

Trade Talk: Lululemon founder's family launches new fashion enterprise, Kit and Ace

Art and soul: Biennale goes big on Granville Island

BY MALCOLM PARRY, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 6, 2014



Shannon and JJ Wilson launched their Kit and Ace fashion firm in a family-owned Gastown building with other outlets readying across Canada and in New York and San Francisco.

Photograph by: Malcolm Parry/Vancouver Sun

FALL WHERE THEY MAY: Officially, Lululemon Athletica yoga-wear founder Chip Wilson has no connection to Kit and Ace. That's the firm the billionaire's wife Shannon and son J.J. Wilson founded in January and that opened its first retail outlets July 31. As for Chip being uninvolved, some claim to see through that as they did a batch of sheer Lululemon pants that, recalled in March 2013, helped precipitate a \$2-billion-range drop in the chain's market value.

Going on face value, though, Shannon and J.J.'s independent enterprise was founded quickly and with aggressive plans to build an international market for garments using its own luxury-technical fabric. Shannon designed the blend of cashmere, viscose and elastane in 2012, when she and Chip resided at Bronte Beach in suburban Sydney, Australia. Trademarked Qemir (which rhymes with "come here"),

the Italy-milled material is employed in Kit and Ace's launch line of \$64 to \$84 T-shirts. Women's and men's pants and suchlike are due this fall.

By then, wholly owned studio versions of Kit and Ace's Gastown store should be open in Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Toronto, New York and San Francisco. Each will feature the original's 2.4-metre-by-2.4-metre table for client powwows and catered dinners. Within a year, Shannon said those 1,500-square-foot-range outlets will double in area to be flagship stores with tailoring facilities and in-house designers.

Shannon was a designer herself in 2000 when she joined fledgling Lululemon's then-four employees in a second-floor Kitsilano facility. She later worked on the organic Oqoqo line, married boss Chip and had three children.

J.J., 25, got a Ryerson U degree in retail merchandising and worked with a private-equity firm in Boston and the Clinton Foundation in New York. Returning to Vancouver, he launched e-commerce operations for menswear firm Wings+Horns, and established the brand with New York department store Bloomingdale's.

Kit and Ace aren't nicknames from the Wilsons' clan's \$54-million Point Grey Road mansion. Nor is there a link to Ace Aasen, the self-proclaimed mayor of 1970s Gastown. "We decided that the perfect girl to wear technical clothing would be named Kit and have a boyfriend Ace," J.J. said.

As for the firm gaining quick occupancy of 151 Water St.'s 4,500-square-foot main floor, the basement and a second-floor graphics studio, that came easy. The building is one of several owned by Low Tide Properties, a Wilson family firm. "We pay rent, though," Shannon said. "It's all straight up."

That's how she and J.J. hope their enterprise will go. It had better. Some 35 people are employed at the store-design-office, and 40 more one block east. Those familiar with Lululemon may see some familiar faces at both. Not Chip's, though, they say.

ART FOR ALL: A crew from Dave Notte's Wolfgang Painters firm began preparation work on Ocean Concrete's Granville Island silos Wednesday. It wasn't to ready them for the firm's logo or the sunburst, fruit or vegetable designs seen on its blender trucks. Instead, Brazilian street artists Gustavo and Otavio Pandolfo, a.k.a. Os Gemeos (the twins), will create a 2,000-square-metre mural by Sept. 7 that would cost \$1 million if privately commissioned. However, after painting murals at London's Tate Modern gallery, Art Basel Miami Beach and elsewhere, they'll execute their biggest-ever work for free. The deal, costing only \$125,000 for preparation, administration and travel accommodation, mostly crowd-funded, was made by senior curator Marcello Dantas for the 2014-16 Vancouver Biennale.

With an annual budget of \$3.8 million, the decade-old event will have 80 international and 12 Canadian artists create public artworks that anyone may see for free.

That, and its non-reliance on taxpayer funding, distinguish the Vancouver Biennale from some 200 others of which — along with Venice, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, etc. — it ranks in the top echelon. When International Biennial Association delegates confer here in 2016, that unique feature will doubtless be scrutinized.

“Many governments like the idea, too, because they don’t have to put money in,” biennale founder, head and former 34-year private gallerist Barrie Mowatt said.

Delegates will also see biennale-spurred public art that stayed here, such as Yue Minjun’s multi-sculpture A-maze-ing Laughter in English Bay’s Morton Park. Secured by Chip and Shannon Wilson’s \$1.5-million donation, it supports six-year marketing director Myriam Blume’s assertion that “the biennale has been a driving force behind tourism.”

That claim is validated by its public artworks appearing in many promotions. Regarding the biennale’s own advancement, such benefactor support “makes artists understand our vision and the importance of being included with other world-renowned artists,” Blume said.

The latter would include film director Oliver Stone and Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, who both participated recently.

Cyclist-gym rat Mowatt, 69, has ambitious plans for his two-lot Third-at-Alberta property and 13,200-square-foot building, which cost \$1 million in 2000 and houses the Vancouver Biennale and Pentland’s Prosthetic & Orthotics Services Inc. He said he figures the former could stand on its own by co-developing a 12-to-16-floor tower to accommodate administration facilities and transiting biennale artists, “a big gallery on the main floor and eight to 10 floors of commercial space to pay for everything.”

Being financially off the hook otherwise, you’d think city hall might be happy to zone something like that.

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