



The Name Game

On racks and Web sites throughout the land, it's the era of the sartorial head-scratcher.

Photographs by PATRICIA HEAL

He's a busy guy, with overall purchasing responsibility for some 500 (mostly tiny) fashion collections, so one can forgive Revolve Clothing co-owner Michael Mente for not being up to speed on some of the new labels the mega-Web site is adding for fall. Here's how a recent exchange unfolded:

What's Helmet of the Will about?

"Helmet of the Will is one of the lines I don't know," Mente admits. "Or maybe I've seen it but just don't remember."

How about Elevate & Collide? Know anything about that one?

"Let's see," says Mente, tapping into his computer database as he chats. "If I call up some information, maybe it will resonate..."

Slow and Steady Wins the Race?

"We just got that one up on the site," Mente says, happy to have struck a little recognition gold. "It's a sunglasses line." (Pretty close; the label, which also bills itself as a "bimonthly clothing diary," focuses on one concept or product category at a time. Recently, shades were its *raison d'être*.)

So much for Calvin and Ralph—or, for that matter, Proenza Schouler. Today there seems to be a pitched battle to come up with the most obscure monikers possible. While no one is lobbying for anything hyper-obvious, à la Very Well-Cut Pants or Crazy-Nice Cashmere Sweaters, it's become nearly impossible to glean a label's MO from its name.

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Hangtags and labels bearing oh-so-quirky names

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From top: Kid Dangerous and Localgod, two curiously named niche labels

In other words, there are a lot of Imitators of Christ out there. And more than a few Citizens of Humanity. “By having these interesting names—almost like bands—brands think they’ll be more recognizable,” says Mente. “But at this point, having a simple name might be the real way to stand out.”

Boo hiss to that, says Humberto Leon, co-owner of Opening Ceremony. As both a retailer and manufacturer (the Opening Ceremony line of “basics plus” is sold globally), he’s quite smitten with the sartorial head-scratchers. In fact, to prepare for the store’s elaborate fashion promotions, which feature designs from a different country every year, Leon and his partner, Carol Lim, comb the planet. “For us, it’s intriguing when a label has a weird name,” Leon explains. “Someone will say, ‘There’s a line in Japan called Mercibeaucoup.’ So what is that? The name doesn’t give you any idea. We do a little research and then go to these secret locations to find them. It’s a game of telephone for us.”

Consider Opening Ceremony’s recent Sweden promotion, which showcased Cheap Monday, Minimarket and Fifth Avenue Shoe Repair. At first blush, only the last would indicate any connection to actual duds. But even that one can’t be taken at face value. “Fifth Avenue Shoe Repair isn’t really a shoe line,” says Leon. Of course it isn’t.

Though the cutesy factor looms large, for some of these labels there’s a genuine connection between name and creator. For artist-turned-objet designer Derrick R. Cruz, the circuitous path he took to return to his birthplace of Manhattan resulted in Black Sheep & Prodigal Sons, a cache of meticulously crafted wares with an old-world feel. Kicking off with animal-head stickpins and scrimshaw necklaces made from vintage ivory piano keys, Cruz has since conjured 24-karat gold-plate “jaws” that double as ashtrays and trinket holders, and straight-edge razors with handles carved from woolly mammoth tusks. Currently he’s curating “A New Hive,” a multimedia exhibit he hopes will draw attention to the plight of endangered honeybees.

With so much going on between the ears, it makes sense that Cruz would deep-six the notion of a run-of-the-mill moniker. Instead, he drew inspiration from *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* by Anatole Broyard. In the book, says Cruz, Broyard describes meeting people “who had either shunned family to come to New York City, or they had been shunned by family and fled to the city. He said that these are paradoxical black sheep or prodigal sons. And I thought, Well, this hasn’t changed.”

For jeweler Alexis Bittar, the decrepit cool of one of Charles Dickens’s most colorful characters informs his Miss Havisham line. Something about the jilted bride

of *Great Expectations*, who sports her bridal gown until it’s in tatters, spoke to Bittar, manifesting in a range he describes as “Memphis art sprinkled with Grace Jones.”

“Miss Havisham’s so dark, but so glamorous,” adds Bittar. “There’s a bird in her hair; she’s in this ancient wedding dress. But in my kind of Eighties brain, she seemed a bit gothic punk. And for me, this line always had a punky vibe.”

Although there was also a short-lived fashion line called Havisham a few years back, not everyone shares Bittar’s enthusiasm for the sour would-be bride. Some folks, including a few jewelry buyers, have never even heard of the old gal. “They have no idea who the f--- it is,” Bittar says, laughing. “They think Miss Havisham is Miss Sixty’s sister.”

Indeed, along with a bunch of “thread” collections (A Common Thread, Denim & Thread, Thread Social), several new Misses are in our midst. And one of the buzziest, the Miss Davenport line by celeb stylists Cristina Ehrlich and Estee Stanley, almost started life as another Miss entirely. Originally, the duo had their hearts set on the name Miss Robinson, a by-product of their fixation with Katharine Ross’s character in *The Graduate*. Though there are other influences in the collection (it borrows heavily from the personal styles of Ehrlich and Stanley, spliced with a little *Belle de Jour*-era Catherine Deneuve), Elaine Robinson was pretty much visual shorthand for what the stylists envisioned.

“This is a woman who lives in America but is obsessed with the European lifestyle,” says Ehrlich. “When you see women in Paris, whether they’re 17 or 85, they’re put together.” But there was just too much association with the movie, so Ehrlich and Stanley settled on the even more prim-sounding Miss Davenport. “We wanted a name that exuded the cocktail era,” Ehrlich says, “and would make buyers think of times past.”

Trust that jeweler Susan Domelsmith wasn’t mining the same elegant turf with Dirty Librarian Chains, her line of reworked vintage necklaces. Rather, the name sprang from the lustful way some besotted dude described her to a mutual friend. “I had glasses, and I was always wearing my hair up in a bun. And this guy started calling me ‘the dirty librarian’ behind my back,” Domelsmith recalls. “I think he had a crush on me. Anyway, I just thought that was hilarious.” Apparently it’s a joke with legs: Not only is every piece named after a library term, but each box is stamped and filled with recycled encyclopedia pages.

While she stocks her share of obscurely named brands—Goat and Tree among them—Louis Boston owner Debi Greenberg says she’s neither for nor against nutty names. “I’m just looking at the clothes,” she says. “And I don’t think the customer cares as long as she picks an item off the rack, tries it on and likes it.”

But as Revolve Clothing’s Mente points out, there are some powerful incentives for staying the weird-moniker course. “Some of the biggest companies of the last 10 years have kind of funky names,” he notes. “Like Yahoo. And Google.”

—DANA WOOD

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