

Industry Insight: extended

Prudence, couture milliner, extended interview

Prudence's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 4, page 138.

How does your work relate to fashion shows?

My accessories give a collection direction.

How did you start to work on millinery for catwalk shows?

I originally took my hats to Harrods and they hated them. The buyer said you'll never make a living making hats. I left in tears. Two weeks later I made an appointment to see Bergdorf Goodman in New York and Henri Bendels and they loved them. And then when they went to Bendels, we photographed them all and got a few covers from that. In between there was a programme on TV with Vivienne, Without Woves, and she was with a tailor and she said "and if I could find people who work by hand, I would work with them all the time" and Sam [my husband] said "tomorrow you are going to call her," and he said you have so much in common with her. So, the next day I called and they said come in. I went in and she saw the hats and she really loved them and then a couple of months later she started asking me to do her hats for shows. That was even before she had red label or gold label. It think it was just Vivienne Westwood. And that was it. That's where it all started.

What is different about working with Vivienne?

When I started, things were more straightforward, the thing that makes Vivienne different is that she doesn't have a backer, she doesn't have people breathing down her neck. So that is good for me because a lot of the pieces I make for her don't sell, quite a lot of pieces do, but not everything. You work for other people ... at St Laurent ... and everything has to sell, "in these colours..." It is really marketed. Accessories and make up are what makes money for a brand. But Vivienne doesn't have to worry about that. The only person who only ever stayed in business by selling clothes was St Laurent. He never had to sell stockings or shoes or lipstick. He's stayed in business selling couture and that's why the numbering started like 0001 and 0002 so we knew who had them, but everything in the show sold. But then people can't afford that but they want something so they buy a lipstick or a bag. Everything is about money. At that time, it was more about expression in London.

From there you went on to produce hats for others?

After that I did St Laurent and Gucci. I went every year for 10 years to meet Lydia Ferez, head of accessories at St Laurent. At the time, there was still a workroom at St Laurent. And she used to say that it is still the old way of doing it. There is still a studio there, they make the hats, they bring them in to St Laurent and we try them on. Then he wanted to retire and they were selling Rive Gauche and they were selling the business and the couture house was going to close ... but then one day they just called and they said are you still interested in making hats and they said "its Tom Ford so can you come in and speak with him."

How do you create millinery for a collection?

You always have to sit down and see what the collection is like, what the fabrics are like, what the ideas behind the collection are, what the hair is like, which people usually don't know by that time, the shoes, then you think. You have to have really strong antennae. Everybody picks a designer to work with because they are going to bring something of themselves into the situation. Philip Tracey, Steven Jones ... you can't separate yourself from your work; you have your own handwriting. When people are looking for accessories designers they like that. But at the same time, I think that it has to be half me and half them, you have to meet in the middle and it is a mathematical problem that you have to solve. You have to listen to what they are saying and think about the history of the house, and then think would I wear it? And I usually think at the end of the day I've got to make something that I would wear and I wouldn't hide my face if they took it out and showed someone. So, a big part of me is in it but you have to be a really good listener. And you have to be able to understand completely what it is that you are making because what they are saying and what they are proposing to make it in may not work to give them what they want, and you have to be really honest. You can never tell people what you think they want to hear. And that has always worked for me.

Sam said last night, which is interesting, that people pick you for something that you bring into their collection. That part of it [absorbing their ideas like a sponge] and then making it and then the show and then editorial, they're the really good parts of the job. I am not interested in what happens after the show, if they are going to sell it. To get a great photo is great. Going into a meeting, people in large companies, I am fascinated about what they are saying about next season, seeing how they style the show ...

How does the process work?

