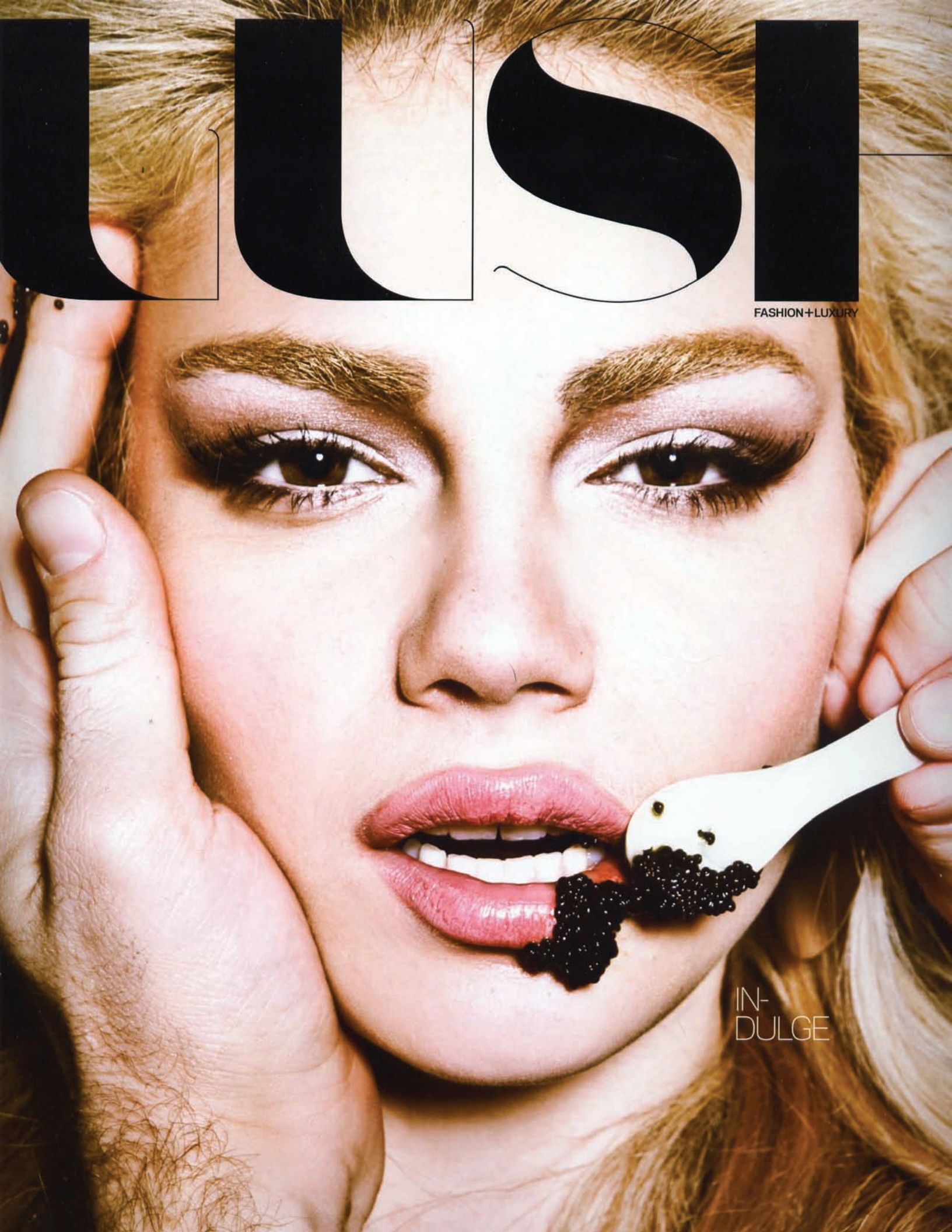
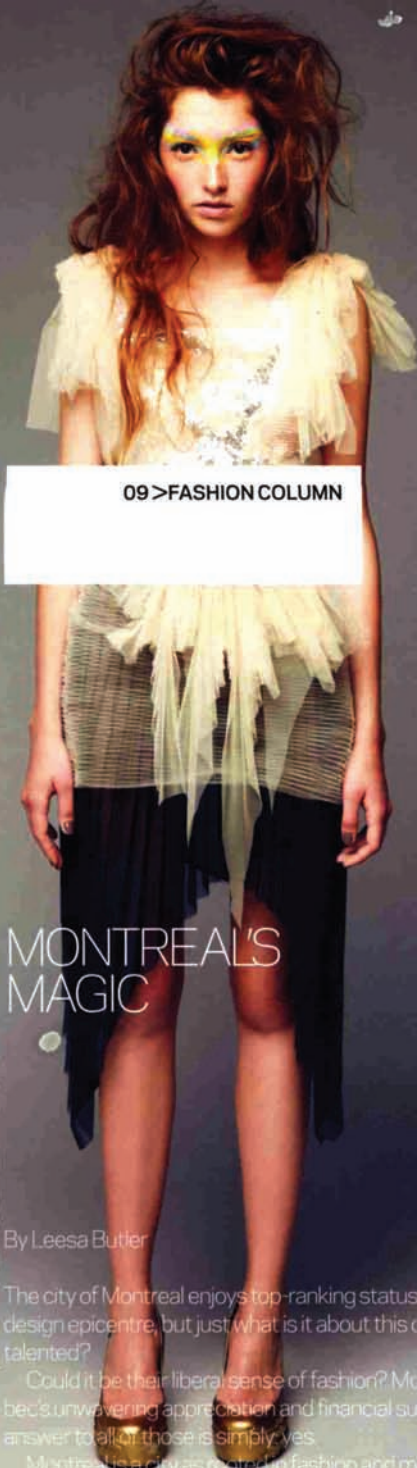


