

A movement, not a moment: Indigenous design in the spotlight at Australian Fashion Week

After decades of underrepresentation and appropriation, First Nations fashion designers and creatives finally hit the runway



The First Nations Fashion + Design runway show made history, with only First Nations talent on the catwalk, behind the scenes and making the clothes.

by Alyx Gorman
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Grace Lillian Lee is used to standing ovations; Australian Fashion week is not. On Wednesday 2 June, the designer and creative director of First Nations Fashion and Design, along with her CEO and fellow designer Teagan Cowlshaw, made history with the first runway show featuring only First Nations talent: on the catwalk, making the clothes, and behind the scenes.

First Nations Fashion and Design is a not-for-profit Indigenous corporation aimed at supporting the growth of the Indigenous fashion industry, with self-determination at the heart of their mission. Lee, who has ties to Torres Strait which she explores through her work, and Cowlshaw, who has kinship with Nyikina people and paternal connections with Bardi and Nyul Nyul people, founded the organisation in 2020. They have been running FNFD on a voluntary basis, close to full time, ever since, and both say the project has been years in the making.

Lee has over a decade of experience in curating fashion performances, at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and in communities around the country. At these events an egalitarian, celebratory atmosphere is par for the course. “This is Grace’s signature,” says Cowlshaw. “Grace is not known for an up and down runway. You’re coming for an experience, you’re coming for a performance ... what she creates on the stage is magic.”

That magic, which included three live musical performances (three more than is typical at an Australian fashion show), two dancers, five artists, 21 models and seven designers moved several seasoned industry professionals both to tears and to their feet at the show’s climax.



A model wears a gown by Paul McCann, commissioned for the Eucalyptusdom exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, opening 1 July.



A model walks the runway in a design by Sown In Time, a Cairns-based label, designed by Lynelle Flinders during the First Nations Fashion and Design show



Charlee Fraser, one of the country's top models, who walked exclusively for First Nations Fashion and Design, wearing Nungala Creative designed by Jessica Johnson.

As Electric Fields performed a cover of From Little Things Big Things Grow, the models and dancers stood, each with one hand outstretched, and allowed a fistful of sand to trickle through their fingers. It was an homage to the historic moment in 1975 when then prime minister Gough Whitlam poured sand into the hand of activist and Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari.

“This is about the movement of giving our land back to its rightful owners,” Lee said of the gesture. This, too, is atypical for a fashion show.



A model wears a gown by Brianna Enoch, commissioned for the Eucalyptusdom exhibition.

Prior to 2021, Indigenous representation at Australian Fashion week was rare, beyond a handful of models. This year at least 12 designers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds showed across two group runway shows and one student showcase; the event also hosted a Welcome to Country to open the week, and multiple panel discussions.



Teagan Cowlshaw and Grace Lillian Lee in the foreground, celebrating after the show.

Taryn Williams, founder of talent booking platform the Right Fit, says that demand for First Nations modelling talent has also exploded. “During 2020 we saw a ten-fold

increase in jobs posted seeking First Nations people for print, TVCs [television commercials] and fashion,” she says.

Models wearing Ngali, designed by Denni Fransisco, backstage.



Williams attributes much of this increase to the movement for black lives. “I think it sparked a dialogue with brands and marketers that potentially hadn’t happened before,” she says. Williams says the “two-fold” combination of unprecedented internal conversations, and a broader societal shift that has led to audiences holding brands to account via social media, “makes me hopeful that it isn’t just a trend”.

That hope was spelled out at First Nations Fashion and Design’s show too: the step and repeat (the backdrop against which show attendees pose for photographs) was stamped with the words “This is not a moment. This is a movement”.

On 28 May, Mexico’s culture ministry released a statement accusing fast fashion brands Zara and Anthropologie of cultural appropriation. At Australian Fashion Week, with the spotlight finally shining on Australia’s first design traditions, the spectre of appropriation was not far from designers’ minds.



Designers Liandra Gaykamangu (Liandra Swim), Natalie Cunningham (Native Swim), Nancy Pattison (Indii Swimwear), Denni Francisco (Ngali), Julie Shaw (Maara Collective) and Amanda Healy (Kirrikin) pose with models after the Indigenous Fashion Projects show.

“For a long time we’ve been associated with \$4.99 boomerangs – no more please,” says Amanda Healy of Kirrikin, who showed as part of the Indigenous Fashion Projects runway on 3 June. Healy, a Wonnarua woman who lives in Western Australia, creates elegant resort wear featuring prints by contemporary Indigenous artists. “We’re high end, our artwork is amazing, it is an ancient, beautiful culture that has such depth.”

Denni Francisco of Ngali, who also showed as part of the IFP runway, said, “we’re always guarding against that as much as we possibly can, because there is so much cultural appropriation that does take place”.



- *A model walks the runway in a design by Maara Collective, by Julie Shaw.*



A model walks the runway in a design by Maara Collective



model Samantha Harris walks the runway in a design by Kirrikin.

“To be honest, it’s already happened to us once,” Fransisco said. “All we can do ... is to have as much transparency as possible around authentic Indigenous design and

Indigenous product,” she suggested, adding that a certification system, similar to “Australian Made” labelling, could help combat the issue. The responsibility falls on shoppers too, she says, hoping “that conscious consumers will have that respect”.

Indigenous Fashion Projects is a program from Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation, with explicitly commercial aims. This showed in their presentation: a more straightforward runway experience where the emphasis was firmly on the clothes. The showcase was developed in partnership with retailer David Jones, which paired six already-established Indigenous designers with the founders of Australian brands stocked at David Jones, in order to facilitate the growth of their businesses.

Natalie Cunningham, the owner and director of Native Swimwear Australia, who showed a colourful collection of swim, jewellery and activewear – all made with recycled marine plastics – has been running her business since 2006. Although she has previously shown at New York Fashion Week, she likened the IFP program to “being given the keys” to expand into wholesaling. “In 15 years I’ve never had an opportunity like this.”

While she was quick to emphasise that not all of the designers included in IFP were interested in wholesaling, Brigid Veals, general manager of womenswear at David Jones, said after the show, “absolutely if the designers are interested in selling wholesale and working with David Jones, there’s no reason we wouldn’t be doing that”.



Natalie Cunningham speaking to the media backstage after the show.

Speaking at a panel discussion about the growth of the First Nations fashion sector on Thursday, model and First Nations Fashion and Design mentor Nathan McGuire said that if the Australian fashion industry wanted to progress in its inclusion of First Nations talent, consistency was vital. He emphasised the need for businesses to develop reconciliation action plans, and to allow First Nations creatives to “have those moments of autonomy”.

On the same panel, Lee confessed she had faced skepticism about the way First Nations Fashion and Design’s runway would be presented. “It wasn’t easy, but for that to change people need to believe in us as creatives,” she said. “I really hope yesterday proved that point”.