

COUTURIER'S CANVAS

We live in a world saturated with fashion, and an industry that pegs itself over cyclical trends. Yet, designer Kirsten Ley is unapologetic about her avant-garde creations and forward-thinking ideologies in the international design lexicon.

BY CHITMAN KANWAR AHUJA

Taking inspiration from the words of Fernando Pessoa this season, Kirsten recalls, "I'm revisiting the roots of my childhood adolescence spent in a back brace. The restrictions of the 22 hour days in my brace heavily influenced my creative expression as an artist. Staying true to my aesthetic, I'm building on that theme through hints of Victorian anatomy diagrams, with massive sleeves and collar details. The silhouettes are classic, avant garde, yet fresh; and the manipulation of fabric is organic and grandiose."

The award-winning Canadian couture designer, prefers working with intuitive and sculptural techniques, as she creates visceral one-of-a-kind works of art, juxtaposing structurally bound garments with the softness and translucence of fervent, flowing silks. As we talk to her, we learn that Kirsten is a woman who speaks her mind yet embraces the vivid colours of life. Her runway collections are the truest form of her soul, being unleashed over a canvas. Edited excerpts follow...

When did you first realise you wanted to be a designer?

I had a few phases of realising that I was a designer. As a child, I always illustrated full collections with names, themes, technical flat style drawings etc. A few years later, when I was around six or seven years old, I wanted

to become an actress. I remember every Sunday night, my favourite activity would be to illustrate and design my future Oscar red carpet gowns. I had an entire sketchpad filled with my future gowns, to be worn down the red carpet. All of this was pushed aside when I grew up, became an actress, a singer and a songwriter. After moving back from Los Angeles to Vancouver, and working as a stylist and in luxury retail, I realised that I wasn't finding the garments I wanted for my clients, because they were actually stuck in my head. I had always sketched my ideal outfits and runway looks, but I never made the connection that I was truly a designer until my

late twenties. I then went to fashion school, graduated at the top of my class, won an award, and immediately gained sponsorship for my first Fashion Week, two months after graduating. It was the perfect storm coming together as everything serendipitously propelled me forward into launching my own eponymous label, Kirsten Ley.

As a creative individual looking at the world, what is your current inspiration?

My inspiration constantly changes and evolves, but I do always have an underlying connectivity between all of my work. For example, I am inspired greatly by Victorian anatomy diagrams, or the turn of the century ways of exploring the human body through early surgical theatres. Those illustrations were extremely explorative and informative, at a time when science was evolving and the exploration of the body was revealed through innovative surgical methods. They were beautiful renditions, portrayed with many artistic liberties taken, but there's something so stunning and visceral about their representation of the human form. That's why I was drawn to leather moulding, because I felt I could express my artistic inspiration through this form of



1. Designer Kirsten Ley (Photography by: Bradley Fairall).
2. Structured skirt by Kirsten Ley (Photography by: Candace Meyer).
3, 4, 5 & 6. Models in designs by Kirsten Ley (Photography by: Alicia Park).

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art and science, melding with fashion.

I constantly find inspiration through literature and poetry, most recently through the works of Neruda, Pessoa, and Baudelaire. Words have always affected me, and reach deep within my soul to massage my most creative impulses and bring them to the surface. I could go on about music, poetry, art, and the way that leaves twinkle in the wind after a rainstorm when the first ray of sunshine hits; but I would be giving the most long winded and superfluous answers, so I will spare you this time.

How do you differ in terms of style, silhouettes, conceptualisation and design language, from that of your

contemporaries?

I think I differ from my contemporaries greatly, because we seem to be in a time where fashion has moved more towards utilitarianism and less romanticism. For me, fashion is escapism and art, and I choose to express my artistic impulses unapologetically through my work. Fashion is an expression of self, and I feel connected when people find any thread of my work that speaks to them.

I am greatly honoured when I can touch a person's soul through art. My silhouettes are organic representations of what moves me from within. I like to always keep a somewhat classic flattering silhouette; like nipping in at the waist and highlighting the

natural female form, yet I also try to change the expected shapes in my work. I like to surprise customers a little bit with each new collection, so they don't get bored of the same cuts, season after season.

What are the design considerations needed to ensure the balance of creating pieces that are visually powerful, yet delicate?

In the end it all rounds up around the construction process. I tend to enjoy presenting ensembles that represent the dichotomy between strong and soft, because it plays into my fundamentals as a designer. Yet if those forms are not executed well, they can risk the translation of that said theme. To me, it's all about preparation, structure built from within, and finally the proper execution of your vision. The hard work is what you don't always see on the surface, but you know the hours that have gone into it. That's why I like to play with different contrasting materials, and I enjoy altering the observers initial expectations of that specific fabric or material. For instance, I mould a lot of leather, which is heavyweight, thick, and stays in its final form. I like to skew the audience's perception of that material by making it look weightless, as if it were organza flowing down the runway.