

Review: Diversity Now! 2021 with Nigel "Legin" John, Legin Knits

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Abstract

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world went into a complete lockdown, people around the globe turned to old hobbies, like crocheting, knitting, and sewing, to keep their minds — and anxieties — at ease (Don 2021). Under the creative colours and designs, though, is a practice that promotes slow living and a return to the self. In a world where clothing consumption is at an all-time high and climate change is a looming crisis, sustainability has become top of mind for designers and brands alike.

During the 2021 Diversity Now! lecture, an annual event organized by the Centre of Fashion & Systemic Change, Masters of Fashion students partook in a two-day workshop with Legin Knits, a Toronto crochet artist and designer, to learn how to uplift their clothing creatively and explore the ways in which the practice of crochet promotes wellbeing — both physically and environmentally.

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FIGURE 1 Legin's candy store... Romni Wools on Queen St. West. Photo by Steve Carty @stevecarty.

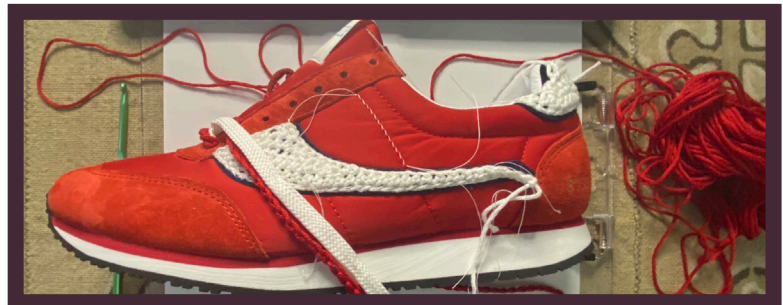


FIGURE 2 Here's a look at the work in progress of these "UPLIFTED" Jaclar sneakers, that Legin customized during his Art Of Crochet virtual workshop with The Bata Shoe Museum. Once completed, they were donated to the museum's collection.

