

Ten people you should meet

Text: MAX BLAGG

HEREWITH *10 DESIGNERS*, MOST OF WHOM WOULD HAPPILY SEW MY LIPS SHUT IF YOU ASKED NICELY. SEVERAL WERE TRAVELLING WHILE THIS DOCUMENT WAS BEING ASSEMBLED, SO THEY HAD TO ANSWER A *RATHER SHABBY QUESTIONNAIRE*. SOME COMPLIED, SOME LIED, NOBODY DIED. IT'S NOT DARFUR, *IT'S JUST FASHION*.





RODARTE
THE MULLEAVY
SISTERS, LAURA AND
KATE, THE ARTISTS
KNOWN AS
RODARTE, CONJURE
UP THE DELIGHTFUL
IMAGE OF LIBRARIANS
TRIPPING ON ACID.

Since they went to Berkeley, a notorious blue-stocking institution on the west coast of the US that caters only to really smart people, usually specialising in science and medicine – that would have to be Owsley acid. These psychic sisters don't take acid, of course, but they do have an interest in science – their dad is a botanist, mum's an artist and they grew up in rural California, greatly influenced by the flora and fauna around them: the towering ancient redwoods and the San Gabriel mountains at the end of the yard. They spent all their time together, more like twins than mere siblings, but with a complete absence of rivalry. Although they wanted to design clothing, first they studied art and literature (Molly and Leo Bloom and F Scott Fitzgerald's doomed Patch family are favourites). They began to make "difficult" beautiful clothes that they themselves have no interest in wearing. They love the movement of colour – Franz Kline and Yves Klein, rather than Calvin, have influenced their mode. And they talk about the clothing in a decidedly unfashion-y way. Describing a dress, Laura says: "It has a quality where it seems to be broken, but actually it's very strong..."

This year's line was influenced by Japanese horror films and kabuki theatre, as well as the colour red. And the models wore red-soled Christian Louboutin heels that elevated them 6½in closer to the sky. These are clothes for dreamy figures, such as Cate Blanchett and Keira Knightley. (Pest alert: the thought of Cate Blanchett has the Kafkaesque effect of making me want to burrow like a cotton weevil into her Rodarte silk-organza number.)

The story of how they broke into the fashion world reads like an indie script. Two Californian waifs, who had never been to New York before, arrive during fashion week with a trunk full of strange clothes and somehow, by dint of their ingenuous yet ingenious cut-out doll invitations, get on the cover of WWD. Throw in a walk-on appearance by La Wintour herself, who tells the kids to "keep it personal". And so they have. They are making clothes that teeter on the edge of couture, girly but lysergic, clothes that make the wearer feel extremely beautiful.

Photographer MARIA ZIEGELBOECK



ALEXANDER WANG
**I MET ALEXANDER
WANG IN THE
HALLWAY OF HIS
STUDIO BUILDING ON
LOWER BROADWAY
IN MANHATTAN.**

I was just leaving after waiting 35 minutes for his arrival. In the fashion world, “timeless” means you are never on time. But he had such a sweet smile. Besides, his excellent publicist and minder, Leslie Rubisch, had already told me everything.

The first garment Alex Wang ever made was a pair of plaid flared pants lacking a centre seam, so the end result was something that would have looked good on the gingerbread man. Undiscouraged by this first, rather banal, silhouette, he began devouring fashion magazines in boarding school and developed a touch of Wintourette’s syndrome, which is characterised by a desire to make people look beautiful at any cost. Inspired by the glossies, the boy insisted on making over many of his classmates. They loved the attention of having him style them, making them look, in his modest description, “awesome”. After boarding school, the pilgrimage to New York, where he enrolled at *Parsons School of Design*. But he didn’t really fit with the school or a structured education in general, so he struck out on his own.

His first big break came with a line of cashmere sweaters, cleverly intarsia-ed with his own favourite iconic images of hot friends and Kate Moss look-alikes. He took an expensive item and made it chic, while maintaining a good price point, and showing impressive business acumen, sold it door to door with his sister-in-law. Now Wang wants his clothing to walk right off the runway onto the street. The new line looks especially sharp on rock’n’roll girls channelling Anita Pallenberg who don’t necessarily have to get up in the morning.

