

BLK ON BLK



CON AMORE

ISSUE #2

TO ROME WITH LOVE

Black Magazine editors **Grant Fell** and **Rachael Churchward** travelled to the eternal city of Rome to attend **Altaroma** and witness the **ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative's** work in three part harmony. Marching to the Beat of Africa were four designers: **Stella Jean**, **duaba serwa**, **Mina Evans** and **Lisa Folawiyo**. Room Service housed **Anita Quansah London**, **Christie Brown** and **MO SAÏQUE**. Meet Stella Jean the Initiative's designer success story, a further five like-minded African designers and **Alaria Venturini Fendi**, founder of **Carmina Campus** a prominent champion of the cause...



*Stella Jean SS15 at Beat of Africa
Photo: Luca Sorrentino*

STELLA VISION

Haitian-Italian designer Stella Jean is the future of fashion according to Giorgio Armani. With her expansive vision, vivacious search for new fabrics, classic European tailoring and artisanal production spread across several of the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative's hubs, he may well be right. Grant Fell and Rachael Churchward meet her for an espresso near the Comlesso Monumentale, Santo Spirito in Sassia, Rome. Images by ITC EFI, unless otherwise credited



Grant Fell: *Kia ora Stella, tell us a little bit about yourself. You were born here in Rome?* **Stella Jean:** Yes, I was born here in Rome. My mother is from Haiti, my father is Italian he is from Turin, the city of Fiat. Growing up in Italy in the 80s wasn't that easy for me, it is a wonderful country but back then it wasn't really that ready for a multi-racial family. It is much more ready for that now but as you can imagine in the 80s it wasn't. So, through my childhood and then my teenage years, I have been through some...I would say...struggles because I had a huge problem with my identity...**GF:** *In what sense?* For instance, my school, which is now my son's school, I wasn't the only black girl in the school but at the same time I was Italian like all of the others weren't. I didn't have the opportunity to go into a community or group like say Haitian, because I am not just Haitian, I am Haitian-Italian. So at 16 I started pretending that I was just Haitian but the Haitian kids didn't really accept me because I was also Italian! So I started looking for an opportunity to create something, I started looking to see if I had the skills to paint or write, and then I discovered I had the capacity to work with fabrics, I liked clothes and found it was my

way to communicate so that is what I started to do. It wasn't about aesthetic at all, I didn't start for an aesthetic reason. It wasn't a link to the fashion mainstream, trends, it wasn't about that at all. It was just to show that I can put in the same styling, the same outfits, Italian structures that I would see – which is typical of my collections because it represents my father's side, 99% of Italian men wear these shirts and most of the time they are striped! **GF:** *Were either of your parents in fashion?* **Stella:** No, no. They use fashion in their lives but in a very easy way, they do not follow trends, it is not about that, I used to go with my father to the tailor who hand-made all of the men's clothes and my mother, in fact my grandmother, too, liked all of the French designers of the time but with a Caribbean twist. Chic with something a little extra...**GF:** *More colour?* Yes...so I started making clothes using the wax fabric, which looks African but is not, it is in fact from Java... **GF:** *In Indonesia?* Yes but now most of the wax fabrics are produced in Holland. So that was the first lesson for me that you don't need to trust appearances so easily. The first thing people say when they see my clothes is: "Ah that is so African," but, maybe it can be so

Holland! (laughs). Really the only truly African fabrics we have are the ones from Burkina Faso. For example in this latest collection there is the Bogolan, a fabric and print created using a mud technique, it is all hand-made. If we can put Haiti, Italy, Mali, Burkina Faso, Japan into an outfit it can all work so easily and I see that mix of fabrics as like real life, the same kind of communication between people can work in real life if we just begin to be less scared. I think people here at least get scared of different textiles, prints and colours. We have always had a lot of African influences in European fashion, in the 60s and 70s there were designers like Yves Saint Laurent, particularly in spring/summer collections so it is nothing new. It is the approach and the point of view that has to change now. It can be a caricature and a parody and has been for a long time to almost look at African culture and say, "Oh, nice, oh cute..." but we don't have the right to do that or say that but if you just take a few minutes to understand those techniques like Bogolan are very sophisticated. It is not easy at all or simple, these are sophisticated techniques, just like the Italian ones, like lace or embroidery that we respect a lot. We



