

Magazine

Manufacturing Desire

“You know how it is when you put on high heels”

Published On 10/26/2005 1:54:32 AM

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Her brown hair is tied back in a neat ponytail; her body is greyhound-lean. She walks toward the Inn at Harvard, leather flats slapping the edges of the cobblestone. She enters the imposing lobby and summons the elevator to the fourth floor. A circle of chattering maids scatters as the girl, a Harvard senior, steps out into the carpeted hallway.

Around the corner she suddenly stops—at a room into which she is welcomed with extended arms and excited shouts. Room 418, the Presidential Suite, has been transformed into the grown-up version of a little girl’s dress-up party.

Inside, giddy girls are transforming themselves from workaday Harvard students in barn jackets and jeans into social butterflies. They step out in ladylike dresses and slip into one of the pairs of perilously high round-toed pumps set out for them. (The heels are said to elongate their legs and give the dresses the right line.) They cinch skinny python belts around their waists, admiring their new selves.

“Are people decent?” Lewis A. Remele ’06, the dresses’ designer, calls before venturing into the suite’s bedroom-cum-changing room.

The girl sets down her extra-large brown Longchamp to examine the racks of blue satin dresses with delicate straps, shrunken tweed blazers, and 1930’s tops. Every so often, she will run her finger over one of the garments and coo with glee.

A blonde girl arrives to shouted greetings from the half-dressed crowd in the bedroom. “I just rolled out of section,” she says casually. She is wearing a beautiful blue Lewis Albert dress with furry white Mukluks and a fur parka. She slips into the bedroom to change. Soon, she is padding around the suite in bare feet with red pedicured toes. She is Elizabeth R. Whitman ’06, the CEO of Lewis Albert Corp., as well as the fit model for the collection.

Whitman and Remele co-founded Lewis Albert Corp. last summer. Remele, an experienced designer, spent the summer sketching about 300 designs, which he and Whitman eventually whittled down to 24 pieces. They hope to sell the line at upscale boutiques on the order of Manhattan’s Scoop and Intermix.

The company’s first target, however, is Harvard, where they have begun a full-court press. Whitman and Remele hope to recover the line’s production costs solely with Harvard sales, says Adam P. Schneider ’07, an employee who is also a Crimson editor. Remele and Whitman would not specify how high their production costs were, and Whitman would only say that they raised funds from “private investors,” but surely they were high. Manufacturing of the clothing was contracted out to the New York factory which produces clothing for fashion boy wonder Zac Posen. Fifteen seamstresses handmade every item.

The past week was studded with Lewis Albert events: first a fashion show and launch party at Chateau Véronique in Brookline, complete with a full open bar to lure a crowd. That was followed by a weeklong trunk show held at the Inn, along with a line-up of private fitting appointments.

The prices, which range from \$400 to \$700 for a dress, hardly suit the typical college student's budget, but the beautiful craftsmanship—each garment takes a team of seamstresses and tailors 12 hours to make—is winning over many of the girls at today's trunk show.

"The blue looks nice with your olive skin," Remele tells Sylvia W. Houghteling '06. Expertly, he hushes the girls' complaints (the most prevalent being "I have no boobs!"). He knows just how to deflect perfunctory wails about flat chests or thick waists, or to suggest that a petite girl wear a dress at tea length. One of his admitted entrepreneurial advantages is that many of the customers are his friends. "Since many of the girls are in the same social circle and go to the same parties," he reasons, "we can say, 'Um, well, you know her and she bought it in green.'"

Throughout the trunk show, he refers to specific girls whose personal style seems to exert an influence. Holding up a shirt: "[sizes] 2-10, flat-to-boob, everyone has looked great in it. Hobbs [Ashley R. Hobbs '06] was wearing it with jeans earlier." Of a rack of suits: "Alexa [L.M. Von Tobel '06] got a pantsuit and a skirt suit for recruiting." Each mention of one of their friends piques the girls' excitement, and they grab more from the racks. "Because of your blockmates, there are, like, 70 pieces lying on the bed," Remele tells Houghteling, who came with a crowd. He highlights a green dress as something that could be worn out to a final club party. (Many of his clients frequent the clubs.)

The collection has been selling briskly, although neither Lewis Corp. executive would offer specific numbers. If everything goes as planned, spring will bring another Lewis Albert runway show at Harvard, showcasing the fall 2006 collection, for which he now has a built-in clientele.

"You all look like Hitchcock heroines," Remele says proudly, as Houghteling struts in a brown sweater dress and pumps.

