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ISLAND LIFE

Posted on: Friday, June 26, 2009

Summer of '79

Hawaii nostalgia stitched into beachwear debuted by new Isle designer

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By **Paula Rath**
Advertiser Staff Writer

Although her company's name is 1979, designer Suzanna Kuhlemann, 32, of Waikiki, is clearly inspired by the statehood era, revolving around 1959.

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Her nostalgic, ladylike suits and cover-ups harken back to a time when much was left to the imagination: Think Gidget and girly, not Brazilian and bare.

Honolulu's newest swim-wear designer gave her new line a public coming out in a fashion show June 17 at the Night Market at Aloha Tower Marketplace.

Her nostalgic take on beachwear, she said, is "inspired by the charm of old Honolulu." A native of Germany, Kuhlemann first arrived in Honolulu 10 years ago. She was charmed by the city, she said, and wanted to find a way to express that.

Most of the styles in her collection are fashioned from recycled aloha shirts and mu'mu'u.

They feature feminine details such as ruffles and modest halter tops and the line includes high-waisted two-piece suits.

Her beach cover-ups are recycled reverse-print aloha shirts that she cuts up and repurposes by sculpting cute little sleeveless, button-front tunics from them. She engineers them so the pocket is still functional.

Kuhlemann is also creating a line with high-tech Lycra spandex that is high-waisted and modest but flattering to many figures. "There's so much swimwear around Hawai'i, but it's



ABOVE and BELOW: Deanna Tolentino models Suzanna Kuhlemann's vintage-inspired swimwear and cover-ups from her line called 1979, most cut from recycled aloha shirts and mu'umu'u.

Photos by REBECCA BREYER | The Honolulu Advertiser

with the Brazilian look, very bare, and that's exactly where I do not want to go. I want to create a

real-woman suit — not just for young girls," she said emphatically.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

When searching for a name for her company, Kuhlemann wanted to choose a moniker that evokes an era. She had trouble choosing just one period, because every era offers her some source of inspiration.

She settled on 1979 because it's the year her beloved sister, Pia Kuhlemann, was born. Pia, the designer of Soozou bags (www.souzoo.com), had named her company after Suzanna, so it was also a sisterly return of the favor.

The sisters have set up a support system with family and friends in Honolulu. As members of Hifi (Hawai'i Fashion Incubator) they are following similar career paths, with small cottage industries that insist on the Made in Hawai'i label.

The name 1979 is not meant to limit Kuhlemann's designs to any particular time.

"It's really to signal that I'm working in times past," she explained. "I am interested in how the two dimensions of time and place form an era and how the context of the era changes all the time."

She plans to explore different eras with each collection. The geography of her inspiration will also morph.

DESIGN PEDIGREE

Although Kuhlemann is new to the Islands, having moved here last summer, she arrives with a strong fashion background in Europe. When she studied fashion design in Berlin at the University of Applied Sciences, her senior thesis was "Hawai'i Abstract."

After graduating, she worked for four years at American Apparel.

With her first capsule collection under her belt, Kuhlemann is already planning future designs. She is developing a nautically inspired swimsuit, reminiscent of the old sailor mokus worn by "everybody who was anybody" in Honolulu in the late 1930s and 1940s. She is also in the final sample stages for a series of modest one-piece maillots inspired by the '50s.

Kuhlemann does all the designing, fitting, grading and cutting herself so she can control everything from the bias cut on the bikini bottoms (to offer added comfort) to the pocket placement on the aloha shirt tunics, to take full advantage of the print and structure of the original garment.

While 1979 suits have been water-tested, Kuhlemann said, "You wouldn't wear them under a rash guard. They're not just functional; it's more like when you get dressed up to go to the beach, like a little outfit." And that's an idea from eras past.

Reach Paula Rath at paularath@aol.com.

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The debut collection of 1979 brand beachwear, modeled by, from left, Sarah Joslyn, Tesa Love, Kiani Yamamoto, Jessica Matthews and Jessica Gonsalves. The line draws its inspiration from vintage styles of several decades, not just the year 1979. Designer Suzanna Kuhlemann also does all the grading and cutting herself.

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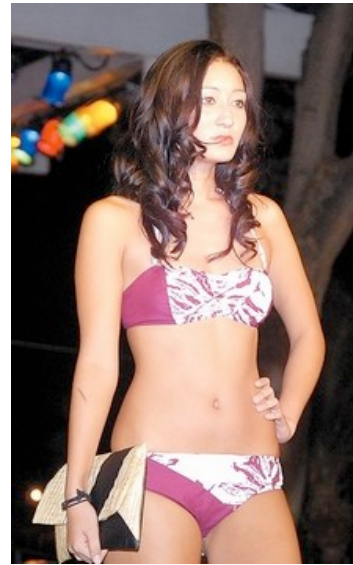
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Kiani Yamamoto models a Kuhlemann design. You can swim in the suits, but they're designed to be seen in.

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