

FASHION TO KNOW

GEORGIA HARDINGE

Written by LYNN FURGE Photography by NICLAS HEIKKINEN

Fresh off my flight from New York, Martyn Roberts, director of Vauxhall Fashion Scout, grabbed my wrist and pulled me through the eager crowd at London Fashion Week. The Vauxhall recipe has been one that has done well for talented, independent, young British designers (Louise Amstrup, Peter Pilotto and Giles Deacon, to name a few) so throngs of bloggers, buyers and British fashion fanatics lined the walls of the Freemasons' Hall hoping to be part of what's next.

Being told who is “great” has its ups and downs in this business. Guidance is key... but gut is survival. And there it was: a cagey white skirt... less than a corset, more than a peplum. Ethereal yet powerful, and the mind behind it is designer Georgia Hardinge. Martyn was right; she is a knockout.

Georgia's voice is as smooth as silk, and a much lower octave than you would expect, given her fragile bone structure. With the dramatic, stiff caging and the contrasting ripples of fabric, her pieces have an undertone of flesh and bone imagery. The Spring/Summer collection is called “La Belle et La Bête” because of the contrasts; coarse fabrics with soft fabrics, structure with draping. There is a strong influence of Jean Cocteau as well, who wrote the film of the same name. Cocteau was a poet, a writer, a painter, a set designer. The man was multi-faceted, a quality which Georgia greatly values.

“Basically I didn't really want to get into fashion, but I loved the industry,” Explains Georgia from her London studio. “I wanted to be a sculptor or an artist. I increased my ideals and decided I wanted to make something useful. As an artist you want to make something that will make people want to invest in you. The usefulness and the wearability. That is how I ended up as a designer.”

The clothing she speaks of is rich in detail at the hip, texture, and translucency. Everything catches the light just so, whether it be a feather-sleeved bolero or a funnel skirt with multiple pouches. Even her trademark cages are either void of fabric or pulled together with the most delicate organza. Hardinge uses both synthetic

and natural fabrics: silk, organza, chiffon, glass fibers, “something really techno”, mesh, see-through fabrics with a sort of shadow effect, neoprene for the body-con aspect, and wool. “Wool I absolutely love, but it is kind of an antique fabric, don't you think? I have to find other ways to build my garments because great wool is getting harder to source. I buy most of my fabrics in England.”

A metamorphosis of thought and experimentation with shape, the Georgia Hardinge label is ever-evolving. Her first collection was based on archeological stencils and fossils, ordinance maps, atmosphere, and the body. She starts with a basic idea and manipulates the fabric to make something very familiar completely new. You wouldn't look at a dress and immediately think *Ab yes, that is a map of a mountain range.* But the peaks and valleys, the rises and falls are all in there, mostly in the hips, a detail that is her signature. “I find it very feminine. I am very structural, which most people expect to be masculine. Adding in volume at the hip gives any woman that small waist. I don't do it to hide the buttocks; I do it for emphasis of the overall feminine silhouette.”

Although the British Fashion Council welcomes designers with open arms, it is very British school-focused. Georgia was educated in Paris. This makes every single one of her accolades even more her own. She has already won the “Golden Thimble” award from her University, participated in the L'Oreal grand final show, made six cages for the *Britain's Next Top Model* girls, made three custom pieces for the Victoria's Secret fashion show, and through that,

collaborated with Swarovski (the piece is being requested by Rihanna).

Hardinge also participates in All Walks Beyond the Catwalk, a movement promoting healthy, realistic female body types founded by Caryn Franklin, Debra Bourne and Erin O'Connor. Designers taking part were asked to make an additional garment for their fashion week show. When I asked if it was a challenge to get a “normal” body into her finely carved cages and stretchy techno fabrics, Georgia laughed proudly. “I think my designs are for curvy women. Women who have an ass. My looks can be worn by a thin body type as well, but it really suits a woman with curves. I was much inspired by All Walks Beyond the Catwalk, expressing the beauty and nature of the woman. I am selfish in my art. I want to make something I love, but I want other women to love it too.”

Currently selling in Japan, Dubai, Lebanon, and England, she has a lot of body shapes to consider. “My new collection for February 2011 is going to push the envelope further beyond the constriction of the “Cage” season which was Autumn/Winter 2010. One of my main influences is Joel Peter Witkin (famous for his photographs of decomposing bodies). I shall do flesh mixed with a structural element. He did a photo mimicking the Man Ray body with tar and manipulated it. That keeps popping into my head as I design. I keep it very personal. I quite like using lots of feelings in each piece. The idea of being constricted, both personally and in my work turned into the cage collection. I don't feel as constricted anymore.”

In a city where all eyes are on the next new talent, and unique, almost strange shapes get the press, it is possible to fall into that path of designing a namesake line until a major fashion house brings you on to their design team. Georgia has other plans. “I want to grow creatively but also stick to my brand identity. I need to have a commercial level of fashion because right now my pieces are a bit more bespoke. Then of course I will have more story-telling and stage pieces. Maybe go into costume. I don't know. Edgy fashion, film, stage, interactive art, and then have a commercial line that echoes all of my inspirations in a more wearable, saleable way.” With her popularity with both the music world as well as retailers, these New Year's resolutions seem way less constricting than the cages she creates.



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