

Q&A

THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN WARDROBE

Interview by Nina Unlay Photography Fruhlein Econar

While the fashion industry is one of the largest causes of pollution, Monica Vivar, or Mo, believes that the answers to these problems might be hiding in the things we've already left behind. Renewable and sustainable clothing is making its mark on the world as an eco-friendly solution to textile waste, but when Filipinos think secondhand, majority of us have one image in mind: ukay-ukay.

When heading to her favorite building in Anonas, on the hunt for her online thrift store Denuo, Mo describes her uniform as a mask and pambahay, things that protect her as she dives into stores of discarded clothing, dust and grime included. But sometimes all it takes is a little bit of care to bring these pieces back to life.

DENUO'S MAIN THRUST IS ECO-CONSCIOUS CLOTHING. IS THIS A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY, OR DID THAT DEVELOP WITH THE BRAND?

I think I saw it in the market as a need, but it was also a part of my mentality. I grew up in Canada, and I feel like I was aware of the environmental and industrial challenges Manila faced compared to that of Canada. The simplest things, such as recycling or the availability of vintage in the market... these were very scarce. These were references I had, but also I have to point out that I was not sustainable at this time at all. I was like any normal person would be. I would shop at malls without a second thought to what I was buying,

where it came from, and where my money was going to. But I knew there was potential to have better options that existed elsewhere. And personally, I wanted that change for myself. I think that was the only time that I imposed my personal intentions onto the business, the only way I felt I could be a reliable leader to the brand was if it meant something to me as well. This was something I wanted to be, I wanted to be someone who cared about the state of consumerism.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE OUR CONCEPT OF SECONDHAND CLOTHING LOCALLY?

I think it goes without question that we should give respect and recognition to organizations that give acknowledgement to Philippine vintage, but [in general] there is still a lack.

In other places in the world, vintage is directly linked to history and an appreciation of culture. Clothing has a story in it. The people who made it are linked with history and the events of that time. Fashion reflected the state of the nation. And it brings a lot of learning with it, whether that be corsets, heels, boho, all of it has a history and I feel that while it's available in the Philippines, it's not easily accessible.

DO YOU THINK THAT WHEN WE SHOP VINTAGE, OR THRIFTED, IN THE PHILIPPINES, IT HAS A DIFFERENT CONNOTATION?

That's a good question because it's a look into what Denuo is trying to achieve... it's a kind of... reestablishing of value. The concept of Denuo is to renew and to

bring back. [Our goal is] not to develop anything different or new that wasn't there, but to bring light into something that may have been forgotten. And I think in essence what has been forgotten is an item's value. The reason why Filipinos think it's so different or so hard to sell vintage is because of our concept of value. When you place a thing, whether it be a person and item or whatever, in an environment that devalues who they are and does not reflect their truth, there is this connotation that it's not worth getting—in general. But when you highlight it and give it an opportunity to shine and highlight its assets, it's able to sell. That's a concept that we're trying very hard to put in our business—to show the value of each piece of clothing, and in turn the value of the Philippine industry and Philippine buying power.

AND IT'S REFLECTED IN THE PLACES WE GO TO SHOP SECONDHAND, WHERE CLOTHES AREN'T NECESSARILY BEING TAKEN CARE OF OR SHOWCASED.

That's an effect of it as well. I think the environment that a thing or a person is in is so strong, it can make a person feel less or feel more. I think that's why we ask ourselves why would we want to buy a cup from this place but not from this place, and it really boils down to how valuable they make it appear. It's a practice of self-discipline to make sure that our environment is worthy of us, to give each other standards.



This page:
The Denuo team.
From left to right: Alex
Lizares, JJ Villianueva,
and Monica Vivar.



BUT YOU ARE ALSO REDEFINING THE IDEA THAT STANDARDS DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO MEAN "NEW."

Yes! Kunyari, [ukay-ukay] sellers usually put [all] their items out there just because they have them, and they aren't really aware of what they're selling. It's very troubling because they're selling items that are dirty and grimy. When I make my purchases, usually the first wash is literally just grime. It's troubling. If we look at it psychologically, [by selling] the idea of lower prices and quality, they're also selling the idea that you're less of a person and that's not true. But on the surface value, what concerns me the most is the health issues.

DENUO ALSO DONATES CLOTHING, SO YOU'RE CAREFUL WITH CLEANING PRACTICES.

We have them washed and ensure they're wearable. Our first big donation was during the holidays, and we're still learning about the best ways to donate. We don't just give it to an organization, which originally we wanted to. But eventually we realized when we

started [talking to] the people in the communities they were donating to, they didn't really get what they needed. They'd say things like "we needed clothes for our kids," or this or that. Now that we're aware, we try to target more appropriately.

THAT LINKS BACK TO WHAT YOU WERE SAYING EARLIER. DO YOUR DONATIONS FEEL MORE VALUABLE THIS WAY?

Yeah. I realized that there are government organizations and corporations that can make the biggest impact, and if we have them back us up that would be amazing, but it's really the smaller organizations that try to keep the most heart and mind.

YOU MEAN SORT OF LIKE A CONSCIOUSNESS?

Yes, exactly. These communities support themselves, basically, and their needs are so specific. For example, they have a lot of senior citizens. And politics makes it difficult for them, political complications are prevalent in any city. It's very hard to help out independently, as an independent organization.

ON THE FLIP SIDE, YOU ALSO HAVE PEOPLE DONATE CLOTHING TO YOU AND YOU SORT OF SIFT THROUGH THEM. WHAT INSIGHTS HAVE YOU GAINED FROM THAT?

When people donate clothes, they usually donate in bulk. Very few times were there people who would give or sell us individual pieces. We appreciate both kinds! But the reason [they give] is usually, "it's not me anymore." Which is totally fine! They think this item no longer has relevance in their lives. The problem comes when they think they need more. It's interesting, because we've found that only one in 30 pieces of what people throw away are actually unusable or unwearable. I think that when they give us these clothes they know, or at least they hope, it still has value. And I think it's important that there's an avenue for that. We always hope that there are more companies and businesses that do [what we do], it isn't a competition for us. The more people we can invite to [re-examine] their wardrobe, the better it is for us. We want more people to divert from the landfill to another person's closet.

SHOP AND WEAR RESPONSIBLY

- **Resist the urge to make impulse buys.** As a responsible consumer, the guiding thought should be the purpose of your purchase, and that can take time.
- **Look for quality.** If the items are well-made, your purchase will last longer, but also your money will support skilled craftsmanship and valuable material.
- **Your next priority is the source.** Be mindful of who creates the product, what it's composed of, and where it came from.
- **Read the tag.** Veer away from textiles like polyester, rayon, and acetates. These go through arduous chemical and destructive processes. Choose more sustainable textiles like industrial hemp, soy cashmere, or recycled polyester.
- **Natural works best.** Launder with biodegradable detergents, disinfect with essential oils and natural agents. Dry your clothes under sunlight, a natural disinfectant. For storage, keep cedar blocks to discourage pests. Use natural aromatics like cinnamon bark, rose buds, or lavender flowers for scents.

**Shop thrift at
denuostore.com**

Denuo also accepts
clothing donations.