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NO FFIXXED ADDRESS

Fiona Lau and Kain Picken, the imaginative couple behind FFIXXED STUDIOS, take an approach to fashion that's animated less by fantasy than it is by the material of the everyday.

By Mariam Arcilla



Courtesy FFIXXED STUDIOS

Fiona Lau and Kain Picken thrive on fluidity. The Australian duo, who refuse to obey fixed ideas, locations or aesthetics, have grown FFIXXED STUDIOS from a niche project into a fashion, art and design label that draws on Picken's background as an artist and Lau's fashion design nous. The designers shy away from trends and traditions. Instead, they combine organic fibers with unconventional materials and processes to create layered and gender-interchangeable apparel that complements the march of modern life.

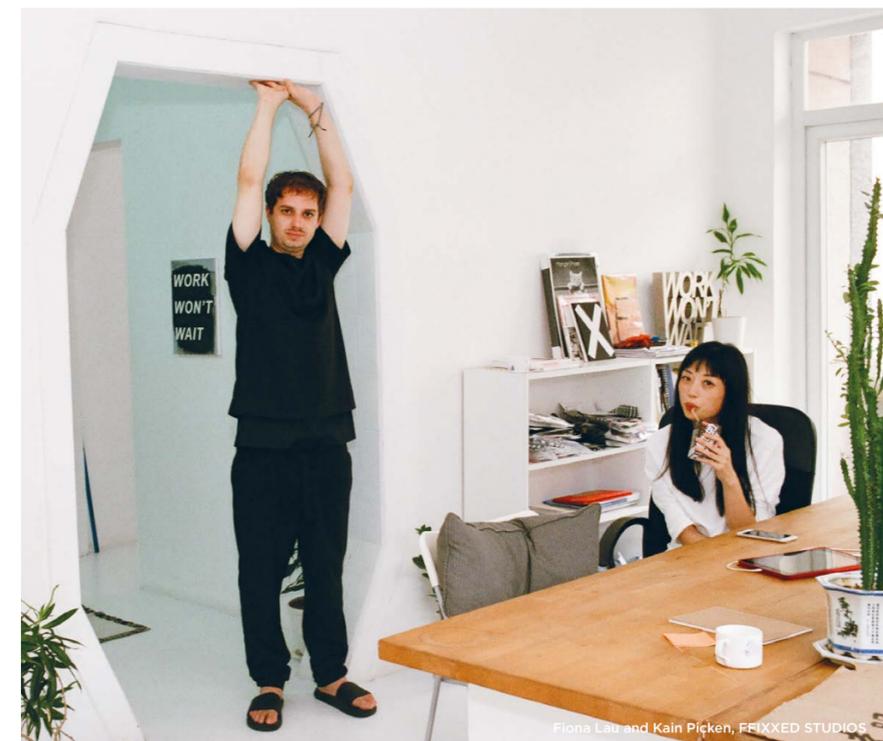
"We don't look to fashion as a form of escapism or fantasy, or the creation of another world," Picken tells me via phone from their Shenzhen studio. "We treat fashion as an extension of our lifestyle, using what we see around us as a starting point for channeling ideas."

Inspired by the crossovers between work, life and travel, Lau and Picken produce readymade dresses, pants, turtlenecks and blazers that appear as moving sculpture for the body. Statement pieces are emblazoned with mantras like 'Work From Home' and 'Work Won't Wait', which stem from real conversations they have had with friends.

"We like to use fashion as a tool to examine the production and consumption of contemporary culture," Picken says. "There are these extreme poles in fashion where you see crazy, inaccessible luxury on one end, and cheap fashion at the other end. We want our label to sit in the middle space, where there is integrity in design and production, but also accessibility."

The pair are currently based in an integrated living and working space at the foot of Shenzhen's Wutong Mountain, enabling them to prototype designs and manage administrative tasks in-house while being close to local garment manufacturers. While Shenzhen has a reputation for being the world's main hub for mass production, the area also offers these sustainability-driven, slow fashion designers grassroots access to highly-skilled labourers and quality textiles. "Being close to the creation point gives us better control over working conditions and design outcomes," Picken explains. "In a way, we're the antithesis of throw-away fast fashion because we know the people who fabricate our clothes, and our designs are versatile enough to be adapted into many wardrobes and styles."

I ask the duo about the origin of the label's name and unusual typography. Lau says that this moniker is an amalgam of her first name and a series of Picken's paintings, which incorporated XX marks. It's also a play on the word 'fixed', she says, "because our creative process is the opposite of that."



