



Creator Spotlight: Joshua Katcher of Brave GentleMan and The Discerning Brute

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“DISRUPTIVE” MENSWEAR BRAND BRAVE GENTLEMAN COMBINES CLASSICAL AESTHETICS WITH SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION, VEGAN MATERIALS, AND ETHICAL LABOR. WE VISITED ITS VISIONARY DESIGNER, JOSHUA KATCHER, AT HIS EAST WILLIAMSBURG STORE FOR AN ENJOYABLE, EYE-OPENING AFTERNOON OF FASHION, HISTORY, POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY, AND, PERHAPS MOST ABSORBINGLY, *COMIC BOOKS*.

Since launching the Brave GentleMan label and eCommerce platform in 2010, founder and designer Joshua Katcher has been recognized by animal rights organizations and activists like PETA, COCO ECO, Veg News, and Alicia Silverstone, but he's also received praise from *W Magazine*, *Time Out New York*, and Oprah.com (which called him a "vegan superstar"). *The WILD* magazine characterized him as "a modern-day hero in the making," while *The Guardian* designated him "the new sexy vegan." In a recent *Vogue* article, Lee Carter wrote, "The full scope of Katcher's ethical commitment is rather head-spinning, just as it is to gape about his Williamsburg shop, with its complete future-is-now men's range."

The first **[Brave GentleMan \(https://www.bravegentleman.com/\)](https://www.bravegentleman.com/)** store — ideally pronounced "brave, gentle man," highlighting both adjectives — opened in 2015. The brand embraces a Slow-Fashion production model and invests in high-performance, high-tech materials (Katcher calls them "Future" or "Superior" products) that are EU Ecolabel-certified and minimally-impactful, vegan, recycled, organic, and sustainable.

Katcher is also an educator who has taught at Parsons, The New School, and LIM college and has lectured internationally on the subject of ethical fashion. Later this year, his book *Fashion Animals*, a full-color, coffee table style book that sheds light on the hidden history of animal exploitation in the fashion industry, will be published by [Vegan Publishers \(https://veganpublishers.com/\)](https://veganpublishers.com/).

For anyone lucky enough to spend time in his presence, it should be immediately apparent that he is an intellectual of the highest caliber, a twenty-first century Renaissance Man with a lifelong passion for compassion.



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ON THE INDIEGOGO PAGE FOR [FASHION ANIMALS \(HTTPS://WWW.INDIEGOGO.COM/PROJECTS/FASHION-ANIMALS-ART-VEGAN#/\)](https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/fashion-animals-art-vegan#/), YOU SAY YOU'VE BEEN WAITING YOUR WHOLE LIFE TO WRITE THIS BOOK. TELL ME ABOUT YOUNG JOSHUA. WHAT SET THIS JOURNEY IN MOTION?

When I was 15, I was in an after-school club — an environmental club — that purchased an acre of rainforest. Back in the '90s, it was a pretty hot topic and we wanted to do what we could to protect it. Then we found out that the land was clearcut illegally for cattle grazing. That was the first time I had come across the idea that food came from somewhere else, somewhere far away. It wasn't the view of the idyllic farm with a red barn and a couple of cows grazing in the grass — we're all indoctrinated to have that image and we see it over and

over, on the carton or on the trucks, because the truth is too horrible and we need to be given something else to latch onto, even though deep down we know it's not true.

One thing led to another and I ended up taking out a copy of Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* from my high school library. It totally blew my mind. Often we're told that compassion and caring — especially about animals — is in the realm of sentimentality and perhaps even fringe extremism, and to have someone articulate the argument in a way that made so much sense was life-changing, it really set things into motion for me. I wanted to make things better for animals. From then on, I went vegan and started learning about all the ways in which animals are exploited. I started looking into strategies for making change.

I grew up reading comic books and I found solace in the world of heroes and villains and fighting for truth and justice — and it always seemed attainable and real. I knew I had the impulse to protect animals, to protect these other earthlings even though we don't have an effective way of communicating with them. We have to learn to respect them. We can all observe that they avoid dying and they avoid pain. So, respect is a pretty simple idea, a basic common decency.