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09 > FASHION COLUMN

MONTREAL'S MAGIC

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY THE FASHION SCENE IN CANADA'S SECOND LARGEST CITY IS ALIVE AND FLOURISHING

By Leesa Butler

The city of Montreal enjoys top-ranking status as a North American fashion and design epicentre, but just what is it about this city that churns out designers so talented?

Could it be their liberal sense of fashion? Montreal's European influence? Quebec's unwavering appreciation and financial support of fledgling designers? The answer to all of those is simply yes.

Montreal is a city as rooted in fashion and manufacturing as New York was in the early part of the 20th century. And sadly, just as in New York, much of that manufacturing business sailed overseas in the '70s and '80s—but not all of it.

Today Quebec's pride in "locally designed, locally manufactured" is impressive, as both the industry and the consumer support local production. And the Quebec government invests in homegrown fashion, having established the Fashion Bureau to promote Montreal as a fashion design hub by highlighting local know-how, creative talent and innovation. In 2009, the Bureau received financial support from the government of Quebec valued at \$2.4 million over three years.

"Our administration believes that the fashion industry is a major economic lever for Montreal, as it generates close to 50,000 jobs in the fields of manufacturing, distribution and retail," said Richard Deschamps, member of the Montreal Executive Committee responsible for economic development.

Some designers who get their start in Montreal ultimately take their talents to larger fashion cities. The now Paris-based Rad Hourani and London-based Thomas Tait, both hailing from Montreal, have earned critical acclaim from fashion's industry at-large. Tait recently won the esteemed Dorchester Collection Fashion Prize, £25,000 and the chance to stage an event in any Dorchester Collection hotel of his choice.

But there is a strong contingent that chooses to live and work successfully at home. Collectively these five Montreal designers share a decidedly eccentric and modern aesthetic that epitomize the city's magic fashion touch.

Denis Gagnon

In 2010, Gagnon celebrated 10 years in fashion with a unique exhibition paying tribute to his work and his creative art mastery at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. He is the first French Canadian designer showcased by the museum. Gagnon's precision and mastery with luxurious fabrics like silk and leather mixes well with his flair for the dramatic in the styling of his runway shows. His work recently attracted Canadian retailer Bebo, who invited Gagnon to design a capsule line for Fall 2010.

Marie Saint Pierre

Marie Saint Pierre is one of Montreal's most seasoned designers. Comfort and versatility are her two trademarks. She is known for her layering techniques and fluid lines, creating an imaginative juxtaposition of textures and colors. Her practical yet avant-garde outfits are for the woman who wants to set herself apart from the crowd.

Morales

Renata Morales plays in a similar avant-garde sandbox as Gagnon, with elaborate and inventive collections. She often embraces different kinds of textiles, and her chic, feminine silhouettes are nuanced with forceful patterns and themes.

Known for her textured and printed collections (photographed left), Morales' work is mostly hand-sewn and often one-of-a-kind. Not surprisingly, she frequently collaborates with various music and film artists.

Barilà

A newer contemporary lifestyle brand, Barilà Clothing is known for its bold prints, vivid colors and softly tailored shapes that strike the perfect balance between edgy and feminine. Its collections are geared to hip, women-about-town who "live life to the fullest." Owner Sabrina Barilà, a devout vegetarian, has modeled the label after Stella McCartney's concept of no animal products.

Mulcair

The 28-year-old Julianna Bennett might be a new kid on the block, but her sophisticated everyday wear label Mulcair has earned notoriety as "tom boy chic." Architecturally boxy yet feminine, it draws inspiration from 1930s high-society and the chic rigidity of military uniforms. The business is clearly in Bennett's blood—her great grandfather and great uncle were Montreal tailors known as the Mulcair Brothers in the 20th century.

Leesa Butler is the founder and executive producer of The F-list (www.f-list.ca), a website devoted to fashion in Canada.