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Classic Confections

Valerie Mayen's Yellowcake line tempts fashion palates with sweet coats and dresses.

Beth Troy



Eric Mull

Valerie Mayen's reaction to her first Cleveland winter was typical, but not for the typical reason.

"My first winter coat was such a boy coat. I thought, *I have to wear this over my awesome clothes? What a buzz kill!*," she says. "If your garment has to be covered, why not have the coat be so beautiful that you wouldn't want to take it off?"

So it's no surprise that Mayen's first line for Yellowcake, her clothing design company committed to "sweet design and classic style," featured five coats of such exquisite detail and vibrant colors that a girl could just pair one of them with opaque tights and call it an outfit.

Mayen dubbed her company Yellowcake because, like the common yet underappreciated dessert, she felt like the underdog in the fashion industry when she first posted her designs on Etsy in October 2007. At the time, she had only five years of fashion illustration and design training. By December 2008, she had 28 orders for her coats, which retail for \$400 to \$650 a pop, even in a plummeting market.

"They are handmade, with lots of details: secret pockets, zippers on the sleeves, back tabs, topstitched sashes and covered buttons," Mayen says. "I send special thank-you cards and wrap the coats in spray-painted paper so that my customers feel like they are getting a gift even though they paid for it."

Her coats may cover every hue of the rainbow and every style from trench to bubble and swing, but she artfully landscapes each with twin-needle topstitching on collars, cuffs, pockets and hems. Her creations even caught the eye of Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, which recently gave Mayen a prestigious \$20,000 grant.

"I never win anything, not even bingo," Mayen says. "Now I can work on branding, making new patterns and putting out a serious collection or a line for a store."

With her growing business, debut at Fashion Week Cleveland 2009 and expansion into dresses, one might think that the prestige and money that accompany such a quick rise in the industry would serve as Mayen's primary motivators. But her passion to do good exceeds her passion to do well — Mayen allots 15 percent of proceeds for charities that alleviate the effects of poverty. She intends to increase this percentage at pace with her business growth.

"It's not about what penthouse you have or the parties you are at," she says. "It's about pitching in with the work of your hands to make someone else's life a little more sustainable."

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