SO THAT WAS YOUR VEGAN "LIGHTBULB" MOMENT. TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU GOT INTO FASHION. HOW DID YOU PUT THESE TWO THINGS TOGETHER?

Actually, I used to be very anti-fashion. I saw it as the epitome of everything I didn't like about our culture: consumerism, objectification and exploitation, sweatshop labor and toxic materials. But even more than that: this vulgar idea of vanity as being this incredibly important thing. If I could tell my 18-year-old self that I'd have a fashion brand, he would laugh in my face.

I started my blog, [The Discerning Brute \(http://thediscerningbrute.com/\)](http://thediscerningbrute.com/), in 2008 because no one was talking about veganism and masculinity. At the time, caring about animals and caring, in general, was seen as something exclusively feminine. So I thought, OK, what are the best current publications that deal with masculinity? Why don't I do a blog that's the GQ for the ethical man? I set out on this journey with this intention to appeal to men and make it a safe space.

Inevitably, I started writing about fashion. What men's fashion was out there that fit these criteria, that met these standards being ethically made and vegan? And there wasn't much. I found a couple of things here and there and I would try to lay it out in a way that looked stylish and cool and aspirational and I was constantly and perpetually frustrated. Finally, I thought, what if I try to do it, what if I make something? During this time, I also thought, if I'm going to put myself out as an expert in the fashion realm, I'd better back that up, I started reading about fashion and fashion theory. I came across a book by a contemporary philosopher, Lars Svendsen, called *The Fashion of Philosophy*, and, like *Animal Liberation*, it kind of blew my mind. I thought, wow, I really underestimated fashion's influence.

You come to realize that fashion is a global industrial complex that has massive and incredibly important historical, cultural, and financial significance — I looked back on my own prejudiced views of fashion and stood corrected. But also found it as an incredibly important tool for making a cultural change.

Similar to food, I think that people are very protective around clothing and what they put on their bodies and how they want to be perceived and the things they're comfortable in and what makes them feel empowered or threatened — it's armor, it's history, it's culture, it's tradition — it's all of these things. I approached it that same way. I wanted to make a brand that is made beautifully, that looks beautiful, that is aspirational, that makes sustainability and ethics in fashion something to aspire toward rather than something that's just an alternative. I did it with the hope of changing the conversation, of getting people to come to the brand who might not be seeking out vegan fashion and to fall in love with something.

YOUR WORK HAS ITS OWN PERSONALITY, ITS OWN STYLE AND VISION. I DON'T JUST SEE "VEGAN VERSIONS" HERE.

I've always been drawn to aesthetics. I'm an artist, I went to art school, we live in a visual culture and we are inherently pleasure seekers. In order for something to work, first and foremost, you have to lead with design. You can make the most eco-friendly, organic, cruelty-free, future-material perfect thing and if it's ugly or if it doesn't function or if it doesn't feel good, it's pointless, it won't resonate.

If we're going to condemn the industry of animal exploitation, let's offer something better, something superior. And it's possible! We've seen it with food, we're seeing it with fashion, we're on the brink of some of the most exciting innovations in material technology that are far superior to animal materials and I've always taken an issue with terms like "faux" and "fake" and "alternative" — I feel like those are devaluing and I've come up with my own words.

LIKE "DISRUPTIVE"? I LOVE THAT.

Thank you, I do, too! There's a sense of troublemaking. I intend to disrupt. I'm not just here to make something pretty and cross my fingers and hope that it all works out. I'm going to take some names if I have to! I have something I'm fighting for! Whether that means making things difficult for other designers who are continuing to have cruel production methodologies, or whether it means creating new materials that could potentially put entire industries out of business — I'm willing to do that. To retrain people. To give them something that's more lucrative. That's happening with the dairy industry, which could be gone in the next ten years. Meanwhile, here in New York State, Elmhurst Dairy. (<https://elmhurst1925.com/>), switched over the all plant-based milks after ninety years in business and they're actually doing well.

There's always an argument to keep things as the status quo. But civilization is a project. We can't take it for granted. It's not just here. Architecture, roads — these are all systems created by people. That was a choice, we made decisions. It's an ongoing project that needs to be refined and made better.

