

# RETAIL THERAPY

BY MARIESSA TERRELL

## Artful Fashion at DC Fashion Week

Is it nurture or nature that can transform an individual into a creative talent? Some artists learn about design at an early age from a relative or mentor, while others with no proximity to the arts are born with a natural gift that emanates from within. Regardless, it takes courage, tenacity, and a bit of refusal to channel creativity into a discipline like fashion. Diana Vreeland, former editor of Vogue, believed that fashion is art. How else could Vreeland withstand the controversy of exhibiting Yves Saint Laurent apparel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, only a few blocks from the YSL flagship store? It takes authentic creativity to emerge original from obscurity. And it takes a fashion investigator from the Diamond District to ferret out talent any- and everywhere.

Of the many talents that I encountered on Sept. 28 at the DC Fashion Week Emerging designers showcase, I was most excited about the artistry of Underground Market.

## Underground Market

Kenneth Wells hails from the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. In June 2013 he launched Underground Market out of the basement of his Woodbridge, Va., home. The collection, inspired by “life” and her many machinations, can best be described as “transformative street wear.” By carefully layering original photography, drawings, and replications over, under, and tip to toe, Wells has elevated his cotton and rayon blended t-shirt line to cult status. Remarkably he prefers to

view each shirt design as a wearable work of art. “The sleeves form the [picture] frame,” he says. Therefore, they are typically monochromatic and made of standout materials like leather and suede.

The “Birth of Venus” design, though controversial, is a favorite. Wells’ re-edited version of Botticelli’s nude classic is a result of a five-step process that involves digitizing, filtering, and re-painting lithographic images. The nudity in the original work presented a unique challenge. Kenneth reasoned that “it’s one thing to see nudity framed on a wall ... and it’s another to wear such controversial artwork.” In an effort to render the piece less R and more PG-13, Wells decided to splash wording like “Parental Advisory” across the bare breasts of Venus. “My goal,” he says, “was to show respect for those who aren’t so daring.”

Bold designs combined with zipper trimmings, feathers, and an affordable price point further distinguish the Underground Market collection from the many other luxury street brands. The designs appear to be back lit because they are forged by a man in pursuit of happiness. They resonate because they are an authentic mashup of art and culture, angst and love. When encountering a Kenneth Wells design you literally feel the energy leaping at you. It’s akin to what Wells said to Ean Williams (DC Fashion Week founder/producer) at the conclusion of his runway presentation on Saturday. When you wear Underground Market you “wear your heart on your sleeve.” [www.undergroundmarketclothingco.bigcartel.com](http://www.undergroundmarketclothingco.bigcartel.com)

*Mariessa Terrell, aka Simone Butterfly, Fashion Investigator, does her sleuthing at yoohoodarling.*



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:  
 “Kill or Be Killed”. Photo: Lamont aka Dom  
 Kenneth Wells, designer. Photo: Melanie “Foto” Gomez.  
 “Spanish Harlem”. Photo: Kenneth Wells