



## THE FASHION *editor* WHO ROARED

FASHION PURISTS HAVE LONG DISMISSED CLOTHES WITH 'PERSONALITY' AS SIGNIFIERS OF BAD TASTE. BUT, AS *Kenya Hunt* DISCOVERED, CLOTHING THAT SHOUTS IS EXACTLY WHAT IT TAKES TO STAND OUT

PHOTOGRAPH *by* PAOLA KUDACKI

Some fashion editors are born into a life of inherited 2.55 bags and Saint Laurent blouses. I am not one of them. I'm the child of a beach town in the southeastern US state of Virginia: the land of boardwalks, shopping malls, tie-dye, Abercrombie & Fitch flip flops and Gap jeans. A world away from London, Milan and Paris – New York, even. I didn't develop a natural knack for styling when adolescence set in. (I wasn't even voted best dressed at school.) Instead, I grew into my sense of style – and self – slowly, from one geographic move to another.

I've spent the vast majority of my life in fashion as an outsider – as in, 'The American' and, most often, 'The Black American'. Rather than try to acclimatise to my surroundings, I leaned into my state of difference. My clothes – which, for a large chunk of my adult life, were the opposite of the fashion 'uniform' of black, greige and navy – have accentuated this. Fashion lore is filled with stories of outsiders who made it in. Small-town misfits who moved to big cities and became the next supermodel. Or unknown assistants who landed a job at a famous magazine and took off from there.

But race adds a complicated layer to the often romanticised fashion outsider story. To experience fashion snobbery because you're from a small town in Missouri means something different to being alienated because you're Black. (I'll never forget being at a work dinner when a tablemate asked me, loudly, why Black women were so into weaves and hair.) As a Black American woman from Virginia, I've been on both sides of that spectrum, and clothes have always underscored my experience. So I figured, if I'm going to stand out, I might as well *stand out*.

My first big designer purchase was a \$3,000 olive green leather Alberta Ferretti coat that I bought for \$30 at a sample sale when I was 21, during my first months in New York City. My roommate – a petite, fiery, Afroed fashion publicist who would yell on the phone in a mixture of English and Italian – used to shake her head at my vintage clothing that I'd worn to tatters. We shared a brownstone flat in a historic part of Harlem (Maya Angelou lived on our street) and I was giddy with excitement about my new life – and therefore gave the act of getting dressed my all. ▶

Up until that point, the only luxury clothes my student budget could afford were from thrift shops. My most prized possession was a Seventies-era Emilio Pucci dress from a vintage store. It was the colour of sugared almonds: soft green, pink and lilac. I should have worn it sparingly, given how old it was. Instead, I wore it to death, until it began to unravel at the seams. I wore it to outdoor concerts in the park, Friday night dates and Saturday afternoon lunches with friends. I wore it so much that my local dry cleaner, noting its age, suggested I take it to a specialist to have it restored. 'The dress needs to rest,' she told me with a wry smile.

I believed in colour, gloss and shimmer; loud clothes that fashion purists regularly dismiss as signifiers of bad taste. My mother introduced me to Diana Ross in *The Wiz* and *Mabogany* (iconic, accidental 'fashion' films). And I came of age on the dance recital circuit, with a closet full of bejewelled bodysuits.

To make matters worse, the Pucci dress's sweet, retro girliness looked out of step in my new city, especially compared to my roommate's biker jackets, expensive denim and heavy boots. She played midwife to my new wardrobe, using her sample sale access to help me develop a very small, very New York capsule wardrobe of a few designer pieces – a bit of Marc Jacobs, Tracy Reese and Anna Sui – and a whole lot of Zara. It ticked all the Noughties trend boxes: leather trousers, tick. Silky blouse, tick. Designer denim, tick. Slip dress, tick. Statement necklace, tick. I felt as though I was playing dress-up, pretending to be a new, grown-up me. But my magpie instincts hung on.

I loved my glossy Ferretti coat best, mainly because it looked straight out of *Mabogany*. When I wore it, I felt like the woman I moved to New York to be: worldly and stylish. It had slim sleeves, a nipped-in waist and skirt that flared. I wore it daily – and nightly, to work and then whatever party I was going to afterwards. I wore it until it started to lose its lustre, and the leather began to bruise from one too many evenings stuck under a pile of coats. I carried that *Mabogany* sense of camp with me as I progressed in fashion publishing. With each pay rise, I'd buy a purchase even louder than the last: Prada heels dipped in glitter; Miu Miu ones covered in crystals; bell-bottom Marc Jacobs jeans.

When I got a job London, I took the Pucci dress and Prada heels with me, just as the city (and the world) was falling in love with Phoebe Philo-era Céline. At my first European fashion weeks in 2009, sat in the overwhelmingly white UK and Italian sections, my clashing prints felt out of place among an army of navy and camel coats. It was the season of stealth wealth; crystals did not factor.

In fashion, I can think of few things as awkward as being in the middle of a group of strangers who are all friends and colleagues.

To be sat there while people to your right are speaking to the people on your left, and in front of and behind you, is a uniquely isolating fashion week experience. The 15 to 20 minutes of idle chit chat that leads up to the start of a runway show can feel like years when you don't have friends around. Even more so when the look of you sticks out. 'A fly in a bowl of milk,' my dad would say.

Rather than give in to the temptation to shop for a new wardrobe of greige tailoring, I piled on even more decoration; clothes that would make it hard for someone else to look through or talk across me. Clothes that said: 'I'm here. I'm in the room.'

It also meant that I saved a decent amount of money, resisting the urge to buy into rotating trends. I was happy to sit out the craze for oversized suiting and flamboyant trainers. I knew what

I liked. Feminine things with bite: Junya Watanabe deconstructed skirts; Simone Rocha tiers; Molly Goddard tulle; Prada decoration, with masculine bits mixed in.

My career progressed in tandem with the social media age. And, as women increasingly began to dress for Insta-bait – out went the classic coats and in came the loud looks that would become catnip for street-style photographers – I increasingly felt the urge to scale back. And the experience of mothering a small boy inspired a newfound love of the pragmatic. The flouncy dresses and statements heels moved further back in my closet, as I settled into men's cashmere sweaters and denim. A jewellery box full of ornamental earrings that I had in heavy rotation served as the lone remnants of my hyper-feminine predilections.

In an interview, fashion designer Jonathan Anderson once told me, 'The minute you see everyone going one way, you get the hell out.' He was referring to his creative process, but that sense of contrarianism was familiar to me on another level. When the streetwear train was gaining speed, I was leaning into tiered tulle. When the cult of *molto molto*

maximalism took off, I wanted nothing more than to wear denim and the perfect tee. In retrospect, I think this was my way of making sure I didn't get lost in it all. But also my default had become to stand out, because I always did.

Nowadays, the idea of dressing according to trends is moot. Fashion is in a state of constant upending. There is no trend cycle anymore, only turbulent shifts in mood. In a year crippled by a deadly virus, I've learnt that every day that I wake up is a win. What I wear is the icing on the cake – whether that be a vintage smock or a pragmatic crew neck. So I've taken it full circle, back to those early days in New York when I wore things because they made me feel good. These days, it's a series of vibrant vintage house dresses, rope sandals and loud gold hoops. Clothes that still scream, 'I'm in the room,' even when I'm the only one who's there. □

*GIRL: Essays on Black womanhood* by Kenya Hunt is out 12 November



THE WRITER  
Kenya in her  
New York days

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