

# MI LEGGETT

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE REBRANDED

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ART EDITOR



This Page:  
Model Fabe shot by **Satchel Lee** for  
the collapse convulse 2021.

Facing Page:  
Model **YEN SEN** shot by **Jasper**  
**Soloff**. Queer the Beach 2018.

Fashion designer, MI Leggett [pronounced M.I.] could teach you a thing or two about composting. Yes, you heard me correctly... composting. Now, before you eco-enthusiasts get excited, don't expect a lesson anytime soon. Why? Because this New York-based non-binary artist and former food justice advocate, has something more important in the works - they are too busy pioneering a new movement in fashion.

If you are not familiar with MI's label **Official Rebrand**, then pay attention. Official Rebrand is a gender fluid collection that challenges the boundaries between art and fashion by transforming discarded garments and unwanted materials into unique items of clothing. Through their unconventional design process, MI has devised a way to combat climate change head-on, simply by not contributing to it. MI refers

to this process, which involves altering gender normative silhouettes and adding their own hand-painted text and artwork, as "rebranding", and the humble word is packed with revolutionary intention. In addition to addressing the lack of gender fluid fashion that currently exists in the market, MI's process equally defines an anti-waste alternative to today's fashion industry model, which has earned its title as the third largest industrial polluter in the world.

Have I sparked your interest? Good! You're not the only one. In the 5 years since its inception, Official Rebrand has transformed fluid, upcycled fashion into a cool, sexy, and affirming movement that has graced the runways of New York and Berlin Fashion Week, was featured in the New Art Dealers Alliance, adorned by LGBTQ celebrities such as Sara

Ramirez and Billy Porter, and appeared in The New York Times, Teen Vogue, Vogue Italia, Paper, and i-D, to name a few. With its sustainable garments that advertise thought-provoking statements, such as, "Angels Have No Gender But Lots Of Sex", "Pride Began With An Uprising" and "God Is Trans", Official Rebrand encourages people to think, ask and engage. Even the label's logo OR?! warrants your attention by empowering you to both raise questions and enthusiastically act upon those questions, and MI herself is leading by example.

IRK Magazine met with MI Leggett for an inside conversation on the impact that their collection is making, along with MI's desire to build "...a movement for the changes we need to see in the world that allows people to participate in whatever capacity they can." Even through our socially distanced Zoom encounter, MI's enthusiasm to forge a new vernacular in the fashion industry proved to be infectious.

**IRK:** Our current issue is inspired by people like yourself, who are making an impact on society today. Could you begin by sharing with us the pivotal experiences that have inspired you to make a difference within your own practice?

**MI:** Yes! My family is very thrifty in using things until they are totally obsolete or broken, and growing up I adopted this



natural proclivity to repurposing. From a really young age, even before I knew what recycling was or the environmental impact of the massive amounts of waste that we produce, I was drawn to do something with discarded materials, like newspapers or my grandmother's old skirts that were too raggedy to wear.

Years later, I was working for a fashion designer in Berlin, and in Berlin there is this huge culture of people just putting clothes that they no longer want on the street. I found a lot of clothes that way. There was also an amazing thrift culture where you could buy a huge pile of clothes for 1 Euro a piece. So, I had a lot of access to cheap clothing and I didn't have to feel precious about altering it. I started painting on clothes to give them a whole new life. I also wear my clothes pretty down. I'm a very adventurous person [smiling]. I spill things and I get dirty, so my clothes sometimes get damaged. I began painting over the stains, which was a really good way for me to keep something going.

**IRK:** And used clothing is cheaper than canvas.

**MI:** Exactly! And also as a young artist, I was rarely able to sell two-dimensional art. But people, especially young people, are more likely to buy a t-shirt than a painting. I love art so much, but the art world is not really the most welcoming. It's not trying



to communicate to everyone, whereas clothing is a necessity and therefore marketed to everyone. As a basic need, it's much more inclusive.

**IRK:** So where did your interest in food justice and sustainable agriculture fit into this story and how does it inform upcycled, gender fluid fashion?

**MI:** In high school I worked in sustainable agriculture for an organization in Boston called *The Food Project*. It was a youth development organization designed to get kids interested in the food system, social justice and environmental justice. I was a youth being developed and it worked very well [laughing]. One of the most inspiring things was turning compost and the circular process of flipping the food scraps from our lunches. Then using that same compost from further down in the pile to nourish the crops that we were growing, harvesting and cooking for our friends and community. That experience was super formative to see the possibilities of material fluidity and resource flow in a circular way.

**IRK:** It's interesting to think about how these seemingly unique facets have formulated your approach to design, especially since most designers operate on a business model that focus on the 'with' (made with, follow along with, must include), and you seem to focus on the 'without' (without waste, without gender, without rules). How has eliminating the industry standards liberated you?

