

## STYLE

BEHIND THE SCENES: CHELSEA GRAYS

## An afternoon in NYC with designer Chelsea Grays

By Niya DeGroat Henry

It's 12:30 p.m. on a warm Sunday afternoon in Midtown Manhattan, and like many other fashion professionals around New York City, I'm jumping into yet another shared Lyft ride on my way to yet another fashion event. Only this time, I'm headed to 300 Vesey Street in the Financial District, to meet M.F.A. fashion design graduate Chelsea Grays, as she and nine other designers prepare for the Academy of Art University's annual Graduate Fashion Show at New York Fashion Week.

When I arrive, I make my way backstage and immediately bump into Grays, who, along with the other designers, has just completed one of many backstage walk-throughs with the production team. After a brief introduction, Grays, who is on a mission, politely asks, "Do you want to walk with me to find a Rite-Aid? I'm not supposed to leave, but I really need to go there." I oblige. As we step back out onto the warm street, Grays cannot help but take in the views. "Every time I am in New York City, I never get to explore it because I am always busy," she confesses.

The 26-year-old psychology-major-turned-designer from Cleveland, Ohio, arrived in New York almost a week ago by bus. Every day since then, she has been working diligently on finalizing her menswear collection at Kimball Studio, a designated

workspace for the Academy's M.F.A. designers located in the middle of West Village. Daily todos have included last-minute touches such as finishes, model fittings, and alterations.

Her inspiration comes from three sources: the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat; the documentary Grays made about homelessness in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood while in school; and her mother's

upbringing and upcycled sense of style. Basquiat was a Brooklyn-born artist and poet known for his street art; most notably for painting graffiti on buildings around Manhattan with the signature tag SAMO meaning 'same old.'

She started off her studies constructing women's garments and only moved into menswear due to her own penchant for wearing men's clothing, which, she admits, she gets from her mother. "When I was younger, my mom would dress me like a boy for some reason," she says. "She would also wear men's clothing out of necessity because growing up she couldn't really afford clothes. She had a younger brother, too, so she would buy clothes that she could wear and then pass them onto him because it was easier."

Upon re-entering the venue, we are met backstage with a chorus of Grays' fellow designers shouting; "There you are, Chelsea! Where have you been? We need to take a group photo!" As she dashes off, I take a closer look at the clothes Grays has been working on, hanging perfectly on racks arranged in show order, with affixed model cards. The collection, I find out, is full of oversized separates—buttoned-up shirts, baggy pants, shirt dresses, and coats—in

a color palette of blues, greens, grays, and browns. Her "artsy craftiness," as she describes it, is highlighted in the screen-printed shirts that are reminiscent of Basquiat paintings, as well as her use of wool felting and effortless mix of patterned fabrics.

The collection offers layered, multi-patterned looks with a refined edge. All of the fabrics were donated. The collection is an interplay of streetwear, urban art, and upcycled fabrication, presented through a social lens of making something out of little to nothing.

When the group photo is over, I catch up with Grays who has joined the other designers in ironing and steaming their garments. I can't help but notice the camaraderie between the designers. One by one, they check in with each other to make sure everyone is on task or if they need a helping hand. It is a moment of inspirational teamwork and fellowship.

As Grays continues to

prep her collection, the nerves begin to kick in.

"[Chelsea] has an interesting story," said Director of Public Relations for the School of Fashion Gabriel Gima during a brief conversation. "She was a psychology major and part of her collection was looking at people that were outside of fashion—to look at perspective ratios, the way people wore things and how her creative eye connected it to clothing in a non-traditional fashion display."

With just under an hour to show time, Grays and I part ways to get ready for the show, but not before she leaves me with one last thought. "I want the audience to see the passion behind the collection," she says confidently. "I want them to see that it is more than just clothes."

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Photo by Danielle Rueda.



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