



Going ape for chic

Over ginseng tea and some classic hip-hop grooves, fashion designer Shaldon Kopman speaks to **Percy Mabandu** about finding personal transformation in Ethiopia and dressing Hollywood A-listers

It's sundowner hour in the Joburg inner-city and the infamous traffic is already taking its serpentine shape to meander on to out-flowing highways and byways. Screeching tyres, along with the hooting cars provide the din that precedes the night time lull of the city.

Shaldon Kopman, one of South Africa's fashion industry men, has elected to wait out the madness before charting his course home. Scheduling the interview at this hour makes for a perfect prelude to that trip.

He sits enthroned on his office chair surrounded by pictures of models clad in his designs and some of his favourite creations.

There are also the now iconic images of Hollywood superstar Samuel L Jackson wearing Kopman's gear. The pictures placed Kopman's brand on the cover of GQ SA.

It's just about enough hype and shine to say the married father of two has arrived, if ever there was any wonder.

His fashion brand is named Naked Ape. He says he came across the similarly titled book by zoologist and ethologist Desmond Morris and was fascinated.

The book looks at humans as a species and compares them to other animals.

Inspired by what he read, Kopman's project focused on celebrating humanity's capacity and taste for a heightened stylishness and culture that defines the substance separating humans from other primates.

"When I started out with this label, I just wanted to make beautiful clothes. So we adopted this concept of the efficiency of street tailoring. I didn't see what the cost of doing this thing would mean and this is a very expensive



Models show off Naked Ape designs on the catwalk

business to be in," he says.

Kopman then paints a picture of how being in the bespoke business comes with being negatively perceived as too expensive. This is wrong because businesses like Naked Ape are generally compared to department store brands that have a disproportionately large share of the market and big marketing budgets. This means Naked Ape et al have to be commercially creative to survive.

Kopman then cautions with a pause: "But you have to understand, there's nothing cheap about what we do. We make luxury clothes for sophisticated men."

The art, he explains, involves capturing the fine finishing and finesse of tailoring, and an understanding of the slick edge of the streets. To illuminate this dichotomous balance, Kopman refers me to his company's old slogan: "We used to say that we make fine attire for a suit and street savvy gentleman."

He then gets up and grabs one of the leather jackets from the hanger. He needs a prop to drive his point home. "This one is called Method-Man," he says.

The piece has the olive green of the Irish army as a base colour. It is embellished and lined with complex patterned nylon and zippers that help the wearer peel some panels away as they wish. The garment is distinguished by a slick versatility that allows it to be

adaptable to different times of the day or style preferences.

For a broad vision of the idea, he points to more pictures on the wall. Here, the jacket is pictured on the ramp alongside others named after his favourite rap stars, mostly members of the Wu-Tang Clan, the supergroup from New York's Staten Island. There's one named after Ghostface Killah, Ol' Dirty Bastard and even RZA.

Kopman improvises a quick modelling session using Tumi, one of his trusted employees, at the surprisingly small establishment. There's about four other people working here, but the skills complement is broad enough to get the job done. Kopman calls it maximised collaboration. They all double up as models, tailors, designers and even admin staff as the need requires.

As soon as Tumi goes back to his chores, we return to our tea and chat. Kopman has offered me some ginseng leaves and a pot of boiling water to brew my serving. There's hemp incense in the air. The room is mellow and the mood is appropriately reflective. The traffic noises have duly ebbed and the soundtrack is De la Soul's Stakes is High.

The chatty designer sinks into his chair again, looking something of a fashion savvy, modern Dinka man from the southern valleys of Ethiopia or Sudan.

He wears an earth-toned Versace scarf that matches his Kangol cap.

The scarf wraps neatly around his body-hugging vest. It's the same one worn by Jackson in one of the pictures on the wall.

The Hollywood A-lister was in South Africa to work on a Japanese anime movie titled Kite. It's due for release next year. The fateful crossing of paths has put a new wind under Kopman's wings. He speaks of it with a mixture of gratitude and a new self-assuredness in his talents.

Kopman explains: "Jackson's people were downstairs at the Benjamin Woollens wholesalers to buy some fabrics to use as wardrobe on the film. They came up to see what we were doing and they asked if they could use our showroom for him to do some fittings. He hated what they were showing him and as he wandered into our studio, he saw some of our stuff and he loved it. That's the long story made short."

The coup counts as a reward to his insistence on being unique. He puts it quite neatly: "The beauty of being in the bespoke business is also being in a position to produce something unique off what you see in a magazine, on a mannequin or on the ramp."

But there's more to it.

The underlying concept of the clothes that won Jackson's approval mark a new turn in Kopman's creative stream. He was recently in Ethiopia, a trip he describes as life changing.

He says: "I came back and I just felt a need to clean up my life. I quit smoking and started to get better organised in everything I do."

Kopman speaks of holistic approaches to life and says things like: "If you take care of yourself on the inside, you should also take care of yourself on the outside."

The culture and spiritual flavour of Ethiopia also seeps into his new designs with items like the iconic Habesha turbans and stylised optic crosses. It all melts into an elite style.

About the future, Kopman says the plan is to inject the same ethos into a ready-to-wear range that will be in a more accessible commercial space. But for now he insists they are happy with the hustle as it stands.

Shaldon Kopman is the founder of fashion brand Naked Ape
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