I don't draw anything. I do a mock up, a toile and I take it in and they fit it ... maybe a millimetre more, or the brim or the crown ... whatever shape it is, we try it on and see, and then I have to change it in the room. And I only leave when it is the way that it should be. You have to go through toiling there and then. With Vivienne a little less so because she is just as specific, whereas Tom Ford ... it is all polish which I love because that's good. And my hats are more like their hats than they are like Vivienne's, but Vivienne has this very free spirit about her and they are both good and now she knows what a good couture hat is, but with Vivienne, it is the feeling of it, the mood. Vivienne doesn't really like things that are just so, she likes that they are just off, or the pattern didn't quite work out. If something is crooked she embraces it, but that is not to say that I can get away with anything, with my hats, but the design element is in there intentionally, what she likes is different, but everyone is very specific.

I know now how Vivienne works but it takes a long time. ... They swap things around. ... there have been many times at the beginning of a meeting when she would say 'this is nice' but then "oh no I didn't want to go down this route, I'm not too sure" and then four hours later she'll start sketching something and say "well what if it's like this" and in the end she makes it her own.

What about the design process?

We go through all the details ... in the end people say this is what we are thinking but you do whatever you feel is right and if it doesn't work, you do what works. The houses send bolts

of fabric across to me. If it is in a straw, I bring samples and they pick out what they like. At the end everyone says if you think that's right, you change it. When you make something it always changes anyway, it is never what you think in your head, it is always a lot better or very different than what you thought in your head. I can't really remember anything that was the same and so you can't go to people and have everything designed specifically because it won't work out. You have to take that idea and as you are making it, if you need to call people, you just call and say this isn't working but you have to be able to say why it isn't working, but we could do this or this. So that is why I really dig my heels in when people say it doesn't make a difference. Because it is couture, you have to know how to make it. If you are standing in front of Stefano Pilati or Karl Lagerfeld you can't say I don't know. That is why I can't get my head around winging it and see what is going to happen. I can't think in any other way. When you are in Paris and everyone around the table is looking at you, and they say what do you mean, you have to say 'this is this' and they understand.

Talk to me about the importance of the accessories to the show

That is all it is. It has to be something that somebody is going to want to wear, that they are going to desire or they are going to open a magazine and say she looks great. I do both show pieces and pieces that will retail. But I don't think you can say that the ones we've done for editorial aren't going to be sold because we've made some hats in the studio and thought this is never going to sell and then you get an order for 50. And Japanese men are wearing it and it was originally for 16-year-old Japanese girls. You can never really say. Nobody is going to ask for a hat if it is not needed to give the show direction. It is an exclamation point, it is punctuation. Otherwise it would just be a frock. It is a woman in a dress. It is not until the hair is done, the make-up is on, it's accessorised, the music is on and the lighting is on and you get where it is going ... nobody is going to have a hat made if it is not about communicating the story. And Vivienne is an accessories person, she is not Calvin Klein. It is not New York sportswear, it is not that.

At a St Laurent show when you see the clothes coming out they have to look precious, there are not a lot of them, but at the same time, it has to sell like Coca Cola. And he, more than anyone, is the best at that: to feel like everyone could have it and it is still exclusive. Like you belonged to a club that had a secret that no one else knew about. I go to the shows and sometimes I watch the show and sometimes I am backstage. Watching it I think about things that I could have done better. I always think I wish I had more time. It is really serious and it is the first time that you see it with the music. And sometimes it is at the wrong angle and later you think that was ok. I am always judging everything ... London Paris, Milan, New York, Tokyo, Brazil ...

Who would your wish list look like?

I am doing some hats for Chanel, for Amanda Harlech, at the moment. She's got a good eye. I can't say what I am doing with Chanel, but it is my hats that they are using.

So, tell me about your own hats?

I sell a lot all over Japan and I have a lot of private customers. I used to sell hats in New York for a long time in Bergdorf Goodman but it didn't work for me. You'd do a hat in a brilliant colour and they'd order it in navy. I was talking with Vivienne. Vivienne is such a star in Japan and Sam contacted people and we said I made hats for Vivienne and the orders

flooded in. I am invited a lot but can't go all of the time. Everyone says Vivienne Westwood's hat designer. They think the hats I design for myself and Vivienne are very English looking. They embrace dressing up which the Americans don't. When they shop, they dress from head to toe.