieved from <http://chromat.co/pages/lab#mindfiles-3D-printed-dress>
- Cross, L. (Interviewer), McCharen, B. (Interviewee) (2014, October). New York Called Becca McCharen (Interview transcript). Retrieved from <http://newyorkcalled.com/portfolio/new-york-called-becca-mccharen/>
- Curve. (2014, November). Chromat Curve Line. Retrieved from <http://chromat.co/blogs/news/18083427-curve>
- Deczynski, R. (2015, February). Chromat is changing the future of fashion. Retrieved from <http://www.nylon.com/articles/chromat-becca-mccharen-nyfw-2015#page-1>
- Feldman, J. (2015, September). Chromat Features Not 1, But 2 Plus-Size Models On Its Runway. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chromat-plus-sizemodels_us_55f420e9e4b063ecbfa48f3c
- Kahn, M. (2016, March). Chromat Designer Becca McCharen: Diversity in Fashion Is a Choice. Retrieved from <https://www.elle.com/culture/a35120/chromat-designer-becca-mccharendiversity/>
- Maiorana, C. (2015, December). Talking with Becca McCharen, CHROMAT's Creator and Designer. Retrieved from <http://www.techstyle.nyc/talking-with-becca-mccharenchromats-creator-and-designer>

Nominating Faculty: Professor Alyssa Dana Adomaitis, Marketing 2335, Department of Business, School of Professional Studies, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

Cite as: Bhagratee, M.M. & Lantigua, I. (2017). Becca McCharen-Tran for Chromat. *City Tech Writer*, 12, 48-52. Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>