**MI:** I love your reading of this and I came in knowing this system was bad. I had an idealist vision of what fashion could be. I wanted to do something completely different and just throw what was, out the window. I've definitely grown as a businessperson. I didn't go into this thinking that I wanted to be a fashion mogul. I went in thinking, I want to be an artist, I want to redefine the way that fashion can be made, the way that we think about waste, the way that we think about what new can be, what male and female can be! I also had to evolve and realize that to continue to push those boundaries, I needed to be able to make a financially sustainable business. I had to learn the rules, the standards in the industry, so I could figure out how to do things on my own terms. That's been a huge point of growth for me, doubling down on how to make the business stable while still not compromising on my values.

**IRK:** It was definitely a successful business model; Official Rebrand took off so quickly! Then again, how could it not have? You've addressed something that is desperately needed. Why do you think it has taken so long for the fashion industry to acknowledge the void in gender fluid fashion?

**MI:** I don't really understand it either. Although androgyny and gender-bending has been a part of style forever, the industry of fashion has been almost completely binary until recently. I mean, you could just point to the slow increase of non-binary visibility, but it's definitely shifting and Gen Z is a big part of that. The studies show that Gen Z consumers do not care what department - men's or women's - a garment is in. There is also more visibility of gender and sexual fluidity seen in people who aren't even necessarily queer identifying. There's a definite shift and the industry is starting to catch on.

**IRK:** And just to take a deeper dive, not everyone understands that gender non-conforming clothing is more than just an option of selection. It allows for a freedom that has been negatively impacting, even oppressing individuals for their entire life. Your 2018 Swimwear collection, *Queer The Beach* highlighted this need so beautifully. For those who do not fully understand the need for gender fluid fashion, could you share with us its importance?

**MI:** I think a lot about the [gender theorist] Judith Butler, and I talk about this in my thesis. They said something really amazing about trying to fit into a world made up of categories that don't work for you, and therefore you are left constantly trying to fit into something that was not designed to fit you. You are left feeling uncomfortable and out of place all of the time.

Clothes are a really important way that we interface with the world when we say who we are. It's a second skin. It's your armor. It's a vital form of communication, and a way you can express yourself first without even talking. If you don't feel that you can ever find the right thing to encase your body in, protect yourself with, express yourself with, you're not going to be as effective as you could be if you felt empowered and embodied by what you were wearing.

I feel similarly with pronouns. I like to try things on because you never know what's going to make you feel right until you try it. Having the freedom to figure that out and take those risks is really, really important. It also touches on sustainability. Queer people who are figuring out their gender identity do need to try on a lot of things, but some of those things don't work. I think that's another reason why sharing clothes, swapping and trading are equally important as well.

**IRK:** So let's deconstruct your own personal design process that you have coined as "rebranding". Most upcycled clothing is derived from a collection of gender conforming 'womenswear' or 'menswear'. Can you share your process of "rebranding" clothes so that they no longer embody a gender label?

**MI:** That's the heart of what I'm doing, taking gendered

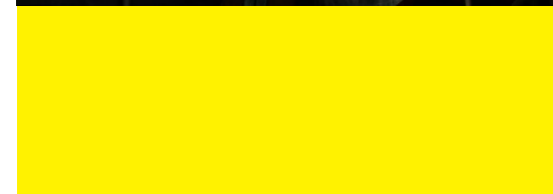
garments and reintroducing them without gender constraints. I've learned more about tailoring and the traditional differences between menswear and womenswear. For me, I'm a pretty small person and I can fit into any kind of cut, but that is just simply not the case for everyone. I've become conscious of those key silhouette differences and what those signify. I also make changes in cuts to make silhouettes more gender neutral or feminize something that might have a masculine cut or vice versa to reach a sort of equilibrium. When labels like Zara or H&M create a gender neutral collection, it's usually just hoodies, overalls, sweatpants and stuff, and that's just menswear. I try not to create pieces that can be put into one box.

**IRK:** Also, looking at your collections, it's impossible not to see your love for fine art in your clothing. There are so many visuals used from symbols to signifiers, language and drawings of the human form. It makes me think of the way Keith Haring communicated through his art.

**MI:** Thank you! Keith Haring is a huge inspiration to me just for breaking down the barriers between high and low art through commercialization. Semiotics too is so important for gay culture. You have to show codes that only certain people can understand and that kind of signaling can be really powerful for community building, especially when your identity can be prosecuted or oppressed in any kind of way. I think fashion is such an important way to live your values and to be able to speak without talking. I feel honored to be able to reach others, communicate how I feel, and to have it resonate with people all over the world. I feel so blessed.

**IRK:** Going forward if you had no limitations, what are your goals for continuing to make an impact on the industry through your brand?

**MI:** That's a great question [they smile and exhale]. I would like to be able to create two and three-dimensional art that is not fashion, that feels welcoming to everyone, and is communicating something about climate change, climate justice, queer rights and freedom. I want to be able to connect with a large group of people and make an impact in that way. I love clothing so much, I love fashion, but my life was completely changed when I fell in love with art and started going to museums, spending hours there by myself just staring at paintings. I want to be able to make art that has a wide reach in that way and can help lend an aesthetic to a movement for a more sustainable, more inclusive, accepting world. I want to continue to speak out in new ways on these issues that I care about so much.



Top: *MI Leggett* shot by *Munachi Osegbu*.

Bottom: Model *Renanzo Williams* shot by *Hunter Francisco*.

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