

## 10 of Tomorrow: Aurora James

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Aurora James, the New York-based founder of buzzy footwear label Brother Vellies, is perched in the brand's flagship, opened last year at 4 Fulton Street in the South Street Seaport. The Toronto native explains that she was a member of PETA when she was just eight years old. A few years later, she became interested in environmental activism, and eventually, she moved onto women's rights as well. (She chalked it all up to her activist mother.)

Now, the 31-year-old creative director fuses all of her passions into her label Brother Vellies, launched in January 2013. "With fashion, my whole issue was that — aside from giving beauty to the world — I didn't feel like it was doing anything monumental to help," James says. "I wanted to find a way to participate in the art of fashion, but give back and empower people at the same time. That was the only way that I'd be able to reconcile devoting my life to it."

James had an ambitious plan: to bring traditional African footwear to the masses while creating and sustaining artisanal jobs in Africa. So she started dreaming up a shoe line — based around the traditional African velskoen, commonly known as "vellies," a type of desert boot — out of her Brooklyn apartment and then in Africa, where, in collaboration with the United Nations' Ethical Fashion Initiative, she works directly with artisans in Ethiopia as well as South Africa, Kenya and Morocco.

Footwear starts at \$195 — averaging about \$285 for most pairs. Sandals with fox fur are \$781, and Masaai beaded sandals are \$1,250.

"It's about supporting local, traditional styles and making sure people understand that those hold authentic value and should be a part of the conversation in fashion," she says. The label prioritizes sustainable practices and materials, such as chrome-free leathers, and continues to evolve each season: heels were introduced in Brother Vellies' spring collection.

In only two years, James' efforts have paid off. Last year, she racked up a slew of accolades, scooping the 2015 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund award (in a three-way tie with Rio Uribe and Jonathan Simkhai) as well as the Vivian Infantino Emerging Talent Award from Footwear News and Vogue Italia's "Who Is on Next? Dubai" award. Brother Vellies' undeniable cool factor has also earned it a solid



Aurora James © Ahmed Klink

celebrity following, including Kanye West, Solange Knowles and Zendaya Coleman. West made a surprise appearance at her first New York Fashion Week presentation last season. Besides its Manhattan flagship and e-commerce site, Brother Vellies counts Moda Operandi, Opening Ceremony, Holt Renfrew and Madewell among its stockists. Sales are projected at around \$1.5 million this year.

James, who's dabbled in clothing and handbags, also expressed an interest in beauty products, but doesn't feel the pressure to rapidly expand into new categories — at least not yet. "I think it's good to become really, really good at something before jumping around," she says.

And on the subject of Africa — a continent that remains a frequent source of fashion inspiration, yet is often met with controversy and accusations of cultural appropriation — James is refreshingly outspoken.

"So many designers are like, 'This is African-inspired. This is my tribute-to-Africa collection.' And it's like...you're taking inspiration from these people who have nothing, and you're putting it out there on the runway and you're glamorizing it, and [Africans] are still there with nothing," James says. "Look, you have to be free to get your inspiration from whatever you want. But I think as designers, given what's going on in the world, we can challenge ourselves a little bit more."