Fiona Lau and Kain Picken, FFIXXED STUDIOS

True to form, they have trialed uppercase and lowercase versions, and have presently settled for FFIXXED — all caps — "because it looks good aesthetically," Lau claims, "and becomes distinguishable when people search for us online." Picken adds: "Interestingly, when magazines cover us, they seem to have their own interpretation on how to spell our label, which kind of goes with our idea of not having a fixed identity."

Picken and Lau first met in their hometown of Melbourne, and decided in 2008 to move to Berlin so Lau could undertake a fashion internship. It was there that the real-life couple established FFIXXED to allow them to maneuver outside their solo art and fashion practices. The intention of the brand, Picken says, was to "tap into that gap in the market for people who seemed bored with fast fashion, and who wanted a deeper engagement with what they bought and wore, and how they wore it."

Berlin's affordable living costs gave the designers the creative and physical space needed to experiment with the label, while stints in New York and Hong Kong provided them with the means to transition from a conceptual project into a fully-fledged business. "Those cities had tiny studios," recalls Picken, "so we spent most of the time learning how to gain access to the industry and building resources — it was a valuable time." As the label's popularity grew in Asia, the pair decided in 2010 to expand to a four-level property in Wutong Village, dividing each floor into areas for dispatch, storage, sewing and administration, with living quarters at the top.

"Every studio served its purpose at different stages of our career," Lau claims. "Right now in Wutong, we have a staff of 17, including patternmakers and sewers, so the relationship between manufacturer and consumer is strong. Also, to live on the rural outskirts of China, and be surrounded by lychee forests and honey farms, gives us a nice contrast to the hectic nature of Hong Kong, which we visit often."

Lau is fluent in basic Cantonese, the main dialect in Wutong, which makes it easy to connect with local manufacturers. "Kain does not speak any Chinese, but he somehow gets by using a lot of body language when communicating with the villagers," she adds with a laugh.

FFIXXED is currently stocked in over 100 outlets across four countries, including Opening Ceremony in New York, and Lane Crawford in Shanghai and Hong Kong. The duo often travel to source fabrics and meet with stockists, finessing ideas on the go.

FFIXXED STUDIOS
Ready To Wear Fall
Winter, 2016, Paris

Courtesy FFIXXED
STUDIOS





Opposite
Top row
FFIXXED STUDIOS
Ready To Wear
Spring Summer, 2016,
Hong Kong

Bottom row
FFIXXED STUDIOS
Ready To Wear Fall
Winter, 2016, Paris

Courtesy FFIXXED
STUDIOS



After riding in countless cabs, the designers were compelled to transform therapeutic car seat cushions into the wooden-bead encrusted pieces *Massager Vest* and *Reflexology Sandals*. For Economy Class, a 2013 exhibition and fashion range, they repurposed commercial airline passenger blankets into chunky blazers, highlighting both the strong airline branding design and the utilitarian function served by the fabric's fire-retardant acrylic. "It turned out that the factories that produced those blankets were located near Shenzhen," Lau reveals. "So we bought the fabric directly from the manufacturers to rework into new pieces."

The designers spend countless hours in-house, so it's not surprising to see domestic environments seep into their creative process. "We like incorporating the textures you find in a home into our design methods," Lau says. "For our AW16 collection, we constructed custom fabrics out of leftover Japanese wool scraps, and we also make digital weaves and boil pattern-knitted wool to give our materials a carpet-like feel. There's a lot of tweaking and adjusting, in the same way we swing between art and fashion projects, though we're focusing on fashion now because of the demand."

The couple hit a career milestone when FFIXXED won the Asia finalist award at the 2013/2014 International Woolmark Prize for designing a wool jacquard and felt dress inspired by a domestic rolled-up rug. This accolade gave them the financial independence to re-evaluate their brand within the global fashion landscape.

"Before the Woolmark Prize came around, we thought of FFIXXED as this niche label that only art and architecture magazines were interested in writing about," Picken reveals. "After this exposure, we were interviewed by *Vogue* for the first time, and soon we started noticing a shift in the language being used to describe our label. We realised that our clothes were appealing to a wider fashion audience who were searching for a new alternative."

Their recent SS17 collection, featuring textural geometries splashed with periwinkle, chartreuse and lemony hues, attracted acclaim at Shanghai Fashion Week, further cementing the brand as one to watch in the lucrative Asian fashion circuit.

So what's next for a label that always seems to be on the move? "We have our eyes set on Shanghai next," Lau divulges. "There's some great energy there!" But for now, they are heads down in future-planning mode as they envision their next range and hunt for a dedicated retail space, location unknown.

"After we sort all of that out," Lau sighs. "Kain and I want to take a holiday far away, to a new place that has absolutely nothing to do with work!" After a brief pause, she laughs. "Actually, we do have a poor track record of keeping life and work separate." ▼

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"WE LIKE TO USE FASHION AS A TOOL TO EXAMINE THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE."