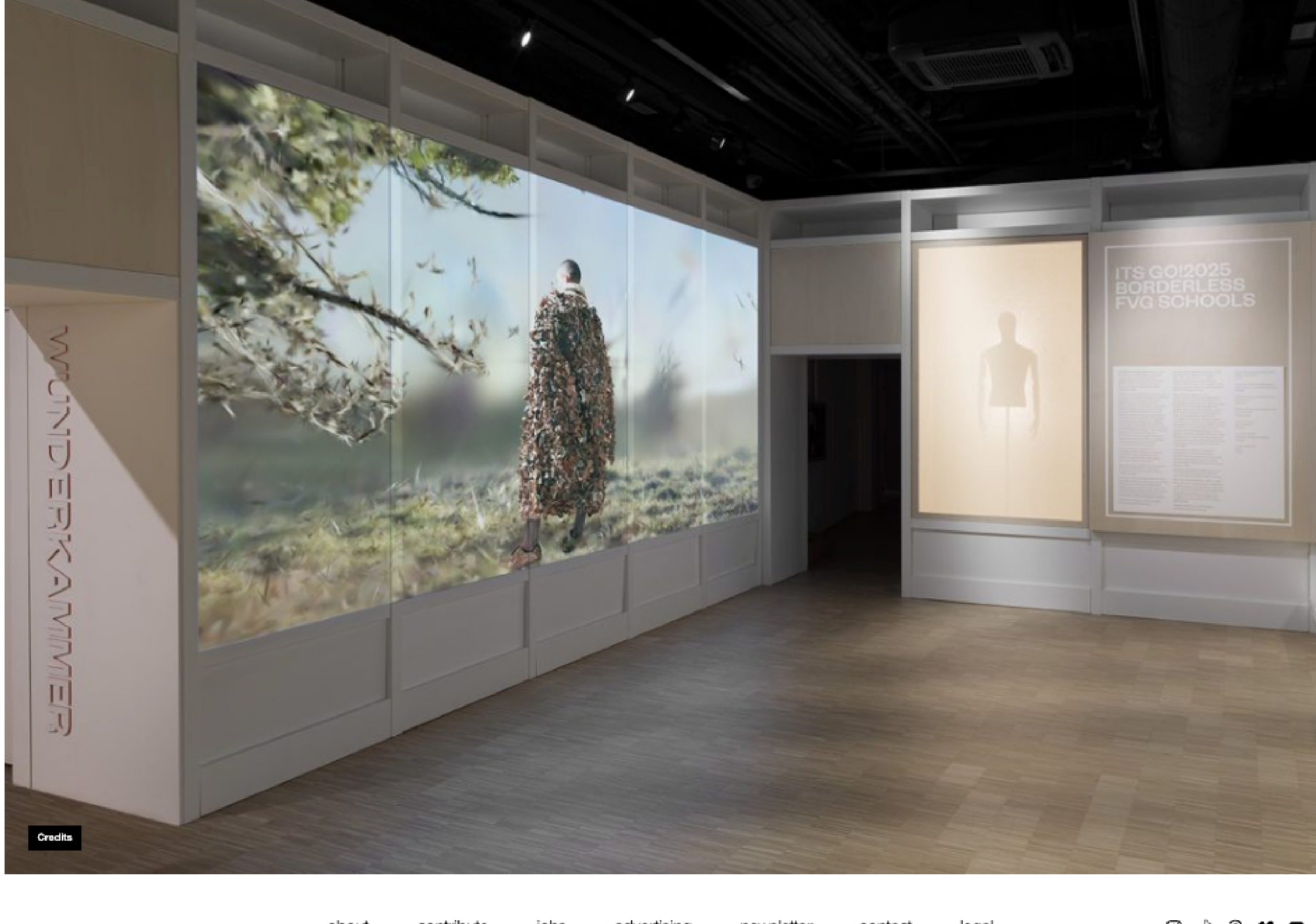


how can young designers navigate today's fashion climate?



