

KIM WEST



THE LATEX QUEEN OF THE UNDERGROUND SCENE

FORGET THE KARDASHIANS. OVER THE LAST 30 YEARS, THE REAL KIM WEST HAS BEEN PUSHING RUBBER FORWARD.

by Ana Brasil

It's almost lunch time when Kim West arrives at her shop in Denmark Hill and heads for a cup of coffee at Rock Steady Eddie's, right across the street. "It's instant coffee, but the owner is really sweet. He lets all the guys from Maudsley [Mental Health Hospital] sit here all day", she warns. Inside, the old American diner inspiration is obvious. On the walls beside the worn out booths, pictures of some of the most iconic 1950's movie stars provide an easy daydream for the regulars. Kim has her glasses on top of her head, holding her hair, and wears a Carhartt sweatshirt underneath a softshell jacket in her relaxed staple look. "Never fancied her too much", she says about the Audrey Hepburn portrait. "Always thought she was boring".

After a 15 year long break, the Kim West fashion house was officially relaunched in 2009. Four years later, its store opened in one of Canberwell's busiest streets and became an instant hit with the local Jamaican dance hall girls. "I think online is great for a lot of products, but for something that is niche, people really need to see it and to try it on. Especially if it's latex. The fit is so specific". Small and all white, the minimalistic style of the shop lets the

coloured latex pieces shine, sparking curiosity in those who walk by its window. Among the customers are also some of the old clientele from the original shop in Kensington Market back in the 1980's, when Kim West's clothes were worn by everyone from Sigue Sigue Sputnik's Tony James to Kylie Minogue.

Even though 30 years have passed since her latex dresses landed on the Great Gear Market, then the centre of London's punk fashion scene, the rubbery fabric hasn't yet found its way out of the underground. "Everyday people come into my shop and say 'what is this?'. I just find it incredible that it hasn't moved on at all", she says.



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Her own experience led her to develop a very peculiar form of the fabric, Kim West's signature Glyde-Tex, a more practical and wearable version that doesn't require the usual hassle with talcum powder and silicon sprays. An upgrade that enabled her to dream of a world where wearing latex would be as common as sporting cotton. But even though there are beacons of hope here and there - she has clients in the corporate world that order some matte black pencil skirts - she is quick to acknowledge that latex is "still underground". A conclusion that comes with its fair share of frustration.

"I feel like I've been trying to break down those barriers for 30 years. Sometimes I feel like I'm really banging my head against a brick wall. Is it ever going to happen? Is anyone ever going to accept it?". Looking at Marlon Brando's famous picture in a biker jacket in *The Wild One* she thinks of leather with envy. "When I was a teenager you had someone like Suzi Quatro wearing a leather cat suit in *Top of the Pops* and it was outrageous! But now everyone wears leather. It's just a fabric that's completely accepted. When are we going to get to the point where that happens to latex?"

THE RUBBER NIGHTMARE

By the end of 2009, it seemed like fashion was getting there. During London Fashion Week, Topshop Unique showed a collection that mixed latex tops and leggings with denim for a grungy look and took rubber straight into the high street the following summer.

"I saw it by accident. I was in Topshop

and I could spot it a mile off. So I went up and played dumb with the assistant and asked 'what is this?', and she said: 'it's rubber, it's a nightmare!'. Unlike Kim West's easy Glyde-Tex, the latex on Topshop required some help to put on, but without talc or lubricant on hand, the customers' romance with the fabric ended up being a one night stand. "Somebody had tried to put them on and obviously had got into a real sweat. It looked terrible on the rail and it was impossible to get on. Even the sales assistant didn't have a clue.

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And I thought, well, that has probably put the course of latex back about 20 years".

Originally from Coventry, where "nobody had ever heard of [Central] Saint Martin's or London College of Fashion, even though it's one hour from London", her ambitions of working in fashion seemed out of place. "Even though I'd make my own clothes constantly - every weekend I'd go out with something cut out from my mum's table cloth - nobody ever spotted it and said 'Kim should apply for a college in London'", she says with an an-

grily. At the age of 55, the designer looks back at those early years with a new perspective. "Now that I've got two kids it has made me revisit that time when I was 16 and nobody knew where to put me, where to send me, what to do with me".

From those years in Coventry, she recalls a "safe idyllic childhood" where an argument with her grandmother stands out as a defining dark moment. "I was seven and I had drawn some pictures of girls with skirts and flared mini dresses on and she threw them

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away because for her it was just scribbling and I went berserk! I just remember her going 'You used to be such a nice little girl. Whatever happened to you?''.

Looking for her place in the world, she moved to London on her own after leaving school. Instead of trying her luck at one of the respected fashion colleges, Kim West found a job in the fabric section of a department store and gazed at a world that fascinated her as much as it scared her. "What I really wanted to do was work for Anthony Price. He was really big in the 1970's because he used to do all the clothes for Brian Ferry, Roxy Music and Jerry Hall, but I was so intimidated! I used to go to his shop in King's Road and maybe look at one thing and then run off." Why hadn't she had the nerve to approach Price or a member of his team? "I thought it was completely unattainable, out of my realm. Why would they want this kid from Coventry? But in my head I was a super star. In my head I was furious! 'I'm as good as Anthony Price. I could do what he does'. But I didn't know what to do with that."

BAPTIZED BY BOWIE

It didn't take long until Kim West started to make her latex dresses in London and catching the eye of celebrity stylists that took her clothes to the cover of magazines and hit music videos. Adam Ant wore her cowboy fringed latex jacket - and so did Samantha Fox-, her clothes were highlight-



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ed in the cover of The Telegraph's Sunday Magazine in 1986 under the title "The new slick look for parties: Different materials for the evening out" and her mum and dad bought it. But something had to change, and she started with her own name. "I would get phone calls every single day, maybe up to ten times a day, from men asking if I was wearing rubber, if I was wearing a gas mask, if I was sweaty. When I started I was 24, so I was young, attractive and working with rubber, and I had a phone number because I

had a business. Now they can get the whole spectrum, whatever someone's into they can find in the Internet, but back then to have a direct line to a girl working with latex.. I was a target".

Being a David Bowie fan since she was 13, it was easy for Kim to snatch the name Kim West from the The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars cover photo. Although it was actually the name of a distribution company that shipped animal furs, for her it was a "good, strong memorable name" that had the plus of keeping the perverts at a safe distance.

For years she worked alone until it got

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to the point where she "was burnt out" and she quit. "When I was busy and I was fortunate enough to have money to employ someone. Those were the good times when I could share the work load. I gave it up in 1994 when there was a big recession, everyone was going out of business and I worked a lot on my own. You know, I lost interest. It was too lonely".

Her comeback in 2009 was the perfect opportunity for a young designer from London College of Fashion to gain experience on working with latex. With a distinctive style, Sasha Louise's latex is a wide net that has served as socks for a fashion editorial in Black magazine and a medieval gown for Lady Gaga. "Now! What a find she was! I'd just relaunched, I needed an extra pair of hands and her email popped in. I said 'sure, come on see me' and I knew in five minutes that she was very good. It doesn't matter how good you are at dressmaking. If you're not good at gluing, forget it!".

With a strong assistant by her side, Kim West had a pretty good 2014. A new wave of young artists like Paloma Faith, Rita Ora, Ellie Goulding and Jessie J are usual customers, magazines all over the world show her clothes in edgy fashion editorials.

This year, Kim West is doing a "proper collection" for men that will be out in March and plans to move to another part of London. "I want to be in the West End, so 2015 is all about working towards that. If we're doing this good just with people passing by in Camberwell, I'm really confident that the West End will be amazing".