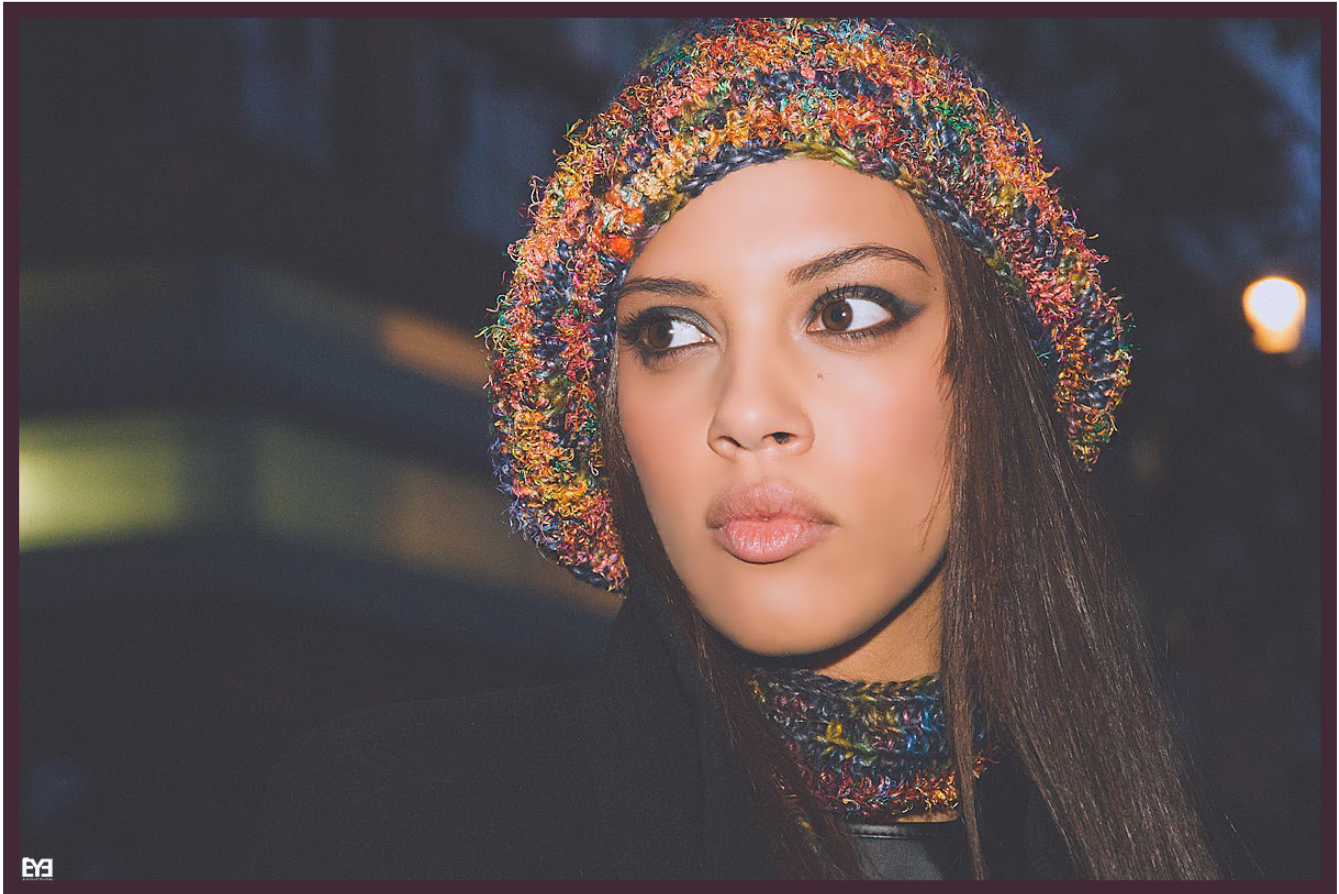


FIGURE 3 LK model in her multi color crown and scarf made from a merino and silk yarn blend. Photo by Michelle Hazell @ellenaturel.



FIGURE 4 This is a classic LK Red gold and green crochet crown. Photo by Michelle Hazell @ellenaturel.

WHAT IS LEGIN KNITS?

Legin Knits was founded by Nigel “Legin” John, after learning to crochet in San Fernando, Trinidad. What started off as a way to make hats for himself (Diversity Now! 2021) turned into a local and global movement of custom crochet pieces that not only reinforced cultural Trinidadian roots, but promoted a lifestyle that prioritized wellbeing and mindfulness. At the time, Legin did not feel there was a market for crocheted goods, locally at home in Toronto or even globally. Looking back at it now, though, he says he knows there was. “Every time there’s a void, there’s a market” (Diversity Now! 2021).

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With a focus on making one-of-a-kind or uplifted pieces in need of new life, Legin joins the movement of designers and creatives seeking to evoke true social change in the fashion system through sustainable practices and the mission to repurpose what we already have.



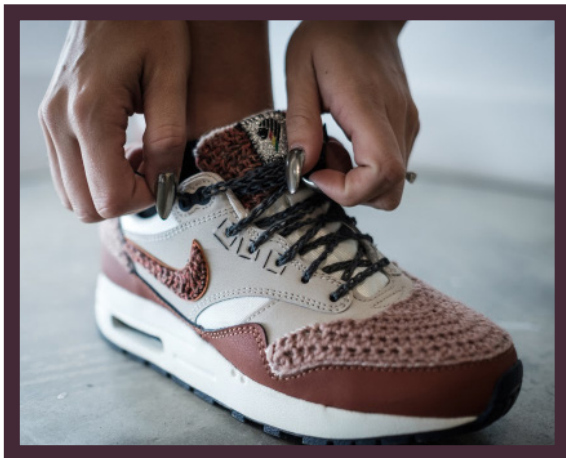
FIGURE 5 In between the crocheted frame is Devontee Woe... on set for Sasha Chaa's music video "Transparent." Photo by Loggo Lionel @_loggo.

His Art of Crochet program, which includes "Original Crochet" or "Uplifted," has reached a wide range of communities, teaching them the fundamentals of crocheting, roots culture, and ways to live and support a sustainable lifestyle ("Art of Crochet"). In particular, the workshop with the Masters of Fashion program took students through the steps of uplifting old t-shirts, resulting in final

pieces that held new life and opportunities to start a movement towards appreciating our clothes. In this way, Legin's workshops promote the important and ever-necessary practices of mindfulness and sustainability through creativity, something Legin believes creatives can really infuse into their work because their minds are always open (Diversity Now! 2021).

THE RESURGENCE OF CROCHET AS A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

The fashion industry's waste and consumption problem is no secret and, in recent years, has been heavily followed and documented. In fact, the industry is responsible for producing approximately fifty-three million tonnes of fibre every year, over seventy percent of which ends up in landfills and less than one percent which is recycled into new garments (McKinsey & Co. 2020, 56). Younger demographics like Generation Z (Gen Z), however, are increasingly devoting their spending dollars to brands that focus on sustainable and ethical practices (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzetti and Grechi, 2020), further proving that sustainability should be at the forefront of fashion's mind. Legin's workshop emphasized this very notion, stating multiple times that the next generation is the one to evoke great change and we, as a society, have a responsibility to instill that in them through creative practices (Diversity Now! 2021). It is brands and creatives such as Legin that are actively marrying theory and practice in a way that seeks to create solutions, no matter how influential, for a more sustainable and mindful world.