Opposite: Stella in Haiti This page: Clockwise from top left: Stella's Bogolan print for SS15 (photo: Luca Sorrentino), Stella Jean SS14 look book, working in Burkina Faso, warping of yarn for SS14 fabric, Stella & Simonetta Gianfeleci working in Burkina Faso



should also start to respect these African fabrics, because in the fabrics you find the culture of a country. So, I think it is the approach and point of view that needs to change. **Rachael Churchward:** *Absolutely, these artisans are good!* **GF:** *Yes, it is just a perception really...* Yes. It's not just the aesthetic. The world is full of beautiful things, beautiful clothes. There are all those high street stores producing a beautiful collection each week! But it can't be just that anymore, just beautiful clothes, we need something more, something different. **RC:** *There is definitely a story in your clothing Stella. Your show yesterday was a complete styling story. I loved it. The way you mixed your textures and patterns, the girls wearing brogues with that, you were telling a story all the way through it. I loved that fabric, the one made with mud?* Yes, the Bogolan...it's incredible you can find out more about a country than you can if you go on Wikipedia if you just take time to understand their fabrics and the culture behind them. That print is a like a giraffe

skin, each single line is made by hand...**RC:** *By painting?* No, not painting. They use a kind of sand, which is the white lines and then fill it in between with a layer of mud, just mud. **GF:** *And it just soaks in?* Yes. And with that outfit, the fabric was produced in Burkina Faso so it is African but the bag with that outfit was produced in Kenya, with Simone and the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative. I think, though, it doesn't help to try and look ethnic anymore. Some labels use this concept a lot. Ethnic - the idea that because it is African, you are helping people by buying this, even if you don't really like it! No, you have to buy it because you like it. Fashion works like that, it can't be a charity purchase. There is no point in buying fashion for your conscience. **RC:** *I can think of many people back in New Zealand who would love your clothes and buy them because they are great, not because they represent Africa or anything. Grant, I am thinking of Jessica for a start. GF:* *Absolutely. And Thistle...* Africa is a lot more advanced than people think,

they are not kids - they are a centre of culture. I am always impressed with how sophisticated they are, the people we work with and meet. People have the impression that everything happens in villages and yes the techniques come from century-old knowledge but it is not mud huts, there are big buildings and factories and cities. **RC:** *I think for us as New Zealanders, this resonates with us too as there is a strong Polynesian culture there. We are Maori and Pacific Island, there is a strong Asian culture – it is very multi-cultural so there are fabrics which are part of the wider society, like Tapa cloth from the islands...* What is it called? **GF:** *Tapa, it is made from bark, a type of cloth and it is used traditionally in most of the islands: Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue...* Tapa? **RC:** *Yes, T-A-P-A...* I am always looking for new things like this, I will have to research it! **GF:** *There are many things I think you would find interesting in our Polynesian cultures; weaving, weaving is an art form used by almost all Polynesian cultures, there are many different types of dyes and techniques used,*



This page: Stella Jean SS15 and SS14 (both photos: Luca Sorrentino)
Opposite page: Left-right: duaba serwa, Mina Evans and Lisa Folawiyo
aAl photos: Luca Sorrentino