Erin Wasson, who radiates that sexy 1960s rock’n’roll girl feeling, is one of Alex’s constant muses. She went from being on his mood/inspiration boards to becoming his friend and collaborator. They didn’t find out until after they had first met that they lived on different floors of the same building.

Erin, with no previous experience, has successfully styled his runway shows for the past two seasons. Alex has total confidence in her feel for what should go out on the catwalk. For a second season, Alex has collaborated with Manolo Blahnik – “Manolo has been extremely generous with his expertise and guidance.” The monarch of toe cleavage doubtless recognises that underneath the wild party boy who dances like that fly girl on *In Living Color* is a boy wonder, going nowhere but up.



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Photographer MARTIEN MULDER



MARIA CORNEJO

MARIA ARRIVED IN ENGLAND WITH HER FAMILY AT THE TENDER AGE OF 11 FROM CHILE, POLITICAL REFUGEES FLEEING FROM THE BRUTAL REGIME OF AUGUSTO PINOCHET.

As if it were not enough to be thrust onto this xenophobic island, the family moved to a rough part of Manchester, where Maria and her brother, neither of whom could speak a word of English, were subjected to the constant showers of verbal abuse for which certain of this island race are justly famous. (I should know, I'm a gutter-bred chav myself, and probably would have participated in the slang-fest if she had lived on my street.) However, Maria learned to eat chips and humour the local louts, and eventually, enough English to extract herself from Manchester. She ran off to *Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication*, where she was mentored and more by designer John Richmond. They worked and lived together, creating a successful line in the 1980s, before she moved on to the French label *Teben*, and finally her own line, *Zero*, which celebrated its 10th year in 2006 with the opening of a second store in New York's West Village.

Maria is an independent and doesn't consider herself a fashion-world insider. She operates on the edges, on the outside looking in, which has been the way she has lived her life after a briefly idyllic early childhood in Chile, when she learned to knit using her grandfather's carpentry nails. Her first handmade garment was a backless dress and matching cardigan for her favourite doll. And still today, she likes best "those ideas that I have no clue where they came from".

Maria didn't really begin to shed her "refugee" status until she came to live in New York City in 1996, a city of refugees. By then she had married Mark Borthwick, an eccentric English photographer and poet. They settled in Brooklyn and are successfully raising two children in an eclectic community of artists, designers, working stiffs and trustafarians. She loves NYC because it's a city that encourages rather than discourages individuality.

In 2006, Maria won the prestigious *Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award* – an award that comes from outside the realm of fashion. Receiving it in a room filled with people who design airplanes, furniture and buildings, she felt like she had finally arrived.

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PHILLIP LIM
HOW SMART IS
PHILLIP LIM?
REALLY SMART.

First, a few credentials. Last year, Phillip was honoured with the *CFDA Swarovski Award* for emerging talent in womenswear, was a finalist for the *Fashion Design Award* of the *Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum* and a runner-up for the *CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund Award*. So, you might say he's a front-runner. And he is running hard, with a new flagship store in New York's SoHo to anchor his collections of menswear, womenswear and kids'wear, as well as a thriving accessories collection.

He grew up in California, "watching my mom sew all the time. So I guess the art of making clothes was with me from an early age". When Phillip was a kid, he always thought that he wanted to be someone "important". A doctor, a lawyer or a mathematician. And, of course, his parents were on that tip, too. But, he says enigmatically, "I soon learned more about life, and realised that it was important for me to do what I love, rather than what other people perceive as being successful. Fortunately, science was not a good fit for me, and fashion was calling me loud and clear. If I'm going to spend my life working, I should do something that I enjoy. So I decided to make my life in fashion."

The first thing he ever "designed" was a wedding dress. "One of my friends asked me to create a wedding gown for her. I was extremely grateful for the opportunity, but also incredibly unsure of what I was doing. Luckily, the results were beautiful." That's what separates artists from those who simply sew – while still in school, they can design and make a perfect wedding dress.

His family was very supportive of his work from the beginning, which can make a big difference to someone starting out in such a tough business. Phillip lists his current business partner and friend Wen as one of his greatest influences: "From the time I met her, leading to my decision to build *Phillip Lim 3.1*, all of that was very spur of the moment and extraordinary, while at the same time so natural and instinctive." Extraordinary because it meant he was going to leave a comfortable life in California, but he knew it was an opportunity that he could not pass up. "Life is crazy, isn't it? Sometimes you expect something to happen one way, but it unfolds into something completely different."