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snape the future of fashion. Both Schön! and the ITS Contest share a philosophy of supporting and spotlighting new talent, and we joined the party in Trieste, Italy, to celebrate the ten finalists. Each year brings a fresh lineup of ten emerging young designers keenly attuned to the zeitgeist of their era. This year was no exception, and among those present was a jury of professionals specially invited to determine which designers' offerings had legs in today's fashion climate.

Which creatives inspired intrigue? What challenges do they face in today's industry? How can we support aspiring designers to succeed? These questions hummed throughout the weekend-long event, and we turned to jurors [Luca Rizzi](#), [Mark C. O'Flaherty](#), [Serge Carreira](#), and [Tom Eerebout](#) for more insight. As experts in their respective fields, each professional brought their own distinct perspectives to the table.



Mentorship

For a young designer, sourcing a mentor can be like rifling for a needle in a haystack. Fortunately, there are many mentorship programs out there for designers who are dedicated to their craft. Events like the ITS Contest are crucial for giving young designers the visibility and support they need to succeed. "In today's saturated media landscape, it's important to have events that elevate new designers," said fashion photographer and writer [Mark C. O'Flaherty](#). "The ITS Contest provides a platform that ensures their work is taken seriously by both the industry and the wider world."

This year, the ITS Contest offered mentorship schemes, bursaries, showcases at the ITS Arcademy's Museum of Contemporary Fashion, and opportunities to engage with influential industry figures and partners, such as [QTB](#), [Swatch](#), and [Vogue Eyewear](#). Beyond this, designers can find support in the [CFDA Vogue Fashion Fund](#), [LVMH Prize for Young Fashion Designers](#), [British Fashion Council's NEWGEN](#), [H&M Design Award](#), [The Fashion Pact Mentorship Program](#) and many more.

Supporting young creatives comes second nature to juror [Serge Carreira](#). As the Director of Emerging Brands Initiative at [Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode](#), Carreira specialises in building support programs for emerging designers. "Each designer is unique," he says. "What makes the difference in their success is not how they break the rules, but how they play with them. There's no single recipe for success—it's more like a cocktail, a mix of various elements."

The rewards for helping emerging creatives has proven to be a two-way street. For Carreira, the process is an insightful opportunity to see how designers constantly discover new ways to approach business. "What's interesting in these processes without replacing the designer's role—it's about being alongside them to support them in reaching their goals."

For fellow juror [Luca Rizzi](#), the Tutoring & Consulting director for [Pitti Immagine](#), the disastrous impact of COVID has made aiding designers early in their careers all the more crucial. "The industry has shifted significantly since COVID," he says. "Independent brands are struggling the most, and our role is to help them find stability in this new environment." As the leading force behind Pitti Immagine's division aimed at helping and guiding talented designers in their professional pathway, Rizzi's eye is attuned to discovering international fashion and design which aligns with sustainable and conscious living.

"At Pitti, we help designers find their right path," Rizzi explained. "We work with both young and established designers to avoid mistakes in marketing and communication, ensuring they stay true to their creative vision." A key part of his work is ensuring that young talent is mentored efficiently and protected from exploitative contracts. Rizzi's initiative is part of [Pitti Uomo](#), one of the most important fashion events for men's fashion, and features collections from designers who are dedicated to sustainability, innovation, and creative craftsmanship. Most importantly, it offers them a wide space to showcase their collections in a high-profile, industry-leading context.

Sustainability

"Sustainability is a significant challenge, but many designers are taking meaningful steps, like using offcuts and natural dyes, to reduce their environmental impact," says O'Flaherty. Sustainability continues to be a major theme in the fashion world and, unsurprisingly, was present throughout the collections belonging to each of the ten ITS contestants.

Yifan Yu's 'zoomorphia' collection, for instance, responded to the growing movement against fur in the fashion industry. Meanwhile, Zhuen Cai's collection, *Chinese Garden Journey*, highlighted humanity's connection to nature and sustainability through his innovative use of fabric, including persimmon plant dyes. Finalist [Qianhan Liu](#) also used 90% repurposed leather in her lineup and [Mijoda Daijomi's](#) collection was a fashion-based exploration of rainwater collection.

