



LARA KHOURY

Words by: Maya Khourchid

A FASHION DESIGNER
WITH A COOL TAKE
ON THE WEATHER

A cross from Le Chef restaurant on Gemmayzeh's main Rue Gourand, lies a non-descript building. There are hardly any

names on the buzzers to identify the tenants, and even armed with meticulous directions it is easy to miss Lara Khoury's atelier on the third floor. But concept-based to the core, this is the way that the new yet hardly nascent designer likes it.

"I wanted it to be an underground place that not everyone can get to," she says sitting behind the desk of her airy loft-style open plan office, workshop and boutique, later adding: "I wanted to give the privilege to the clients, the kind of luxury that they're my clients, my people, my place; I'm very intimate and I always like to build relationships."

Opened in March, the atelier displays her first namesake collection and demonstrates the name she has built for herself. Although only 25, Khoury's resume and reputation are peppered with some of the strongest local names in the international fashion scene.

During her first year at the ESMOD fashion school in 2003 she interned with famed local designer Rabih Keyrouz, then just after her 2006 graduation she went on to work with Elie Saab. After around a year, she came to see that the iconic fashion-house's style was intrinsically different from her own and decided to leave to begin her own brand.

Khoury launched ILK in 2007, and was picked up as part of the inaugural collection of the Starch boutique - created by her former mentor Keyrouz and dedicated to cultivating young local designers. After three seasons at the trendy Saifi outlet, it was again time for a change.

"ILK was more of an experimental thing. I was really discovering my identity and fashion when I finally found myself, I decided to change the name and go for Lara Khoury," she explains.

To design her workspace and atelier she collaborated with yet another well-known name in the regional arts scene - Cynthia Zaven, art director of Nadine Labaki's critically acclaimed film *Caramel*.

Together, they designed the loft to channel an affection and perception of Beirut. The parquet floors are partly composed of traditional doors and her designs are displayed on hangers that can be moved to and from several dangling chains.

"In this space everything moves and goes up and down and everything changes. And this change is compared to the life of Lebanese in Beirut and how life changes every day," she explains.

The concept-based layout is but a prelude to the studied thought processes that precede her first collection.

"I wanted to have a message in my collections because that is the only way I could really express myself and I talked about how global warming changes the life of many people without them even noticing it getting hotter and hotter and needing to wear things that are lighter," she said.

As a result her Winter 2010 collection is a study of applying summer to the colder months. Where thicker winter materials such as wool are used, the designs tend towards thigh-high hemlines and the reverse is present as well; summer fabrics applied to traditional winter styles such as jackets.

More interested in the architecture and volume of garments than color, her prototypes come in a solely neutral palette; whites, blacks, grays and beiges abound. But the designer concedes that well-thought out designs do not necessarily indicate wearability or forecast sales. In fact, most of her income comes from customized designs as per clients' requests. At the back of her workspace hangs a near perfect illustration: the ankle length dress with lace appliqués was originally designed in beige, this version has instead been tinted a deep blue as per the whims of a client.

"Fifty percent is not wearable. I work conceptually. I think of what I want to create," she explains. The pieces that do not sell well are archived, a thought that hardly depresses Khalil. Quite the contrary: "The best pieces ever become archives - the best pieces ever," she says with a smile.