GUCCI, MICHAEL KORS, ARMANI, AND OTHERS HAVE ANNOUNCED THEY'RE GOING "FUR-FREE." DO YOU THINK THAT YOU AND PEOPLE LIKE YOU HAVE PLAYED A ROLE IN THAT?

The fashion industry is unapologetically hierarchical — there are very few people in very powerful positions who dictate to people what they should wear, and why and how. This system is being threatened by a democratic conversation that is allowed to question and challenge, which is starting to result in increased transparency.

Now that companies like Armani and Gucci are going fur-free, it allows other brands to see that fur isn't necessarily the epitome of status and power anymore. For a long time, it was *the* object to be seen in if you had "made it." You can still see it in hip-hop culture and rock culture. The fur coat is such a powerful symbol: sexual power, feminine power, financial power — it represents all of those things. But how do we change a symbol? Through education, through giving people someone or something else to associate with it. I think that's what's happened over the last few decades.

Maybe fur now represents something else. If you have a beautiful outfit that was made in a horrible way, how should that be interpreted? Can the beauty of an object be separate from how it was made? Most people would say "yes." If I see a beautiful fur coat on a rack, the beauty becomes the justification, it becomes the truth, and the horrible way it was made is not even in the equation, it's hidden intentionally.

CONGRATULATIONS ON *VOGUE*. IT'S THRILLING! TELL US ABOUT GETTING CONNECTED WITH ALAN CUMMING.

He found me! He was looking for vegan clothing to wear for events and his people reached out to my PR person, Erik Bucci. When he agreed to do a shoot with me, he said, "Yeah sure." And I was, like, I don't have to beg you?! He showed up and was so easy to work with — not a diva at all, so laid back, having fun and joking around. I felt like I was hanging out with a friend. We've stayed in touch and he has become kind of an ambassador for the brand. He wants to promote us and use his position of leverage to amplify what we're doing, which is so needed.

The truth about Brave GentleMan is that we're not a major operation by any means. I'm here full-time, packing things up and sending off customer orders, sitting in the store and working retail. We can't compete with a YSL or Stella McCartney, we don't have the resources. They have money and huge teams and dedicated factories and tailors. I'm scrambling every day to keep this thing afloat and hoping something will take off!



Photo by Lauren Perlstein.

RIGHT, IT ISN'T JUST PHOTO SHOOTS AND RED CARPETS. TELL ME ABOUT YOUR DAY-TO-DAY AS A FASHION ENTREPRENEUR AND SMALL BUSINESS OWNER IN NEW YORK CITY.

With any small business that looks great — that has great social media and PR — there's a struggle going on behind the scenes that people don't know about. The expectation of perfection is a training that needs to be undone. We have been trained to see ourselves as these passive consumers — I *hate* that word — as opposed to “citizen,” an *investor*. If people who weren't business owners saw themselves as Citizen Investors, it would put a different level of importance

behind what they buy and how they view the businesses they support. Your money isn't just lining the pocket of the designer, you are funding a system that is going to flourish because of your money or not — and you have to support the systems you want to see flourish. As a consumer, you can't do that, you're on the receiving end, you're passive, not active.

It's the law of supply and demand but told in a slightly different and more empowering way for the individual. You're not lost in the crowd anymore. Your dollar makes a big difference — *one person can make a big difference*. Especially for us smaller brands.

JUST FOR FUN, COMPLETE THIS SENTENCE: “BESIDES MY PHONE, I NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...”

If I leave the house and I've forgotten to put on my fragrance, I feel kind of naked. When you're in the fashion industry, you have to appear well, dress well, smell good — if any one of those elements is off, you're like, *shit*, what if I run into someone, what if I'm sweating and I smell bad? I love **Le Labo**

(https://www.lelabofragrances.com/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMik4Xhzv3u2QIVC16GCh3IRwnwEAAYASAAEgIpA_D_BwE).

I'm friends with the founder. It's a cruelty-free and vegan company and they're totally blowing up and taking over the world. At this point, Santal 33 has become the next Chanel No. 5. It's a fragrance that is eclectic and it smells different depending on who's wearing it. My husband wears Oud 27 — which is lovely. They're all good.



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