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Art of the Gentlewoman Rises From Pantsuit Nation

Started by Melissa Martinez and Melissa Kanarek, the California-based fashion brand wants to reach women who like "dapper femininity."

By [Khanh T.L. Tran](#) on January 25, 2017



A look from Art of the Gentlewoman's debut collection.

A trend forecaster and a furniture upholsterer see opportunity rising from Pantsuit Nation.

As sales of pants continue their momentum and **women move forward politically**, socially and economically, Melissa Martinez and Melissa Kanarek are launching a fashion brand that centers on the suit.

The founders came together from disparate backgrounds a year ago to start Art of the Gentlewoman in Laguna Beach, Calif. Martinez, who studied at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology before designing at Liz Claiborne and in the surf industry, runs a trend forecast and design consultancy called Pelt Inc. Kanarek, who trained in high-end furniture upholstery in England, is working in fashion for the first time.

What they have in common is a disdain for the lack of options in women's suits. As Martinez described it, the styles that are available are either maternal or sexy and tight. "We couldn't find a pocket that could keep a cell phone in," she said. "It wasn't a reflection of us as women."

Launching March 1 on their web site and through a pop-up shop in Kanarek's store Brass Tack in Laguna Beach, the debut collection centers around a slouchy suit in a linen-viscose blend with a cotton T-shirt, silk halter shell and accessories such as a silk tie and Modal bandeau to complement it. Though minimalist, the designs reveal tiny details, such as hidden tabs that cinch the fit on the pants without a belt. Prices for the six pieces, made in **Los Angeles** and Asia and washed in hues of black, white and gray, run between \$68 and \$280. The blazer and pants combination goes for \$448.

"We're huge proponents of affordable luxury," Martinez said. "Today, women are spending more money on trips and saving money on the family."

Operating with an edict not to produce too much or grow too fast, Kanarek estimates that first-year sales will be less than \$1 million. Continuing the concept of designing each season as a capsule collection, she plans to offer the shell and T-shirts in new colors and add a silk scarf for summer. A military duster and skinny drop-crotch pants, both in wool blend, are slated for the fall lineup. For holiday, she envisions what she calls "the cool girl interpretation of the lounge suit."

They're looking to outfit more than cool girls, however. Blending philanthropy with fashion, they hope to partner with a charity, perhaps Dress for Success, which aids women who are looking to reenter the workforce.

"We are a female-empowered company," Kanarek said. Even though **Hillary Clinton** lost the presidential election, "it's an interesting time to be a woman, politically [and] socially."

As such, Martinez added, "There's a whole movement toward dapper femininity." Plus, with the unisex cut of the fine jersey T-shirt, she said, "I wouldn't be mad if a guy bought it and wore it."