



Sarah Slean takes the enviro-glamour movement out on tour *By Nathalie Atkinson*

“Every time I go on tour there’s a whole area of stress regarding what I’m going to wear and all the criteria it needs to meet,” Sarah Slean explains by phone from Saskatoon during an afternoon break from her current Recession-ista tour. The problem was easily solved when the chanteuse decided to commission dresses from her favourite Canadian designers (including Annie Thompson and Rose-Marie Umetsu) to wear in each

city. Slean gave them no specific design brief, just a few minor or functional requirements but one major stipulation: All the materials used in the garment had to be upcycled, as in reclaimed and repurposed fabric. “The first portion of sustainability, choosing to go solo [on the tour] and buying carbon offsets, that’s the portion of doing right by ourselves and the Earth. It’s the right thing to do,” Slean says. “But it doesn’t really engage the imagination, excite or inspire us. And I feel that’s the way these ideas really catch on in the world. So the idea of the dresses just hit me one day.”

For the designers, it was a test of their ingenuity and, often, wit. Janine Cockburn of label Momiji cut up a sari and a towelling jumper from the ’70s and combined them. “It’s that kind of vintage terrycloth, and at first I thought, ‘Oh God, that’s going to be an unlikely pairing and is it gonna work?’” Slean admits. “But it’s statuesque and I love that it’s casual and really quite beautiful and borderline glamorous.” In a nod to our national obsession, Comrags rounded up the many hockey jerseys outgrown by their children and their design studio staff (well-laundered, of course), cut them up and crafted them into a slinky, sporty patchwork single gown that puts Shania’s Juno Awards parade of kitschy beaded and sequined outfits to shame. Susan Harris, whose stock-in-trade is

upcycled garments, contributed a white and cream variation of her feminine Country dress, made from antique table linens and other soft, timeworn fabrics. “It’s especially beautiful stuff because it has history,” says Harris of the dress’s many layers of both ruffles and meaning. “It’s embroidered sometimes with people’s monogrammed initials or flowers, all aged perfectly, that have been washed, worn and has a history. And it has a very

traditional rural country feel, which I love.” Sunny Fong, who as the reigning *Project Runway Canada* winner is no stranger to challenges, had an edge: Slean has worn his designs on stage in the past, from Vawk, his previous label. “I’ve always loved Sunny because he is so unique and unusual in a really unexpected kind of way,” Slean enthuses. “It’s not just his own style; it’s true originality, which is really hard to do in fashion. He’ll go from heavily laden beading kind of dresses that look so stunning — ’30s filmstar stunning, or then a crazy sporty little pink thing.” For Slean’s tour, Fong wanted stage presence and took inspiration from a mint-condition judge’s robe he found at Toronto’s Black Market. The voluminous black fabric was reworked into a chic strapless cocktail dress with removable bolero jacket and majestic sleeves that have all the drama of a *Law & Order* dénouement. Fong took time out from sourcing and designing his spring 2010 collection to work on Slean’s tour dress on principle. “I see my own pieces as pieces that people won’t throw out,” Fong says. “That’s why I want to make every piece in my collection a special piece. Nothing that’s disposable. When I think of the clothes my mother used to wear before things became mainstream and mass-produced, she had only high quality and good design.”

“The North American ideal is greed and disposability,” Slean concurs. “It’s, ‘Oh I’ll buy this and sure it’s only \$30 and then throw it out next season’ ... We have to think differently about something like clothing. It isn’t as innocent as we think.” Accordingly, Slean’s onstage baubles are recycled stunners by designer Ashley Winnington-Ball, who specializes in found-object jewellery using components such as vintage, lock mechanisms, broken clari-

net fingers and antique keys. Ball happened to be a longtime fan of Slean’s and joined the tour’s ersatz wardrobe department almost by accident after reading about Slean’s recycled wardrobe premise in her email newsletter. “Maybe I was feeling confident that day!” Winnington-Ball recalls. “I emailed her PR and offered to contribute in some way.” Cuffs, rings and bracelets were ruled out because Slean bends over a piano, but several pairs of earrings made the cut, fashioned from washers, links of lamp chain, small rusty keys or sparkling chandelier crystal dangles, as did the designer’s signature layered key necklace (all the components are coated with clear resin to protect the skin and give them a gloss that happens to highlight their patina and texture).

When the tour ends, each unique dress will be auctioned on eBay with proceeds going to the David Suzuki Foundation (visit sarahslean.com for details). Or ... maybe not? “After looking at the pictures from the photo shoot,” Slean laughs, “I’m thinking, ‘Oh my God. I can’t believe I’m giving any of them away!’” ■ Sarah Slean performs tomorrow in Kingston, Ont., at The Grad Club; Thursday in Montreal at Le Savoy; Friday in Wakefield, Que., at the Black Sheep Inn; and June 10 in Toronto at Massey Hall. For more tour dates see sarahslean.com.

National Post