MICHAEL AND NICOLE COLOVOS
TWO YEARS AGO,
THIS CHIC NEW
YORK DUO TOOK
OVER THE VENERABLE
HELMUT LANG LABEL.

And despite fears that Helmut's "language without words" might not be properly translated by anyone but Lang himself, they have managed to beautifully transform Helmut's iconic modernity into something uniquely their own.

They started out on different parts of the planet: Nicole was born in New Zealand and Michael in Washington State. When their lives finally intersected, they quickly formed a working and marital partnership that radiates strength and interdependence. Nicole's mother was in the fashion business, so for her, it was a natural choice: "My mother has amazing taste in clothes and impeccable style. She can't sew, but she knows a lot about clothes. I always knew I wanted to do something in that world. I went down different paths – styling, photography, make-up – it was not until I met Michael that I decided to actually make clothes."

"I was 17 when I first thought about designing clothes," says Michael. "I looked at fashion as a creative outlet wrapped around a 'real' job." The first piece he ever made was a prom dress for his sister Amanda. Halfway across the world in Wellington, Nicole was making a poncho in a school sewing class. Michael was in his sophomore year of college when he picked up a sketch-book and "decided to see if I could really do this. I used to fill the sketch-book with designs, but never showed them to anyone. That year I showed them to a friend of mine who was really into fashion. She encouraged me to take it seriously. She let me read through her stacks of *Italian Vogue*, *i-D*, *The Face* and introduced me to the fashion director of my college. That was it for me. I got a pattern-making tutor and a sewing tutor, finished the accounting degree I had been working on and devoted my studies and, ultimately, my career to fashion. My family was supportive. I guess they were just glad I had found something to do".

The couple live in New York City with their six-year-old son Max and harbour the same resentful adoration for the place as most of its residents. "I love the convenience and the energy," says Nicole, "and I hate February and August in the city." For Michael, the same things he loves about New York are also the things he hates: "I love the energy and the pace, but find there are times I need to escape. But this town is a constant inspiration."

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RICHARD CHAI
RICHARD LIVES IN
WHAT WAS ONCE
THE HEART OF THE
BEAST, RIGHT ON
THE BOWERY.

He can still feel traces of an iconic past among the new museums, boutique hotels and fast-rising condos of 21st-century New York. *CBGBs* wasn't always a retail outlet, Mark Rothko lived across the street, in the same building that William Burroughs inhabited in the 1980s. In this town, the past is always just below the surface.

Richard started out studying architecture at *Parsons School of Design*. One day, as he was walking along a corridor, he experienced a brief epiphany. A door opened and loud house music poured out – he got a glimpse of ragazzi students sketching an elongated German-looking figure out of Otto Dix. Then, just as abruptly, the door closed. “What was that?” he asked someone. “Oh, that was fashion-drawing class.” Richard transferred shortly thereafter and his trajectory was set.

Fashion replaced architecture, but there are still echoes of volume and space in the clothing he designs. At *Parsons* he was chosen by Alber Elbaz to do an internship at *Geoffrey Beene*. This first taste of couture, of old-school fashion, was followed by a move to Paris, where he studied at the Lissa School and later worked as a sketcher at the house of *Lanvin* (before Alber's arrival).

Back in New York, Richard worked briefly for *Donna Karan*, before connecting with *Marc Jacobs* for an invaluable crash course in brutal gossip and sharp tailoring in the rarefied air of a highly successful fashion house. Richard held the position of design director for the *Marc Jacobs* men's and women's collections, as well as launching the *Marc by Marc Jacobs* men's collection. He went on to revitalise a rather staid *TSE*, and finally went solo in 2004. He has been growing steadily ever since.

Style runs in the family. Richard's brother Eddy co-owns the eclectic *Odin*, an outpost of fine taste in menswear and accessories on Lafayette Street, just around the corner from Richard's brand-new showroom on Mercer and Houston. The showroom was formerly a gallery run by the late, great Holly Solomon, the formidable queen of the New York art scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

Holly's restless spirit seems to have stayed around the place, despite her physical departure from the planet in 2002. Richard's staff report all kinds of



curious manifestations: curtains closing by themselves, clocks running backwards, garments leaping off their racks. Since Holly was a great fashion arbiter as well as gallerist, she may be simply showing her approval of Richard Chai's irrepressible rise.



