

ATLANTA

PEACH



SELITA EBANKS

DESIGN TEAM

Brand co-founders Gabrielle Kennedy and Malcolm Fontier.





Ahead Of The Pack

*Outback or out for the night, new travel bags and accessories from **Malcolm Fontier** make the coolest carryalls*

BY AMY FLURRY
PORTRAITS BY MALI AZIMA

MALCOLM FONTIER

How is it that an accessories designer and one of this year's Gen Art Fresh Faces of Fashion—the same national program that launched emerging stars Zac Posen, Eugenia Kim and Philip Lim—eludes this and every other style editor on our home turf? That's the question peevishly lingering when I buzz up to Malcolm Fontier's downtown studio.

Brand co-founder Gabrielle Kennedy, who with Fontier officially launched the line of travel bags and accessories last August, welcomes me into their light-filled industrial space. A span of windows reveals a weathered cityscape of rusted water tanks, parking decks, sidewalk electronic shops and looming skyscrapers. Against an exposed brick backdrop, I spot the small collection of carry-alls that created a buzz—and spruced up the animal-friendly fashion movement—before ever getting out of the gates. There's the crisp white messenger bag that already sells at Fred Segal in Hollywood and here at Bill Hallman, and the sleek toiletry cases that are stocked at New York's chic retail hub, Flight 001. Next to those there is a perfect low-slung hip pouch with an ultra-slim profile, and a boxy travel satchel with a cool front-buckle closure. The high-octane designs are made of all-vegan materials, but they deliver the refined, luxurious feel of leather, and make no compromises in the looks department.

"We really didn't set out to be a non-leather line," says Fontier, who bridged a decade of experience as an industrial designer with his interest in fashion to create the eponymous label. "But when we saw the thousands of material options out there, there was really no justifying using leather." That decision, coupled with fortuitous timing and a swell of conscience-led consumerism, catapulted the nascent brand into the limelight.

But the real impetus behind the line was Fontier and Kennedy's free-wheeling, peripatetic lifestyle, evidenced by a recent off-road motorcycle trip with five pals in the Utah desert, a two month road trip with a friend and a couple of snowboards, and a tour of Nicaragua via bus, cab, motorcycle, and pick-up truck. The pack-and-go mentality, paired with a love for adventure, ended up serving as the inspiration. "When you bounce around like we do, it becomes more and more clear the essential everyday pieces you need," says Fontier. "And these low-tech items seem to be



The Entertainer carryall in black.

A pack-and-go mentality and a love for adventure served as inspiration.

the most neglected design-wise."

The designer's foray into fashion was its own sort of journey. Like so many others, Fontier jumped the 9-to-5 work ship in favor of an independent start-up. "For that, there are no roadmaps," he adds. "But we try to shape our business to incorporate the things we love, and travel fits in perfectly. We brainstorm and sketch

out ideas on planes or sitting on the beach. Last year, we packed up some gear and worked from Brazil for a month. Stepping away from our regular setting often spurs new concepts and ideas."

Along with Kennedy, to whom Fontier is now engaged, the inveterate traveler took the last two years to develop the resilient, spare and stylish travel bags and accessories for like-minded, on-the-go urbanites. Rather than employing an

Urban chic. Clockwise from top left: The Bellini wallet in camel; the Director messenger in white; the Entertainer carryall in brown; the Mimosa wallet in burgundy.



agent to find materials for them, the couple took on the challenge of sourcing their own materials in Hong Kong and China. Hitting Macau and Tokyo to add a bit of urban adventure to their business trip, their research had paved the road for test-driving, and honing, the designs.

Travel meets high-tech in the unisex bags, which are engineered with resilient, high performance fabrics like polyurethane-coated canvas. That's a result of Fontier's problem-solving background as an industrial designer. "There are a lot of super-specific bags on the market, but very few you use every day that do it all." Built-in features like a magazine pocket, padded neoprene computer protectors that provide a snug casing for laptops, and quick access pockets on the outside for passports and MP3 players are standard issue, adding an intuitive edge to the hold-alls.

As for all the noise about being a cruelty-free front, Fontier demurs. "We simply consider the bags to be modern and to us that's more than an aesthetic. It's also a mindset and that applies also to choosing materials." ◻