

DESIGNER
PROFILE

ALICE
RITTER

Self reinvention is something we all entertain, and the way fashion allows us to dream.

Alice Ritter is kneeling at the feet of a long-limbed model, one of a dozen milling around a photography set in clothes from her Fall-Winter 2011 collection. It is crucial that she get the girl's pant legs scrunched just so for the shoot. Precise, but with an unstudied symmetry that somehow comes off as casual. She readily admits to being obsessed with this level of detail, because it's where story springs from. "Design is storytelling," Ritter explains. "You start to draw, then you go into the details and the story takes over."

As much as detail is the motor that drives the story inherent in an Alice Ritter piece, it's also what provokes an emotional response to the item. "The piece has to trigger an emotion," Ritter believes, and the seat of emotion is detail. Detail grabs you by the scruff of the neck. It slips its hand in yours. It follows you home. Detail is what makes an item "really special," she says, "the one dress you'll wear for ten years."

So she sweats the small stuff, crafting and editing a fresh batch of stories with each new collection. The unifying design element--the signature plotline threading one season to the next--is the vision of a better Alice. One who regularly tumbles down the rabbit hole to see where the



path might lead her. The story she's telling and the design process that leads her there is "a reflection of my journey, my self-discovery. A big part of my identity—or my dreamed identity—goes into my design."

Which raises a really good question: Who is Alice Ritter anyway? There are at least two ways to tell that story.

A small-town French girl raised in a nice family with traditional bourgeois values, she grew up playing dress up in her grandparents' attic with a cache of 19th century gowns and corsets. While that piqued her interest in fashion early on, the couture in the pages of French Vogue—Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent and Balmain and the rest—hooked her for life on design. "I



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would never miss an issue,” she says, devoting all of her allowance money to the magazine. By age nine she was intent on sketching YSL’s “Saharienne” dress and, discovering that was no picnic, carried on anyway.

In her family, the idea that one would pursue a career in fashion was inconceivable. “That was way out there, beyond the realm of possibility,” Ritter says. “The attitude was, why not be a singer or an actress while you’re at it?” It just wasn’t done. Instead, one became a doctor or a lawyer. So she moved to Paris to study economics. After completing her degree, she found work with a record company as a music publicist and went about creating a life for herself in the French capital.

That’s where she met and fell in love with the American man who she later followed to New York City and married. And this is where the story of her identity takes a sharp right turn.

“The power of New York City is that you can reinvent yourself,” Ritter avows. In Paris, a global epicenter of fashion, she believes it would not have been possible to reinvent herself as a designer. “Moving to New York changed me totally.



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Here, we have a freer spirit, a strong do-it-yourself thing.” The DNA of the Alice Ritter brand now resides in that sense of freedom and possibility. The line embodies the optimism she encountered on the sidewalks and runways of New York. It embraces the permission she was given—by an entrepreneurial, DIY culture unlike the one she’d come from—to follow what she calls her “true passion” and remake herself as a designer.

Like attempting to sketch the iconic YSL dress as a nine-year-old, this self-reinvention wasn’t exactly a walk in the park. Ritter bought a sewing machine and began ripping apart vintage pieces to understand how they were put together. By studying the way a sleeve or a trouser leg looked when it was laid out flat on tracing paper, she taught herself pattern making. She also read everything she could get her hands on about fashion history and took design classes at night. For the first few years, she experimented with pieces for her friends, all handmade at home. “It was a great way to learn,” she says, “and to get out of my system some bad ideas.”

When she and her husband moved to Brooklyn, she began placing one-of-a-kind pieces in a hip local boutique, Isa, where they sold out within a week. That convinced her it was time to launch a ready-to-wear collection. Her first debuted in 2006, with a solo show at Bryant Park.

Five years and dozens of collections later (including Piplette, her label for Urban Outfitters), she continues to be inspired by all things French—and then some. She’s a huge film buff, especially when it comes to French New Wave cinema. For the Fall-Winter 2011 collection, she drew inspiration from the 1974 erotic French film *Emmanuelle*. It was as much about explor-

ing the textures, prints and bohemian chic of the period as it was about “finding sexiness in new places.” As she explains, “I like romantic, feminine, sexy pieces that are not too revealing.” Focusing on the ground-breaking film from the period helped her stretch past her comfort zone and explore a bold, feminine sexiness clearly distinct from vulgarity.

She has no intention of slowing down the discovery or reining in the adventure. Each time she sends a new collection down the runway or kneels in a photography studio to adjust a pant leg, she’s already thinking ahead to the next concept, relishing the challenge of translating her vision to a new season of shapes, prints, fabrics.

In the end, the goal is for each piece to convey the brand, to make the girl who wears it feel at ease and pretty and just-so, to give that girl license to boldly own the French romantic meets Annie Hall cachet of the line. When it succeeds in doing so, each piece of clothing also conveys Ritter’s passion, her devotion, her complete ass-over-teakettle adoration of every aspect of the work she does as a designer. The work it appears she was cut out for, so to speak, all along.



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