VICTORIA BARTLETT
**VICTORIA CAN
SEW, BUT IT'S NOT
HER FAVOURITE
OCCUPATION.**

"I'm really not meant to sew. In fashion school, every time I used a machine, it would break. I liked the knitting machines and hand-sewing best." But she did sew her first dolls' clothes when she was growing up in the quiet precincts of Gloucester – a nice town to leave when you're about 18, like most towns all over the world. "Get out as early as you can," as Philip Larkin famously remarked.

Victoria started out in fine art. And during her school years, found a niche in textiles and textile printing when she was about 17, you know what I mean. There was also a fashion-forward boy on the premises, and Victoria's crush on him motivated her to take some fashion classes. He is long gone, probably back to Gloucester. After graduation, she began assisting Rhavis of London, where she learned invaluable couture craftsmanship. Soon after, she made the trans-oceanic leap to New York, where she collaborated with Jeffery Costello on a line called *BC*, designing bodysuits for two seasons and still occasionally dreaming of becoming a trapeze artist.

New York suited her multitasking approach. "It is a whirlpool of informa-

tion, and you can do what you want; it's easy to initiate ideas. This doesn't come so naturally other places. There are so many different cultures here and nobody is entrenched in tradition." As if to prove this point, Victoria switched to fashion illustration and a subsequent career in styling, both of which were excellent groundwork for re-inventing herself later as a designer. Stylists are always the coolest people on any shoot.

Her constant focus remains trained on the geography of the body, but also the body under stress, emblazoned with sutures and stitches, surgical colours. Other signifiers in her work include modern suffragettes, the success and empowerment of women and shape-shifting dance. Victoria explores the functional uniform aspects of underwear, its architectural zones, as well as its immense sexiness.

Her first big break came when a Japanese store asked her to redesign their look. "As part of the deal I asked them to let me do a line of 'fast-food undies.'" This was the start of Victoria's theme of "underwear, outerwear, anywhere". "My vision of underwear started as a concept specifically geared towards the Japanese market. To package bras and undies in vending machines." It was a big hit, and Victoria has been modifying our take on undergarments ever since.

PROENZA SCHOULER
LAZARO HERNANDEZ
AND JACK
MCCOLLOUGH
ARE THE BEAUTY
AND BRAINS BEHIND
THE PROENZA
SCHOULER LABEL.

They can both sew quite well. In fact, Jack asked for a sewing machine (and a blender!) for his 10th birthday. Then, when he was in high school in New Jersey, he skipped town to follow the *Grateful Dead* around the country: "I sewed up all kinds of patchwork corduroy things that I sold off to people on the streets. That's how I supported myself when I was a kid." Lazaro, meanwhile, was growing up in Miami, already making "really awful" things for his friends to wear, the first of which he recalls was a very "Miami" top. Thinking of it still makes his head hurt.

Lazaro's parents were definitely sceptical of the "wishy-washy" fashion world, but he somehow convinced them that he was studying something else, something "respectable" like architecture, until the very last minute when he dropped the fashion bomb on them. "They were totally freaked out, but eventually were cool when they saw how serious I was about it." Jack's parents, on the other hand, were relieved by his choice of a fashion career: "It was definitely safer than wanting to be a glass-blower living in San Francisco."

Their career took off after Julie Gilhart from *Barneys* saw their collaborative senior thesis collection and made the brave decision of taking on two kids and buying up their collection for *Barneys*. "Sarah from *Colette* was the second person who supported us," adds Jack, "and we owe these two ladies everything. We are eternally grateful to them."

Outside of making clothes, art is their consuming passion. "We are really into American art from the 1960s... the whole Judd, Ryman, Smithson thing is really important to us. We have many friends who are artists, and many of our most interesting ideas come from dialogue with them. The invention of a visual language is something we respect above all. To a designer it's incredibly important."

They love New York, but they don't quite get all the talk about this city being the most inspiring place. "We find it very overwhelming sometimes – you're always surrounded by people and things to do. Getting away from the city is something we do all the time, mainly to think clearly and design the collection. We come back to the city to make these things in our heads into actual things that exist."



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JEAN YU
THE TINY SLIVER THAT IS JEAN YU'S STORE IS LOCATED ON A COBBLED STREET IN THE HEART OF SOHO.