LADIES' MAN

As a boy, Remele used to bring his sketch pad to restaurants with his parents. When he tired of adult conversations, he drew dresses. "I named them things like 'the Samantha' and 'the Elizabeth,'" he says. Remele had an only-child-like upbringing since his brothers and sister were much older—"I was raised by my sister, her mom, and female babysitters. I've always been around women, surrounded by women. I'm more comfortable interacting with women." (Whitman, perched on an adjoining couch, adds pointedly: "Strong women.") Part of his ability to sell to the girls comes from understanding how to talk to them. "They don't want to feel like they're being played. It's not genuine then. I don't want to say they look fabulous every time they walk out," he says.

Remele dabbled in costume design in high school, and has assisted with costumes for a few shows while at Harvard. He is also known for making fanciful creations for costume parties: "like, personal use, for individual friends." Whitman says that he made her a gold lamé gown for the Bee-54 party. It was through these dresses that he first won notoriety as a designer within the Harvard social scene. The women for whom he designs are extremely important to his vision. As he says, "a dress is always going to look better on a body than on a hanger."

Remele, who took design classes at Parsons School of Design in Manhattan and concentrates in the History of Art and Architecture, is full of intellectual and artistic allusions about his collection. Art Deco, Russian Constructivism, even the design of the Chrysler hood ornament, all come into play. He has fanciful names for colors: cream, thistle, champagne, dove.

If Remele is the head-in-the-clouds artist/academic, Whitman holds up the business end. She speaks in a clipped tone and shuttles the samples back and forth from the bedroom to the racks. A member of the Bee Club and its historian, she has attracted many of her fellow

the Bees to the suite. The vice president of the club, the “Hobbs” to whom Remele often refers, has tried on almost every piece in the collection. At the trunk show last week, she posed saucily for Polaroids of each outfit so she could show them to her mother when she came up for the Head of the Charles weekend.

Remele and Whitman’s involvement in the Harvard social scene (he belongs to the Hasty Pudding social club), has helped them find a customer base. Still, Remele insists that “none of our friends come in and feel as if they have to buy because they’re our friends.” Whitman says thoughtfully: “Both of our social lives have given us a good look at many different women,” as well as helping them get to know what she calls their demographic.

THE RUNWAY

The Saturday fashion show, which preceded the week of fittings, was scheduled for 9 p.m. At 9:36, Whitman began to let the male guests down from the balcony where they had been sequestered. The invitation list was exclusive and, given that Lewis Albert is a women’s collection, largely female. (An e-mail acquired by FM politely disinvited many of the male guests to the runway show two days before, on the grounds of “the tremendous amount of RSVPs from young, fashionable ladies (potential Lewis Albert clients),” but invited them to the open-bar reception.) The entire Bee, including the punch class, was invited. Whitman seated the guests herself, seating many of the club members in the front rows.

After a brief speech by Whitman and Alissa M. Gordon ’06, who worked on the corporation over the summer but left the company shortly after the runway show, the models began streaming out. The crowd became visibly excited when certain pieces emerged, such as the signature dress with flower petals on the straps. But for the most part they behaved politely, only murmuring to friends behind cupped palms. An upbeat techno playlist, which Remele later reprised at his trunk show, obscured their infrequent chatter. Most of the women in the audience were dressed as formally as the models, and although some came in jeans, nearly as many sported fur stoles and large pearls.

“It was quite a spectacle,” Tim H. Pierson ’06, one of the few men to be seated on the floor, said after the show. “Everyone comports themselves with such seriousness.”

When the show ended at 10 p.m., Remele came out to a standing ovation. He waved and took his bow, then gave hugs and kisses to close friends.

Abigail M. Baird ’08, a Crimson editor who was enlisted to work as a dresser in the show, says, “I loved every single dress in it. My mom has said I’m allowed to get one thing.”

WHEN YOU PUT ON HIGH HEELS

Another day (Wednesday), another set of fittings in the Presidential Suite. Remele circulates nervously, attending to customers. The Quincy resident reveals he has been sleeping in the P-Suite. After all, his company is paying for the room, not to mention that “after a crazy day, it’s nice to have a nice bed.”

Sitting on one of the living room couches in front of a refreshments table loaded with a variety of low-calorie drinks (Aquafina, Schweppes, and Diet Coke), Whitman theorizes that the atmosphere has a lot to do with the clothes' appeal. The customers, she says, "are walking in from the library, feeling drab and dumpy." Posing in silk charmeuse cocktail dresses before the mirror and their friends, they become new people. "You know how it is when you put high heels on," Whitman says.

Lewis Albert's web site promises potential corporate sponsors access to "300 consuming females." While the suite is hardly that crowded, he does, for the moment, seem to have women falling at his feet.

"I just spent my entire summer salary on this!" exults a girl who asks not to be named. ("You don't want your parents to open The Crimson," explains her friend, "and find out you've been shopping.") As she leaves with a suit and dress in hand, she adds, "...but it's going to make me so much happier."

—*Steven A. McDonald contributed to the reporting of this story.*

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