different textiles...RC: I think there are a lot of New Zealanders who would love Stella Jean, your style is quite suited to us! GF: So how did your connection with Simone and ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative happen? Simonetta Gianfelici, I think you met her, yes? She is the talent scout for Altaroma (Rome Fashion Week). Twice I entered into 'Who Is On Next', which is the new designer contest and twice I was rejected (laughs) and the third time I got in and won! Afterward I developed a special relationship with Simonetta and she introduced me to Simone. Before we met she said, "You have to meet this man because he is just about what you do. I was always doing research about other cultures, which is why I am now interested in Tapa, and then I met Simone and it was love at first sight. It was incredible, he started talking about Burkina and then he showed me some fabrics from Burkina. If someone else had shown me those fabrics I would never have imagined that it was from Africa. From that moment on we started this journey and together we have been through Burkina Faso, Mali and the last one was to Haiti so I was able to come back to my own roots (because ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative have a hub there). Yesterday was just a little sample of the whole collection we will be showing at Milan Fashion Week in September. In that collection you will see another point of view of Haiti, which is an island that many people know just for the earthquake or being a really poor island. But, it has its own artistic wave, a style of painting called Naïve. In the show yesterday you would have seen some of those paintings in the last dress. GF: Yes! That

was a beautiful dress...and it absolutely reminded me of the Caribbean. We also made those bracelets there in Haiti, the metal ones and there were other Naïve elements, like the market and then also the Papier-mâché...you see people will talk about Haiti but never talk about this, like the Naïve paintings and yet it is all typical of Haiti. We think about everything in the design and styling, it is so linked to so many cultural aspects. GF: When you show in Milan in September is that the first time you have shown on schedule? No, it is the third time. The first time was with Armani, when Giorgio Armani invited me to show...RC: That's a big honour, to have been invited by him. Of course, and being invited into his temple, the Teatro Armani! GF: Where do you retail Stella, is it worldwide? Yes...RC: Except in New Zealand as far as I know. How about Australia? Yes, in Australia we definitely do, in fact we have had a lot of requests from Australian magazines for samples just in the last month, Vogue Australia, Elle Australia...GF: Great, hopefully we will see you in New Zealand soon! So the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative is it more of a mentoring, guidance thing or are they more like a partner, a business partner? I hope...that they consider me as a business partner because it is not a...trend, for me. It is part of the DNA of the collection, together we are always looking for new surprises, new culture. We are on a constant search together. We can't stop! It is really interesting working with Simone, you wonder what will be the next country for us to work with, you never know. Maybe New Zealand! (laughs) GF: Hell yeah! At this point the ITC Ethical Fashion

Initiative's Chloe Mukai joins the conversation and summarises the partnership. **Chloe Mukai:** I think Stella Jean perfectly encapsulates what the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative is trying to do. When we met her she was already doing this, she was doing this anyway. It was not like we approached another brand and said, "Do you want to produce a collection in Africa," she was already designing with that level of aesthetic. In so many ways, she is the perfect match for us. Stella Jean: I think this is something that could happen in New Zealand. Why can't you take a designer from New Zealand and mix them with a Russian designer or fabric, or Greece? I think the world will change in that direction, we are travelling so much and so easily now, races are melding together much more. I am Haitian-Italian but in a few years there will be many, many more racial mixes, much more than mine...but it doesn't have to be patchwork as I like to say. I don't mix my own cultures; Italian, Haitian or even African as a patchwork, one over the other, they have to communicate in an equal way. Like my fabrics, I treat all of my fabrics in an equal way. That is the change...GF: Fantastic, the fashion world can do with this sort of change...RC: Thanks Stella, see you next time!

Stella Jean Australian stockists: Brisbane - Carmargue Melbourne - Christine Barro

Stella Jean website



AFRICAN BEAT

Altaroma is in its 25th year. The venerable event is more than a fashion week, it fuses high quality artists (this year US street artist DAIN headed up a substantial list), fashion (from Italian couture houses to African designers), launches new talent (Who Is On Next and A View On Talents - both in partnership with Vogue Italia) and pairs artists with designers (A.I - Artisanal Intelligence) among many more events, exhibitions and shows. Beat of Africa was the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative's opportunity to showcase not only the increasingly fabulous work of Stella Jean but three of Africa's rising stars in Nelly Hagan Aboagye (duaba serwa) of Ghana, Nigeria's Lisa Folawiyo and Mina Evans, also of Ghana. A shared vision between all of the designers at Beat of Africa emerged; a colour palette of earthy, yet vivid hues; fantastic prints that often verged on pictorial; and an absolute sense of the infusion of culture into garments, accessorising and even styling. Nelly Hagan Aboagye has designed from an early age when she began resizing her mother's clothes to fit herself and despite studying in the medical field at the University of Ghana in Legon she returned to her first passion, fashion, in 2007 when she launched a jewellery line. She named it duaba serwa (Serwa, the daughter of a tree) and by 2011 had expanded into making dresses and