Yet it is also a discreet location that seems far removed from the waddling tourist crowds mobbing Old Navy and the discount sneaker stores just a block away on Broadway. The delicate silk dresses and slips draped on mannequins, in shades of silver and gold, flesh tones and undertones echoing around feathery concoctions that tremble as you pass. On the desk, a monograph on Vionnet and Dior's *Little Dictionary of Fashion*. Something about the slightly frayed edge of a deep neckline invoked a coffee plantation in Madagascar, a woman resembling Kristin Scott Thomas sipping a gin sling on the balcony. A voluptuous ambience. A man could spend a lot of money here. A month's wages on underwear alone. My reverie is interrupted by the arrival of Jean Yu, whose Asian elegance perfectly complements the things she makes.

She grew up in southern California, and as a child, was first obsessed with car culture, before stumbling on an endless supply of remaindered fashion magazines at her local news-stand. Jean began studying them and, despite her parents' protestations, went into the fashion business. "I love making things with my hands," she says. "If I had been a man, I would have been a carpenter."

Jean opened her store in 2001, around the time of the disaster of that September. She persevered through very quiet times, making the kind of dresses she would wear herself: beautifully tailored, almost architectural creations in silk chiffon, charmeuse; featherweight fabrics carefully constructed to follow the natural contours of a woman's body. Lingerie seemed like a natural progression and Jean's take on that subterranean garment is rendered in just a few, simple, architectural strokes, devoid of the bondage-y, restraining overtones that most "sexy" lingerie seems compelled to feature. Jean likes the inside of her garments to be as beautifully constructed as the outside – she enjoys the technical aspect, the actual making of these ethereal pieces. The stark minimalism was originally a reaction to that "billboard signage" period, during which people walked around with designer names emblazoned on every inch of their clothing. Jean took the opposite tack of making very extravagant garments that no one could see, except for very intimate



friends. It was a daring approach that quickly won her a loyal following. People found her, usually by word of mouth. "It's real design, real composition," she says, "and the people who recognise it tend to really love it."



THOM BROWNE
**THOM'S MOTHER
DOESN'T SEW,
BUT BROWNE
HIMSELF IS A VERY
ACCOMPLISHED
TAILOR, EVEN
THOUGH A MASTER
CRAFTSMAN DOES
ALL HIS SEWING
NOW.**

His very slim suits and abbreviated pants have outraged the purists and definitely influenced the silhouette of menswear over the past couple of seasons. Odd for a shape that seems, at first glance, to have been originally inspired by that eccentric American icon Pee-wee Herman, the strange and delightful invention of the actor Paul Reubens. But it wasn't Pee-wee, according to Browne, even though the first suit he ever made was a tight-fitting grey suit not unlike the boy/man look Pee-wee first sported around the Playhouse... "I've pretty much worn this type of suit all my life," says Browne. "Growing up, all of us [there were seven siblings] wore *Brooks Brothers* or ordered from the Sears catalogue. Once I graduated from college and moved to LA, I bought vintage suits

and cut them down, had them altered to look somewhat like this."

After a brief acting career and a successful design stint at *Club Monaco*, Browne decided to open a bespoke business. He found a studio in Manhattan's meatpacking district. Armed with five suits made up by a master tailor, he lunched every day on the terrace at nearby Pastis. In an extended performance reminiscent of Gilbert and George (who would look great in his suits), he became a living advertisement for his wares. Curious Manhattanites, never able to mind their own business, would approach and ask: "Where did you get that suit?" He quickly began to build up a clientele.

The stylised cut and rather restrictive proportions of his clothing are perfectly aligned with the curious ambience of the film he commissioned for a recent catwalk performance. *The Septembrists*, directed by Cuban film-maker Anthony Goicolea, adds a whiff of perversity to the Thom Browne aesthetic. The film purports to be a study of a monastic all-male cult, a group of very attractive ephebes who grow their own cotton, do their own sewing, and fish for octopi, the ink of which they use as dye for the stylish baptismal clothes they make for each other. How they reproduce I have no idea, but when they die, they are buried in tube socks. (This last detail is strangely horrific.) Despite, or perhaps

because of this anti-establishment stance, Browne was recently hired by *Brooks Brothers* to produce a line of both menswear and womenswear. And a range of jewellery for *Harry Winston*. "It's good to provoke new ideas and make people sit up," says Browne. Obviously, they end up begging for more.