ERL and Winnie New York, the American brands that won the Karl Lagerfeld Prize

By Triana Alonso  -  June 5, 2022

The LVMH Prize had a few surprises in store on Thursday, June 2. A few minutes before announcing this year's winner (British designer Steven Stokey Daley), Delphine Arnault gave the floor to Olympic medalist Eileen Gu. The professional skier, tasked with awarding the Karl Lagerfeld Prize, shocked those present at the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris by announcing that "due to the exceptional quality of the competition" the award would go to not only one, but two of the finalists: founder of the brand ERL, Eli Russell Linnetz and Idris Balogun of Winnie New York.

Renamed the Karl Lagerfeld Prize in 2019, in honor of the iconic German designer’s tenure as a juror for the LVMH Prize over the years, the award will grant the two American-born designers a one-year mentorship program within the French luxury group as well as €150,000. The award previously known as the Special prize has helped boost the careers of designers and brands such as Hood by Air, Jacquemus, Vejas, and Rokh.

"Karl Lagerfeld is definitely one of my idols and a fashion legend. To win an award named after him is very exciting," Linnetz confessed when speaking to FashionNetwork.com, just after receiving the award which he dedicated to the jury, the Arnaults and his own family. "ERL was created as an escape, a place to create without
asking myself too many questions, a world full of experimentation and risk-taking. But I never expected anyone to wear my clothes," beamed the Venice Beach-based designer, who draws much of his inspiration from his homeland.

The 31-year-old fashion designer, who launched his first complete menswear collection in January 2020, described his style as "relaxed and not always too serious, but with a good story to tell". His signature label is also defined by "the colorful and the California vibe," which permeate simple, yet sultry interpretations of American basics delivered as menswear, womenswear and genderless collections. "I've never seen myself as part of the fashion industry. Narrative design is my true passion," said the American creative, a self-confessed lover of photography who studied screenwriting in college.

The brand already noticed by Kim Jones

Linnetz designs have so far not only seduced the LVMH Prize jury, but have already earned him a look from the Fall 2021 collection in the 'In America: A Lexicon of Fashion' exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Dior Men's creative director Kim Jones, who also served on the jury, catapulted him into the spotlight last May. A creative alliance between Linnetz and Jones was born out of an informal conversation via Instagram. The British
designer, known for his passion for collaborations, chose him to be a surprise guest at Dior's latest runway show in Los Angeles. The Spring 2023 menswear show presented the fruit of the collaboration between the two designers: a maximalist capsule collection filled with vivid colors.

As for the future of his brand, which is now available in 85 stores around the world, Linnetz stated how he is planning to expand into new product categories and continue growing his studio.

"Every handcrafted garment made at the studio in Venice is created from repurposed materials. In the future, I would also like to build my own local factory where everything can be manufactured and sold," he explained about the importance of upcycling in his brand's DNA. In addition, the creative is considering opening his own store in Paris in the near future. "It's normal - after all, I've traveled to this city 12 times this year!" he quipped.
The 29-year-old American Balogun, the man behind Winnie New York, already boasts an impressive track record. The Brooklyn-based designer of Nigerian descent graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology and trained at London’s bespoke tailoring street Savile Row before joining the ranks of Burberry, where he worked under Christopher Bailey and oversaw menswear, and then moved to Tom Ford’s made-to-measure department. Balogun went on to present his own brand’s first collection in February 2020 in Paris.

His brand’s premium positioning and solid trajectory earned him the well-deserved recognition of a jury composed of some of the leading names in men’s fashion, such as Silvia Venturini Fendi, Nigo, and the aforementioned Jones.

"It has been an incredible journey and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of this platform," said the designer, dedicating the award to his mother, siblings and friends. In fact, his brand’s roots were also built on family ties.

"I created the brand in tribute to the memory of my grandmother, nothing could make me happier than for her name to be next to Karl Lagerfeld’s," explained Balogun emotionally to FashionNetwork.com, detailing how his brand’s identity represents "luxury in its purest form," opting for classic techniques, craftsmanship, sustainability.
Brand’s identity represents “luxury in its purest form”, opting for classic techniques, craftsmanship, sustainability, tailoring and exquisite fabrics.

Winnie New York’s garments are made of natural fibers such as cotton, linen and wool, in order to "facilitate their recycling", and its designer encourages the use of recycled materials and leftover stock in his collections. This sustainable approach can be further explored thanks to the credit received by each winner for purchasing fabrics at Nona Source, LVMH's online resale platform of deadstock fabrics from its fashion and leather goods brands.

“I had certain respect, I find it very difficult to speak in public and I did not know what to expect when presenting my brand to the jury, but they made us feel very comfortable and it has been an experience from which I have learned a lot," described the designer about the feedback received, detailing that the main questions put forth focused on his brand’s approach, the prospects for his business and its growth potential. These opinions were shared by the remaining 7 finalists of the 2022 edition.

The financial reward of €150,000 will help Balogun recruit employees, as he currently is the only member of his team, expand his brand's product portfolio and develop its online and direct-to-consumer business. In addition, Balogun is finalizing the details of Winnie New York’s upcoming presentation, which is scheduled to take place in Paris on the first day of Fashion Week Men's, June 22.