that year won the British Council's Young Creative Entrepreneur Award. This year's Altaroma marked her 6th international fashion week. Mina Evans graduated from the London Centre for Fashion Studies at Johannesburg Design School in South Africa before working under the premier fashion designer in Ghana, Mr Kofi Ansah to learn her craft. Mina Evans-Ansah describes her style as a love of "fusing luxurious fabrics with Ankara to produce feminine, stylish pieces that are wearable time after time." Ankara is often called African print, was originally a Dutch wax print but now very clearly gives the impression of African culture. Mina Evans also has a range of menswear dress shirts which she says are "carefree and cool with a hint of afrocentricity." In addition to Altaroma, Mina has just shown at Glitz Africa Fashion Week held in Accra, Ghana. Lisa Folawiyo launched her first label, Jewel By Lisa in 2005. Like Mina Evans she had always had a love of Ankara but felt it had been worn and used for ever. She decided to create something new by embellishing the fabric with Swarovski crystals, sequins and beads and Jewel By Lisa was born. More recently the label became the eponymous Lisa Folawiyo and has enjoyed considerable success, not just in Nigeria but further afield. Shows at Lagos Fashion & Design Week have

been joined by Johannesburg, London, Paris, Milan (Vogue talent) and New York Fashion Week (twice). She retails online through Moda Operandi, has collaborated with Blackberry and L'Oreal and has even sold her line in a pop-up store inside Selfridges. All three designers already have solid local and international followings and like Stella Jean are making their mark in many places. The Beat of Africa show itself was fantastic. Held in the Sala Lancisi, a hall inside the magnificent Complesso Monumentale, Santo Spirito in Sassia, a stones throw from the Vatican, attendees included Suzy Menkes - Vogue's International Fashion Editor, Altaroma's Simonetta Gianfelici and movie star Rosario Dawson who is co-designer with Abrima Erwiah of Studio One Eighty Nine. It is pertinent that seven of the ten fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa, these designers are well poised to grow their businesses. The exciting thing is that, with supporters like the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative, they are also growing the chance to incorporate and spread their cultures to the world.

duaba serwa website
Mina Evans website
Lisa Folawiyo website



ROOM TO MOVE

Ghana was also well represented at the third event associated with the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative, **Room Service**. Christie Brown, MO SAÏQUE and Anita Quansah London, are all of Ghanaian descent, although London is now a base for two of them. The event was held on the Sunday night we arrived in Roma and as we had been travelling for 35 hours or so our visit was shortish but the quality of design, fashion, footwear and accessories on show set the tone for the rest of the week. **Christie Brown** is based in Ghana but aims to satisfy the urge of modern women anywhere who “seeks a true taste of Africa.” Founded in 2008 in Accra by creative director **Aisha Obuobi** she named the label after her grandmother Christie Brown, a seamstress that created “rich and vibrant garments.” Like all of the designers we saw in Roma, Aisha infuses large amounts of her own culture into her collections and offers a broad range from a full bespoke gown to statement pieces and innovative accessories. In 2009 she won the Emerging Designer of

the Year award at the inaugural Arise Africa Fashion Week in Johannesburg, has shown at Paris Fashion Week and has been a panelist at the Africa Economic Forum to discuss “African Fashion Going Global.” A banker with a love of footwear, MO SAÏQUE’s **Afua Dabanka** left the financial industry to study at the London College of Fashion and go on to launch this footwear brand in 2011. Known to friends as ‘Mo’ Afua is of Ghanaian and German heritage, the former being present in the rich, bold selection of colours and the latter in the clean Germanic silhouettes in her designs. At London Fashion Week in February this year, former head designer at Michiko Koshino, Jasper Garvida paired Afua’s heels with his AW 14 show and MO SAÏQUE has become popular with celebs and musos, from the Noisettes’ Shingai Shoniwa to Angela Simmons. UK-based jewellery and accessories brand **Anita Quansah London** grew up in Nigeria where her art-loving family were quick to encourage her to make her own creations and experiment with different

techniques. The result is a label rich with fabulous, expressive, one-of-a-kind handmade pieces. Of all the designers we saw Anita’s design perhaps felt the most African due to the handcraft, intricate beading, mix of materials and traditional, almost aristocratic way in which her pieces should be worn. Several of the pieces we were shown were in fact inspired by her grandfather, a chief. **Room Service** offered a glimpse into the vast potential African designers can tap into quite readily - their own culture - much of which is contemporaneously existing and very much alive. *Top left: Christie Brown at Room Service Bottom left: MO SAÏQUE designer Afua Dabanka at Room Service Both images: Gianni Catani, Ariel Gabriel La Rosa, Luca Sorrentino Above: Anita Quansah London Photo: Asiko Fine Art Photography*

[Christie Brown website](#)
[MO SAÏQUE website](#)
[Anita Quansah London website](#)

CHANT OF LIFE

Fendi. All fashion followers know the name, an Italian luxury dynasty started by Edoardo and Adele Fendi in 1925 as a fur and leather shop in Via del Plebiscito in Rome. The ‘baguette,’ sale to LVMH and of course a creative director called Karl Lagerfeld are fashion legend. It is a global yet oh-so-very-Italian brand perhaps best illustrated by Fendi’s 2 million euro investment into upgrading that most famous of Roman places, the Trevi Fountain. “It’s about tying us with a city that makes millions of people dream,” says CEO Pietro Beccari. Yes, the Fendi’s are more Roman than just about anyone. So, when the chance came to visit **Ilaria Venturini Fendi**, youngest daughter of Anna Fendi at her farm on ancient Etruscan land outside of Rome we jumped at the chance. It is there Ilaria and her dedicated crew have based her own upcycled and environmentally smart label, **Carmina Campus**. Almost a decade ago Ilaria turned her back on fashion and her role as a designer at Fendi, leaving much of that to her sister Sylvia and purchased the magical

farm **I Casali Del Pino** with the aim of living a slower, more organic life. Ilaria has always been resourceful and a hater of waste so after several years working on the farm, she began playing around with the concept of upcycling and began creating bags and accessories out of end-of-line scraps from Fendi and elsewhere. Thus was born **Carmina Campus**, which is a Latin citation meaning “Chants of the Fields.” The company makes bags, accessories and even furniture - all with Fendi style, culture and heritage applied - but which uses and reuses materials that others pass over or discard. This is not “ecofashion” more beautifully-made products finished in a Fendi way. **I Casali Del Pino** is a vast farm that includes many different sources of food, including bees. As an apiarist, the University of Rome asked her in 2007 to share some of her knowledge with beekeepers from Cameroon in Africa. They gifted her a hat which she promptly turned over to create a bag and her fashion flame and consequently, fashion journey was reignited. She set up her

initial **Carmina Campus** team and travelled to Cameroon to investigate potential production of the bags, a trip which in turn led to a meeting with Simone Cipriani and the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative. It is a relationship that has blossomed as handsomely as the flowers on show at the annual Floracult festival held on the farm with **Carmina Campus** now employing 70 Kenyans full time. Clearly Ilaria’s vision and willingness to work with the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative has opened the door for the collaborations to follow: Vivienne Westwood, Stella McCartney, Sass & Bide, Karen Walker and Corso Como among them. Like Stella Jean and all of the designers we met in Rome, Ilaria has a strong vision for the future of fashion. A place where fashion can initiate change, provide work and enrich and empower culture and people. Not charity, just work! [Carmina Campus website](#)