More than just a fashion trend, however, this resurgence of crochet paired with the next generation of consumers can be a way to create a circular fashion system that favours true material recycling and repurposing through uplifted garments.

Legin says he believes “anytime you are being a source, you can make a difference because you’re the source, you’re the one deciding what to use, how to use it” (Diversity Now! 2021). Crocheting, by its very nature as a hands-on practice, leaves a smaller eco footprint compared to machine-made goods. Because of this, Legin says he believes that “even if you’re not on-par with the whole sustainable aspect, you’re already still ten steps ahead of the bigger companies and conglomerates because they’re, just like anything else, a big business” (Diversity Now! 2021). Initially, Legin was using the word “upcycled” to describe the garments he repurposed. However, like any buzzword in the fashion system that is over-saturated and used out of context, Legin felt that the term was losing its meaning. Instead, he began using “uplifted” to describe his practice because not only were the clothes given new meaning, but the workshops he held to teach others the art of crochet were also a way to uplift people and bring them together.

FIGURE 6 “UPLIFTED” Nike Air Max. Crocheted with hemp, merino, and linen yarns. Photo by Steve Carty @stevecarty.

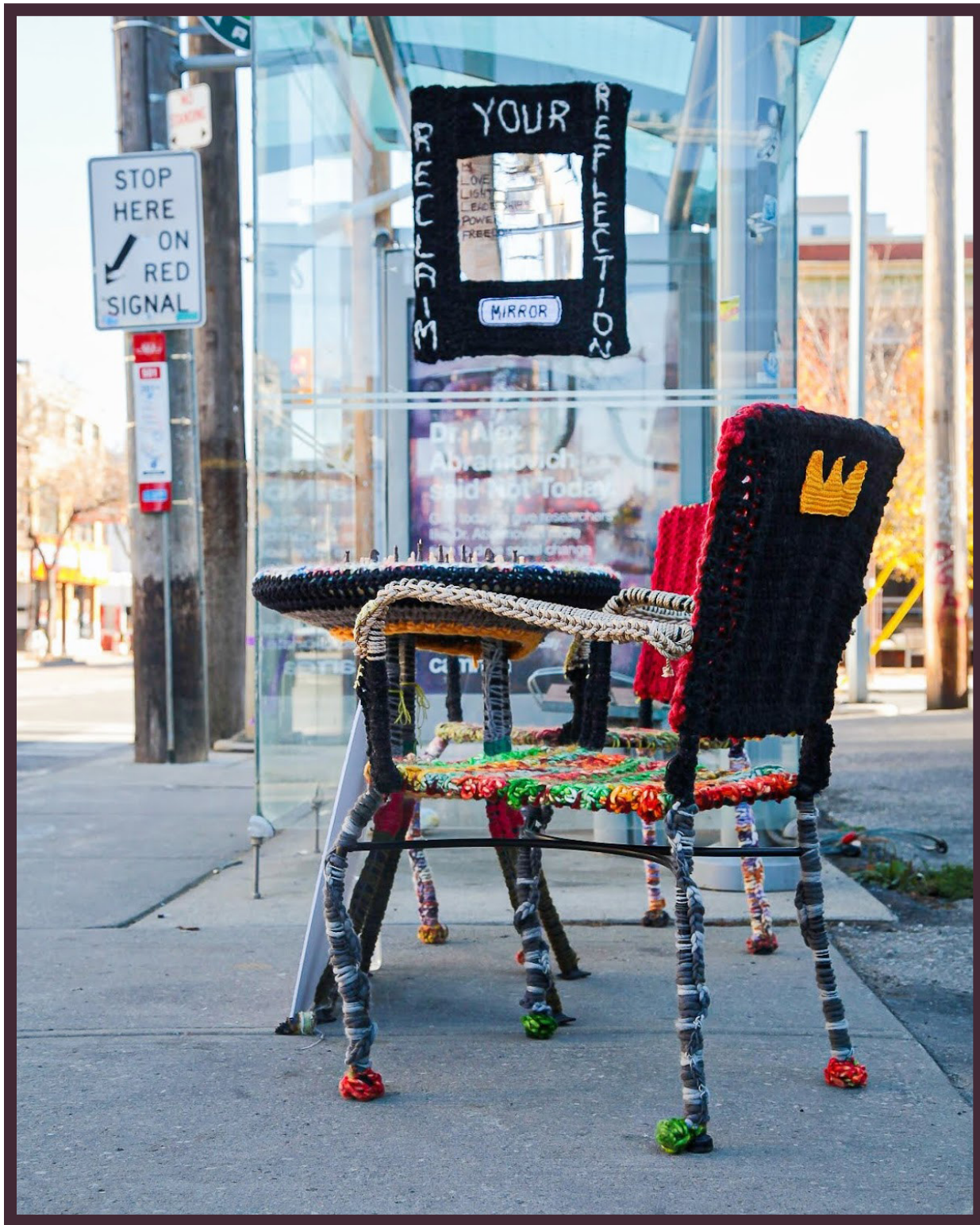


FIGURE 7 "Reclaim your reflection" it says on the custom crocheted mirror, alongside a patio set transformed into crochet royalty with a bonus chess board for people to play. Legin and his team placed this art installation on Queen West from sun up to sun down. It was staged across from the Drake hotel on Halloween day on Oct 31st, 2020. Once set up him and the team watched to view engagement. Well needless to say... it was a hit! Photo by Aaron Dyer @photolific.

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UPLIFTING THE MIND THROUGH CROCHET

Before the two-day workshop, Legin picked yarn for every individual student participating, citing that the colours chosen were determined by their names and energies he got when coming across them (Diversity Now! 2021). This anecdote speaks perfectly to the movement of creatives turning to crafting and traditional hobbies, like crocheting, to promote wellbeing and mindfulness.

FIGURES 8 & 9 Legin shows participants how to crochet at his Art of Crochet workshop with Puma at Footaction in the Eaton Center.

Figure 8 by @ryones.

Figure 9 by Steve Carty @stevecarty.



In emerging research, there is an increased focus on the relationship between mindfulness and creativity, with the two being seen as very much related. While mindfulness improves mental states and concentration, it also allows for open-mindedness and the acceptance of new experiences, qualities that help increase one's creative mind and work (Henriksen, Richardson and Shack 2020). Meditation breaks in organizational settings have also been found to help individuals re-centre and focus, which will enhance creativity after the fact (Holm 2015).

Interestingly, much of this research is in line with Legin's beliefs on the very topic, only further proving that there is a strong connection between practice and theory. According to Legin, in its stillness, crochet is a way to increase mindfulness because it mimics meditation.



FIGURE 10 LK crochet halter top and skirt on the set of "Under the Silver Lake," styled by Caroline Eselin.

