

Bernice King Talks Civil Rights

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Antoinette King at P. Valentine Photo by Alex Jones

A Makeover for Retail Fashion

By Katrice L. Mines

WHAT'S "HOT" in the fashion industry changes from one season to the next. But, the T-Shirt has been a staple since its introduction to the American wardrobe in the early 1900s — and it just got another makeover. Karma Designs has taken the tee from basic to high fashion with an urban feel.

Owned and operated by Antoinette King and Eduard Davis, Karma Designs introduced their version of "the perfect couture T-Shirt" on the sales floors of

Macy's in New York in November, and is in negotiations to launch the line in the company's South division.

But, the popularity of their first line, as a team, didn't begin with department store chain. Since the collection's launch just under two years ago, the two fashion industry veterans have parlayed their trendy designs into more than 70 boutiques around the country. Described by them as "innovative collection of T-shirts," the line was a derivative of their variant fashion backgrounds.

"We were constantly being told that we should combine his background as a designer and mine as a model to create a fashionable T-Shirt collection," King says. "But, I wasn't even a fan of T-shirts. I always thought they were just for bumming around until others (with design backgrounds) started to tell me that I could

choose exactly what I wanted – the fabrics and all – and make it something I would love to wear any time.”

The objective of Karma Designs, King says, is to give women clothing that makes them feel good about whom they are as individuals.

“I pay attention to what (women) go through in society as far as the focus on our bodies,” she reveals. “Conceptualizing this line has made me more observant.”

Inspired by King’s zest and charisma, Davis developed the form-fitting shirts with unique color combinations, luxuriously comfortable fabrics and strategically placed rust and distressing — a treatment used to give fabrics a worn, not-so-new look. The cotton poly fabric is also put through an especially elaborate “burnout” process, essentially leaving the material see-through. King and Davis launched their collection in July 2005, approaching Macy’s South about distribution early-on, but were put on hold by the chain.

Gail Nutt, corporate director of supplier diversity-retail for Federated Department Stores — the parent company of Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s, looked at the Karma collection and thought it interesting, “but felt that it needed little more development and wanted to get a sense of how customers would respond.”

“We became aware of her line when she was in the very early stages and since then it has expanded, which is one of the things we had commented to,” Nutt explains. “So, when I was in Las Vegas in August, I shopped the line again, and we made an order for our New York stores. We will test it there and based on the results expand into other markets sometime in the near future.”

While Karma T-Shirts were an instant success with Atlanta-area boutiques, it was the response their line received at Project Show — Las Vegas, an annual trade show for new designers to promote their collections, that gave them an even more significant advance.

In fact, Sherlita Patton, Co-owner of the P. Valentine boutique in Atlanta, ordered a selection of Karma tees for the opening of her shop last year, and has three in her own closet. The shirts, which retail from \$80 to \$150, are designed in five styles — tank tops, short-sleeved T-shirts, long-sleeved T-shirts, thermals and

a variation called the ringer.

“We thought that their shirts were cute and we liked the quality and the feel of the material,” Patton contends. “Our customers like the shirts because they have a nice fit. And I believe the sales have been good because people see them in ads and on television. Atlanta is one of those cities where if people see you with it on; they want it.”

King recalls, “I was just getting the hang of things with the boutiques and managing our inventory with them, when I realized that getting our line into department stores would be a whole other ballpark. With boutiques, you may be doing a \$2,000 order, while department stores may have a \$30,000 order every two to three months.”

Understanding the opportunity presented by Karma’s success with boutiques and newfound favor with Macy’s through its supplier diversity initiative, King and Eduard have already begun to expand the line to include accessories and an upcoming men’s collection. With showrooms in Dallas, Texas and Los Angeles, where everything is manufactured and printed, the partners are involved in every facet of their company from maintaining weekly contact with each retailer to King lending her face to the print-ad campaign.

“It’s difficult to get your product into stores, as a minority retailer, but the challenge motivates me to go out and give the effort 200 percent,” King reveals. “I believe that it helps our line and reputation for stores to know that they have direct contact with the owners.”

Karma shirts line the shelves of trendy shops in Buckhead, Virginia Highlands, Mid-town, Little Five Points and Atlantic Station, curtailed to one store per area of the city as a means of keeping the line exclusive, King explains.

“We want our shirts to be everywhere but we also want to keep them spread out so that the stores can continue to sell the product at certain price points,” she says.

Nutt, who has closely monitored the company’s evolution, believes that the product’s potential to do well is promising.

“They offer affordable fashion and it’s a brand of tops that compliments our existing assortment but also brings something different,” she says. “The use of screens and various treatments is unique, and it’s something that doesn’t just appeal to a junior customer but also to the contemporary missy customer who could be 25, 35 or 55 years old.”



Karma T-Shirts are retailed in the following boutiques:

Bill Hallman
792 N. Highland Avenue NE
Atlanta, GA 30306

BluPrint
1146 Euclid Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30307

P. Valentine
572 Edgewood Avenue
Suite 115
Atlanta, GA 30312

Balboa Boutique
Gwinnett Place Mall
2100 Pleasant Hill Road
Duluth, GA 30096

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Specialty: Manages design and manufacturing of product