This year's crop of fashion graduates are brimming with talent and imagination — but can they survive in the real world, where interns routinely work for free and there's always somebody new and younger knocking on the door? By Annabel Ross

FUTURAMA

Wow factor
The designs of seven RMIT graduates appearing at the fashion festival this month.

With thanks to Wilson Parking and the Melbourne Convention Exhibition Centre. Over: the young designers take us behind the scenes.
On the 10th floor of building 8 at RMIT’s city campus, Anisha Bhoyro lays out a tiny piece of cloth. Demonstrating how to make a jacket using a single piece of silk, she creates a step-by-step microcosm of her design process, which culminates in an intricate jacket of doll-like proportions. Called Precious Threads, her final-year collection is based around the idea of creating haute couture garments with a minimum of waste, “re-tensioning” yarns within the fabric to create a puckering effect, removing the need for offcuts. “There’s a lot of details that are done by hand, so that people appreciate the craft of the garment rather than just, ‘This is a trendy piece for the season’”, says the softly spoken Bhoyro, who graduated from the bachelor of fashion with first-class honours last year.

Bhoyro’s considered fusion of sustainability and fine techniques has been recognised in the form of a place in the National Graduate Showcase, a Sportsgirl-sponsored initiative that will exhibit the works of the country’s brightest fashion graduates at the L’Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival this month. Bhoyro is one of seven RMIT graduates to land a coveted spot in the 12-designer showcase; the 26-year-old was also named RMIT fashion student of the year at Melbourne Spring Fashion Week last September and, as a reward, will soon travel to Milan to commence an internship at Armani.

Yet even those plaudits aren’t enough to guarantee that her brilliant designs will ever find a wider audience. Like most aspiring designers, she’s hoping her two to three-month stint at Armani might lead to a job offer, but is realistic about her prospects. “Fashion companies are run on interns, you’d have to stand out a lot,” she says. The 2010 RMIT student of the year, Laura Anderson, is a case in point. After appearing in the NGS in 2011, she headed to Italy to do an internship with Costume National and studied briefly at the prestigious Istituto Marangoni in Milan. When her money ran out, Anderson returned to Sydney, where for the past three months she’s been managing a retail store and collaborating with Danish company Muuse, which produces and sells couture made by top graduate students online. Anderson admits to being a bit surprised at not having found a full-time job in fashion already.

“Everyone does tell you that there’s not many jobs going, but when you’re fortunate enough to get recognition you do think that that should ease the path,” she says. The 26-year-old remains optimistic. “Things are a little different to what I’d expected but when a challenge comes up, you have to think of a way to work around it.”

Several others in Anderson’s graduate year who have already done internships with celebrated Australian designers including Josh Goot and Arnsdorf are also yet to secure paying roles in the industry, currently working in hospitality while they look for fashion jobs. The hard slog is nothing new, says Karen Webster, fashion director at RMIT and director of the L’Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival (LMFF) from 2006 to 2010.

“It’s no different now to how it has been historically, and I’ve been involved with the program for over 20 years, and I have my own history of when I studied years ago,” she says. On the flipside, Webster thinks the opportunities for students now are broader than ever, thanks to increased awards and grants and closer ties with overseas institutions. “People could always attempt to work overseas but now, just by the way of our communication channels opening up, more and more of our students are going on to work internationally,” she says.

The bigger and better the prize, the more likely the recipients’ shot at success. Laura Wade, a 2010 RMIT graduate, won the Australians in New York Fashion Foundation (AINYFF) award in 2010, consisting of a $25,000 cash prize and an internship of her choice in New York. Wade did her internship at Proenza Schouler for six months and has just taken up a second internship at Thom Browne. “Australians in New York set you up with visas and the internship, it’s a real leg-up to help you intern here,” says Wade. “If you had to work at the same time, it’d be
a lot. I was really fortunate that I could not worry about that, I guess that’s the idea of the scholarship,” she says. As a design intern, tasks would include sourcing fabric and helping with the more technical elements of design, without doing any actual designing as such. At Thom Browne, Wade supports the two designers working directly under Browne. “It’s been interesting to be involved in the discussion of the direction of things and helping out with accessories, it’s been very hands-on in the respect that it’s a smaller team,” she says. Wade sees a move into a design assistant role or similar as the next logical step. “Getting experience at a label over here would be amazing,” she says. “To get experience at an international level is something that’s really important to me.”