While it is an activity that requires the artist to be still during the learning process, there are different ways of reaching this mindful state. For Legin, it is important to create an atmosphere with good music and the scent of Palo Santo. In this way, crochet is the proxy for activities that promote mindfulness. He says that crochet might not be something that is still and quiet for everyone, but it is important to find something that does allow you to be still and quiet in some way because in this day and age, we are constantly in a rush. "[Just] embracing the fact that some things will take some time to get used to; certain things will just take time to be comfortable.... Yes, you'll be anxious, you'll maybe not be fully present, but that is part of embracing" (Diversity Now! 2021).

Legin Knits' "Uplifted" workshop provided students with a two-day experience that taught the basics of crocheting as well as unique and creative ways to customize garments. While Legin Knits workshops usually happen in person, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students participated through Zoom and had the option to join breakout rooms for more help or to have any questions answered. In this particular workshop, students were tasked with uplifting an old t-shirt, but garment options to uplift are endless and have included sneakers, hats, bags, accessories, and more. During the workshop, I chose to uplift one of my boyfriend's old band t-shirts, which I felt had not gotten much wear for a few months. By the end of the workshop, this simple, black t-shirt had new life breathed into it—I crocheted the sleeve edges in a white yarn, which gave them a puffed-sleeve effect, and also crocheted the bottom of the shirt, which I had cropped months before. Although the yarn has now come off after countless washes (speaking to my talent of crocheting), this experience was beneficial to me on multiple levels: it taught me to slow down and experience moments while they are happening, and it provided me with a new interest in slow fashion and the many ways we can repurpose and design old garments into new ones. To learn more about Legin Knits and the workshops it provides, see here <https://www.leginknits.com/art-of-crochet/>.



FIGURE 11 Legin "UpLifted" Coogi fabric to make Doorag for Coogi. Also pictured is also an UPLIFTED army jacket with LK lion logo on the back. Photo by Steve Carty @stevecarty.

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Bianca Zanotti (she/her) is a second year Masters of Fashion candidate at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University).

She completed her undergraduate degree at Toronto Metropolitan University, obtaining a Bachelors of Journalism with a minor in Public Relations. Bianca's research interests include the luxury fashion industry and how it intersects with diversity and inclusion, fitting in the field of Critical Luxury Studies. These research interests are integrated into her upcoming MRP which focuses on the performative allyship of luxury fashion brands during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 to question whether or not inclusion means anything to an industry built on exclusivity, specifically relating to marketing and public relations practices. She hopes to use this MRP research to consult luxury fashion brands in the future.

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