



Michele Lee works on creative ideas for a fresh window display at her downtown Guelph boutique, recently renamed Shop B.



Michele Lee prepares “the girls” for a new look in the window of her Guelph boutique recently renamed Shop B.

Window into a lost art

Michele Lee’s fashionable customers appreciate the effort she puts into dressing her shop window

BY LYNN HADRALL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAMILLA B.

Do you ever just admire a window display? The best fashion displays stop you in your tracks and entice you to enter the store.

Store owners used to work hard to dress their windows. Any trip downtown meant strolling past delightful displays. Two British television shows that showcased the early days of retail – “The Paradise” and “Mr. Selfridge” – delightfully captured that excitement. Window displays were seen as works of art as well as tools of merchandising.

Today, major department stores in big cities such as Paris and Toronto still take pride in their storefronts. For spring 2018, Galeries Lafayette in Paris incorporated live animation in its windows, mesmerizing



Lynn Hadrall

pedestrians and taking care to credit the creators of each display. Hudson’s Bay in Toronto went big on newspaper advertising last November to unveil its holiday display, pitching it as a “spectacular celebration with a special musical performance by Pentatonix.”

Small urban centres have lost much of that creative flair, with the advance of big-box stores and online shopping. So it’s refreshing to walk by a boutique where the owner cares about the story in the window.

Michele Lee loves to hear people commenting on the displays she creates in her chic boutique on Quebec Street in Guelph. The owner of Shop B, formerly Blush, spends countless hours planning her window dressing.

“It really is a lost art,” Lee says. “I absolutely love to hear the customers’ reactions when they walk by the window. It makes me so happy to hear if someone tells me that display made them smile, or that they wanted to pop in because the window grabbed their attention.”

Lee keeps a journal, creates a mood board and collects images that inspire her from sites such as Pinterest and Instagram. To plan her windows, she peruses those visuals and brainstorms ideas to match the season’s merchandise.

“Once I have the inspiration, I start sketching different layouts for the shop window. Next, I like to make a list of props to buy or to make for the display,” Lee explains. “Sometimes I start the planning and then decide that I think something else might work better. Back to the Pinterest board I go and scroll through more ideas. Sometimes it’s good to have a plan B.”

Some displays are labour-intensive. For one, she did a backdrop of cross-stitched flowers. It started with a pattern, but she ended up winging it. For another, she wet paper and then randomly dropped dark navy ink on it, as a backdrop to showcase classic navy dresses.

The window displays often feature two mannequins that Lee has dubbed “the girls.” They are her blank canvas, ready to

model any new style.

One of Lee’s favourite displays was a Christmas installation with a huge advent calendar containing numbered boxes. It generated anticipation on Quebec Street.

“Each day we took the box lid off and revealed something on display. It was fun and it kept people dropping by to take a peek and see what we were showing.”

Window day has become a big event for her. Lee will post a picture of the new window to her social media accounts. This elicits a barrage of comments such as “Your window is seriously awesome” or “I so miss living in Guelph and walking past this lovely shop window every day.”

Lee developed her display talents at Seneca College in Toronto in a two-year program for visual merchandising. She got

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hands-on experience through the college's field placements. She has worked at fashion companies including the Bay, Eaton's, Suzy Shier, Creeds and Club Monaco.

"I would say absolutely hands-down I learned the most being at Club Monaco. I was there for nine years and you kind of get that esthetic and you know how they roll, and that just felt right for me. It was a great place to work."

Although she loved the work, the commute from Guelph to Toronto kept her from enjoying life in the Royal City. Lee made the most of her weekends and eventually decided to open her own boutique. It was a big step to abandon a secure, senior position with a big company to become a self-employed entrepreneur in a small city. But Lee loves a challenge.

"It was a real shakeup. Absolutely," she says. "I did little surveys before I opened the store in Guelph to get a feel. At that point, when I was with Club Monaco, I knew what was happening in Toronto. I was also in New York, probably about once a month. You see what's happening in the big cities, but it is different in Guelph."

Lee opened Blush in October 2004. She swapped the long commute for a job within walking distance. She got to know her customers who keep in touch even after they move away. Fourteen years after she started her business, she now sees daughters of the women who remain her loyal customers.

"I think when I first opened, everybody thought that I would be gearing toward the university crowd, but that is not my customer. It surprised me too because I thought it might be university, but it was definitely a different clientele. Now I've known these people and I know what's in their closet and their shoe size. I know their brand, what they can wear, what fabrics they can wear."

Lee thinks it's important to stay innovative. One fun idea she featured for four years was a mobile pop-up store in a pink RV trailer. She named it Blush on Wheels



Michele Lee's five tips for summer style

- 1 Summer is the season to have fun. Add a pop of colour with your shoes, handbag or sunglasses.
- 2 Wear lightweight fabrics. Linen and cotton are perfect for super-hot days.
- 3 White denim is a summer favourite. Find the right style and silhouette and you will wear it with everything.
- 4 Dresses – find a few effortless styles to wear over and over. Change up the look by switching up your accessories.
- 5 Stay safe and stylish in the sunshine. Straw hats and "sunnies" are summer must-haves.

(BOW) and hit the road bringing clothes and accessories to special events and smaller communities.

The boutique has an online presence and active social media accounts where Lee's eye for imaginative snapshots draws devotion. Her Instagram account has 140,000 followers and there are 156,000 monthly viewers on Pinterest. Her blog offers lots of style tips, like how to wear a vibrant red top with classic jeans and a neutral shoe – "when you are wearing a statement piece, keep your other styles simple and understated."

This spring, Lee felt it was time to revital-

ize the boutique, so she changed the name. "Time to move forward and grow. Our new name, Shop B, feels like a refreshing yet timeless update for Blush. The change has us feeling excited and inspired."

Lee, who shares a 1950s Guelph home with her husband, Sean, and their French bulldog, Louis Pierre, says she wants her retail space to provide a respite from the busy world. Regular customers affectionately call it "the pink bubble." Carefully chosen styles are showcased in a space that could be found in a trendy section of any big city, with fresh flowers, whitewashed wood floors, and background music befitting a French café. Her favourite playlist currently features Diana Panton, a Canadian jazz singer.

Lee's personal style, which is chic and seemingly effortless, influences her choices. "I seem to be most influenced with how French women dress. I think it's their attitude; they look comfortable and very confident in what they are wearing."

High-fashion streets are a long way from the tiny hamlet of Ethel where Lee grew up. She attended school in Listowel and was creative from an early age. Her father, a farmer, was also an artist and photographer. Her mother loved interior design.

"I think all my siblings, we got something creative. I've just always been interested in being creative and artsy and the fashion."

Lee followed a French esthetic long before she got to stroll the cobblestone streets in that fashion capital. She was thrilled to visit Paris for the first time in the spring of 2016. She took it all in – blossoms, architecture, culture, shops – but, most of all, the street style.

"Needless to say, I was snapping photos the whole trip. It was still a little cooler at that time, so the women were layered up in their chic outerwear and scarves. Believe me, I was subtly taking notes."

Lee has made sure that you don't have to go all the way to Paris to capture European flair. Just stroll Quebec Street to see what "the girls" at Shop B are wearing in the window. ©

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