"Sustainability is no longer a buzzword—it's a necessity," says Rizzi. But upholding ethical eco-practices can be a tall and expensive order for emerging creatives with tight budgets. Acknowledging this, Rizzi believes that we need "systemic change" to help young designers "to make sustainability the standard in fashion, not a niche."

Another factor limiting the growth of evolving brands is obtaining a sustainable stream of income. While this can be helped by the backing of a retailer the retail landscape is typically hard for designers to navigate. "Thanks to the digital boom and the struggles of traditional retailers, many brands cannot simply shift from wholesale to direct-to-consumer models overnight due to pricing and audience considerations," says Carreira. "The retail market has become more closed off. For a while, programs like those from Matches, Net-a-Porter, and Essence were fantastic in promoting young designers, but as the digital bubble burst, these programs are now focusing more on security. It's no longer about getting the ideas; it's about how to bring those ideas to the customer."



Storytelling

How exactly do young designers capture the attention of retailers and customers? For Belgian-based stylist and fashion consultant [Tom Eerebout](#), judging the emerging talent was an opportunity to support new voices in fashion. "I love working with designers who have fun with their collections," he shared. "Fashion is about storytelling, and the most exciting designers are those who take us into another world." Also in agreement, Carreira expressed his excitement for designers who draw inspiration from their personal experiences. "They're constantly refining their methods, making sustainability an integral part of their design process."

"The best designers today are those who can translate their personal stories into collections that resonate with the broader fashion landscape," believes O'Flaherty. One look at the nominated collections, and it's easy to see the importance of designers who combine personal narratives with commercial creativity. For his ITS nominated collection, [Patrick Taylor](#) drew inspiration from his childhood photographs and experiences of skiing and sailing with his family. Other personal narratives exuded from collections by [Naya El Ahdab](#), which traced her journey as a disabled woman, and [Macy Grimshaw](#), whose work centered on her grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's disease.

For the jury, storytelling and social relevance seemed to be the reigning elements distinguishing one designer from another. The ITS mentorship program was highlighted by the selection of [Maximilian Raynor](#) from the UK, who was awarded the ITS Jury's Rewarding Honors for his powerful use of historical and artistic references. "His work made me smile," said Rizzi of Raynor's design process. "He brings joy through his creations, which is something we need more of in fashion."

Collaboration Over Competition

Once an intern for renowned fashion stylist, creative consultant, and fashion mentor [Anna Trevelyan](#), Eerebout quickly became her first assistant before going on to collaborate with notable icons such as Lady Gaga, Kylie Minogue, Rita Ora, Banks, Austin Butler, and Sylvie Kreusch, while his editorial work has been featured in international publications such as *Vogue*, *Interview*, *V*, *Numero*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Elle*.

"Anna Trevelyan was a major influence on me, as she was deeply involved in supporting young designers," says the stylist. Judging for the ITS Contest provided him with the opportunity to continue his mentor's ethos of helping others succeed. "I've always felt it's important to support new talent, and when I got the chance to work here, I felt like a kid in a candy store. The opportunity to dive into the archive and portfolios was incredible."

Instead of a winnertakes-all format, this year's ITS Contest adopted a more inclusive approach, offering support and recognition to all the selected designers. Barbara Franchin, founder of ITS Contest, explained: "Collaboration, rather than competition, is essential. Young designers need the support of the industry to thrive, and the challenges they face are best overcome when they're united."

With the theme of "Borderless," the event exemplifies the global community's desire to push past cultural and geographical boundaries to bring fresh ideas and artistic collaborations to the forefront. Senator Lucia Borgonzoni of Italy's Ministry of Culture, who attended the event, lauded the initiative for its commitment to supporting young creatives, stating, "The ITS Contest provides a platform that celebrates diversity and innovation, key drivers in today's rapidly evolving cultural and artistic dialogue."

Eerebout echoed these sentiments, saying, "Events like this are so important because they bring people together and provide young designers with a platform to showcase their work. It's not all about the big names like Gucci or Valentino. We need to make space for these young talents to shine."



Learn more about ITS Contest at [itsweb.org](#).

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