Fellow RMIT alumnus Georgia Lazzaro has made that next step. She won the inaugural AINYFF award in 2009, and after six months of being an intern at Narciso Rodriguez and another six months at Calvin Klein, she found paid employment at the latter, where she now works as an associate designer, splitting her time between ready-to-wear eveningwear and celebrity couture. Recently, she’s worked on the fall 11/12 collection and show, and on several gowns for the Hollywood awards season. She works long hours, most of the year, and is directly involved in the design and development for all eveningwear in Calvin Klein’s top-end “Collection” range. “When you’re studying, it’s what you’d fantasise about, in a way,” says Lazzaro. “There’s not many opportunities given to people that ring true to what a designer is.”

Over in Paris, another former RMIT student is also starting to make waves. After graduating with honours in 2008, Sarah Schofield was one of only 18 students to be accepted into the international postgraduate accessory design program at the Institut Francais de la Mode in Paris. Run by the CEOs of YSL, Dior and Chanel, the two-year course is designed as a bridge for students between university and jobs in luxury fashion, consisting of one year of classes, followed by a year-long monitored internship. Schofield collaborated with Dior on sunglasses and shoes as part of her course before doing an eight-month internship in the label’s eyewear department.

A 10-month internship as a design assistant in the bag department of Louis Vuitton followed before Schofield secured her current job, junior designer of bags, shoes and accessories at Nina Ricci. Unlike Lazzaro and Wade, Schofield was paid a minimum wage while completing her internship (it is illegal to work unpaid in France). “As an intern, I was treated with respect and as an important part of the design team. I was never sent to make coffee or photocopy things like in the horror stories people like to tell,” she says.
There’s no shortage of brilliant graduates to emerge from RMIT, from fledgling designers such as Schofield, Lazzaro and Wade to established local luminaries such as Toni Maticevski, Dhini Pararajasingham and Lui Hon, whose profile was boosted by an appearance on Project Runway Australia. Graeme Lewsey, CEO of LMFF and one of the judges on the national graduate showcase panel, says that it’s no coincidence that more than half the graduates in the showcase come from RMIT.

“It’s through the incredible work they’re doing,” he says, himself an RMIT graduate. But it’s not the only Melbourne institution producing great talent. Since opening in 2008, similar success stories have emerged from the Melbourne branch of Australia’s Whitehouse Institute of Design. Penelope Efthimiadis was named graduate designer of the year at Whitehouse in 2010, and did an internship at Karen Walker in New Zealand before heading to London to take up an internship with Antipodium. Now working as an intern at Mary Katrantzou, she’s working 10am to 10pm in a studio in the lead-up to London Fashion Week. She’s not on easy street just yet: to make ends meet, she works part-time at night in a cinema, often knocking off at 2.30am and getting up for a 9am start at the studio the next day. But she’s not complaining: “I really enjoy nights at the cinema, it’s kind of my relaxing time … so it works.”

Chloe Smith, 2010 student of the year at Whitehouse, fulfilled her dream of getting an internship with Ann Demeulemeester in Belgium but returns home feeling less optimistic about her prospects here. “The hard reality is that this industry possibly won’t pay the bills and (won’t) provide me with the lifestyle I would wish for myself.” After being an intern for up to a year – longer in some cases – entry-level positions such as an assistant designer role might pay $30,000 to $45,000 a year in Australia. By the time graduates move into an actual designer role, they could expect to make an average of between $45,000 and $70,000 for the first four years.

Graduates are informed of the economic realities, says Robyn Healy, co-director of fashion at RMIT. But that doesn’t deter them. Elle Roseby, CEO of Sportsgiri and member of the judging panel for the graduate showcase, says that most graduates are aware of just how tough it is. “I think it’s very, very difficult out there.” Of the current batch of RMIT graduates in the national showcase, Bhoyro is the only one to have an international internship lined up as part of her student of the year award. The other six are in a state of flux, with two graduates battling to get temporary residency visas in Australia. The editor of Ragtrader magazine, Assia Benmedjdoub, concedes that times are tough. With an unprecedented number of fashion businesses going into administration last year, and the strong Australian dollar damaging overseas exports, the resulting redundancies did not bode well for job-seeking graduates, Benmedjdoub says. “I think the biggest concern is that a large number of graduates are not seeking entry-level roles or pursuing long-term internship programs,” she says. “This is not an ideal time to be entering the market without the practical business tools needed to survive the sector.”

Knowing how to market themselves is integral to the graduates’ success, Lewsey says. “That’d be my advice to students – keep your creative integrity but definitely keep your eyes open and attuned to the digital frontier.”