

Milwaukee's Fashion BY MANYA KACZKOWSKI

NINJA

LOCAL CLOTHING DESIGNER
AREKA IKELER SNEAKS INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

Six pairs of panties—that's the first thing I notice when I approach Fashion Ninja. Stretched across round forms in the storefront windows, these dainty scraps of satin and lace tease at the burgeoning talent that thrives inside this designer boutique, studio and classroom. It's all under one small roof in the middle of an eclectic collection of funky boutiques and cafes in Bay View, just south of downtown Milwaukee.

Atop the ancient wood floor in the shop's main room, independently designed and labeled sweaters, skirts, tops and other clothing share space with handbags, belts, bolts of cloth, various bits of trimmings and a poster for a Rockabilly Chili contest. A youngish male customer shops for his girlfriend, and I start getting into the pulsing alternative music that surrounds me. After taking time to absorb the look and feel of the clothing and the store, I sink into a comfortable chair to talk shop with the Fashion Ninja herself.

Areka Ikeler is 28 years old and a Milwaukee-born original whose short, spiky blond hair matches her outgoing approach to her life's work. She's on a

mission—to hit the national fashion scene with her designs, which are made mostly of recycled fabric and deconstructed clothing. "I love what I do," Ikeler says, as she points out a rack of former men's sweaters, each customized to fit a woman's smaller frame and embellished with collar and trim. The sweaters are a good example of how Ikeler can turn an ordinary piece of clothing or a swatch of arresting fabric into a stylish urban fashion statement.

She sometimes sketches out her designs, but Ikeler is more of a hands-on artist. "I usually start by draping on a form," she says. "I'm thinking shape, initially, but when it comes to fabric, I start thinking about color and texture." For inspiration, she scours thrift shops and searches for fabric locally and in Chicago.

Her own outfit is a perfect reflection of the unique clothing in her shop: Her black top has a sexy asymmetrical ruffle running down the right side of the bodice; she's paired it with gray pants and orange suede boots. It's sleek but feminine, with that eye-catching punch of color. "A lot of times, the climate dictates what I wear,"

she says. "I love what I have in my closet. I have to test ride everything, and I wear a lot of independent labels."

What she sells is equally edgy: from tops with unfinished hems, flirty off-the-shoulder necklines and peek-a-boo backs to flare skirts and handmade handbags. My particular favorite? The slinky Kukaracha, a halter top made of synthetic blend stretch satin that can be worn three different ways. But it's not just the styles that make this "fashion ninja" a standout in Milwaukee. "I'm different in that I have 100 percent Milwaukee-made clothing—all independent designers," she says proudly. The mix in the store is about 70 percent Ikeler's designs and the rest from other locals like Rochelle R. Nason and Kristy Schomburg. She does some of it on consignment. "I like to see new designers, and I'm interested in helping people to become successful."

She puts her money (and time) where her mouth is, too. Not only does Ikeler sell other designers' clothing, she also holds sewing and design classes for budding fashionistas. She takes me on a tour

of the back rooms, where there are several sewing machines, numerous mirrors and a long wooden worktable piled high with material. Fashion Ninja offers beginner classes in clothing construction, draping seminars and even a class titled “Hardcore Handbags.” The sessions, which last anywhere from six to 16 weeks, are usually filled with six to eight students each.

Ikeler’s own education consists of two years of study at Mount Mary’s design school in Milwaukee. She knew all along that she wanted to be independent when she got out of school. “I’ve always been a driven person who knew I would work hardest for myself—and my passion for design has driven me into business,” she says.

And so, instead of graduating, at age 23 Ikeler opened the boutique, and in five years it has doubled in size. She’s now beginning to look outside the boundaries

of her store to sell her work. “I’ve grown as a designer. I’m getting smarter and quicker,” she says, adding that Chicago seems to be a logical place to approach shops that may be interested in her work. In the last couple of years, she has been able to make larger quantities of items, which will enable her to sell to other boutiques. “I’m 28, and I feel now that I can offer my work outside of Milwaukee. That’s the goal,” she says.

At the same time, Ikeler is quick to point out that she’s proud of being a local artist who continues to sell locally. “I am competing with H&M and the malls,” she says. “The women who shop here—who provide 100 percent of my income—they’re independent women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, and they don’t necessarily follow mainstream fashion. They are supporting the local economy, because I’m

likely to take the money I earn and spend it right in this area, at the restaurant down the street, for example.”

For the immediate future, the fashion ninja will continue her work locally, running the store and her school, and sponsoring events in Milwaukee such as fashion shows and a handbag expo. But Ikeler doesn’t stand still for long; for this ninja, there’s always the glimmer of the next challenge on the horizon.

Fashion Ninja is located at 2671 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. in Milwaukee. For more information, call 414-481-3865 or visit www.fashionninja.com. To shop online for clothing offered by designers who have items at Fashion Ninja, visit www.fashionflat.com.

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