

# Butter Piping and Nipple Flowers

A young designer takes on New York Fashion Week

by Lynn Yaeger

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"That's it! We'll walk her in that!" fashion designer Lewis Albert says when he sees the blank-faced teenage model standing before him, resplendent in a turquoise sheath with white pleating at the hem. It's two days before Albert's first official runway show, and the designer, who is 22 and will graduate from Harvard this spring, is in the middle of a full day of fittings in a borrowed studio on the western edge of the garment district.



The designer takes a bow.

photo: Jennifer Snow/[jensnow.com](http://jensnow.com)



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The model slips the dress over her head and stands naked but for a pair of tiny black lace panties, not even bothering to go behind the screen, but no one is looking at her. Instead, Albert and his two partners, CEO Elizabeth Whitman (Harvard '06) and Adam Schneider, vice president for marketing and public relations (Harvard '07), are studying Polaroids of models in different "looks" that are spread out on a badly banged-up desk.

Albert is debuting his fall 2006 collection at MAO Space, a venue on 18th Street that produces shows for designers who are mostly too young, or too broke, to show in the tents, the official site in Bryant Park run by Olympus Fashion Week. About 70 designers are scheduled for presentations in the tents over the next eight days, and many more will show elsewhere, in places ranging from a tugboat in dry dock to a dilapidated former synagogue on Norfolk Street.

Manhattan is only the first stop on a semiannual fashion rotation that includes London, Milan, and Paris; regardless of the town, the audiences remain surprisingly similar, an international caravan of editors and buyers who have been making this trek for decades.

For a novice like Albert, New York's Fashion Week presents a make-or-break opportunity to pique the interest of these sartorial rainmakers. One enthusiastic review from an important magazine, one big order from a major department store can put a fledgling designer immediately on the map. On the other hand, more often than anyone likes to acknowledge, really talented people can languish on the sidelines, showing excellent collections season after season but for some reason falling through the cracks—lacking the moxie, the fierce desire, or maybe just the plain dumb luck that lands other designers on top.

Albert grew up in Minneapolis, where his mother had one of those all-purpose ladies' boutiques that used to grace every upscale American Main Street but by the early '90s had all but vanished, done in by the recession and the discount malls. When he was a freshman in high school, Albert made a film of Cinderella and dressed his child actresses in his family's best bed linens; like so many artists, he came to his calling early. Two



Ready to walk  
photo: Jennifer Snow/[jensnow.com](http://jensnow.com)

summers ago, while interning for Derek Lam, a fairly seasoned designer, Albert was fortunate enough to work backstage at Lam's runway show. "When I saw the models come in with no makeup and their hair all flat and then by the end of the week standing all lined up to walk the runway and looking so great, I was just mesmerized," he recalls. In a froth of excitement he called home and said, "This is it! This is what I've got to do."

Albert's childhood home is two blocks from the house where Mary Tyler Moore supposedly lived, but when he's asked whether that fresh-faced working girl inspired his collection he says, "Not this time." His inaugural effort is instead dedicated to the Mitford sisters, six madcap debutantes who lived in Britain between the wars and captivated society with their dazzling repartee, their beauty, and the wildly divergent lives they went on to lead. (Two were Nazis; one was a famous muckraking Communist; another was a much lauded author.) Though a glance at the bursting rack holding his collection doesn't immediately bring Mitfords to mind—unless you can imagine Jessica in a transparent python blouse—Albert says he doesn't really mean for you to take this Mitford business literally.

"The collection tries to synthesize the Mitford spirit—pragmatic but at the same time extremely frivolous," he says, holding up a bold royal-blue skirt trimmed with what Albert calls "butter" piping and swaths of teal crystal pleating. "It's really just about my vague sort of love for these sisters that I'm trying to translate into modern, contemporary clothes for real women—maybe something to wear to brunch with your grandmother." When it is suggested that these days both granddaughter and grandmother are likely to show up for such an occasion in sweatpants, everyone in the studio—even the model—cracks up.

If Albert is a little over-the-top with his Mitford references, he is hardly alone. The fashion world floats on a fluffy cloud of hyperbole: This

season, the house of J. Mendel says its collection is meant to invoke the spirit of Bonnie Parker; Y-3 states that its clothes were strongly influenced by 1950s horror movies; Ralph Lauren cites modern shooting parties (grouse, one assumes, not heroin); Luella Bartley suggests an affinity with a blindfolded Bettie Page; Diane von Furstenberg offers the film *Working Girl*.

One thing is clear: If you don't believe in your own peculiar vision, no matter how far-fetched, you'll never convince the clothes-buying public to meet you and your fantasies at least halfway, and you really have no business mounting a runway show. In fact, it could be argued that it's the ability to transfix, bewitch, and ultimately seduce an initially indifferent audience that makes for a truly great designer.

When Albert is asked what he'll be doing tomorrow, the day before his show on Super Bowl Sunday (an event that passes completely unnoticed during Fashion Week), he says he'll be attending to last-minute details, which include solving his most pressing problem: shoes. Somehow he didn't realize that young models' feet were all size 10 1/2 or 11, plus, since he ordered a lot of shoes from the Internet to save money, there are the usual problems when you can't see things in person: The two-tone spectators he got from Bluefly are a peculiar mustard color, and there are plans to go to Pearl Paint and buy something to remedy this.

When they're asked who would sit in their dream front row on Sunday, Whitman, Schneider, and Albert are taken aback for a moment, then say they'd be happy with anyone from any magazine, really, or ideally, a buyer from one of the "B's," the collective nickname for Bergdorf's, Bloomingdale's, Barneys, and Henri Bendel. (A fifth B, Bonwit Teller, went out of business years ago.) Then suddenly Whitman shouts, "I want Oprah to come! I want to meet the O!"

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At 11 a.m. on Sunday, an hour before the show is set to begin, the atmosphere backstage is strangely relaxed. Though Albert is waiting anxiously for his mom to bring boob tape (to allay jiggling) and nipple flowers (for strategic concealment), and Whitman has made an emergency run to Filene's Basement for still more shoes, Albert wears an expression of almost beatific calm. The models, with their hair in curlers (the designer says he wants their coiffures to look like "the sort of British girl alone in a big house and down on her luck who does her own hair for the ball and this is the morning after and it's all loose at the ends") and wearing their own raffish outfits—jeans and little furry Kate Moss-ish jackets—take part in a technical run-through to make sure the lights, music, and pacing are all in sync.



Cigarette girls: Taking a break before the show  
photo: Jennifer Snow/[jensnow.com](http://jensnow.com)

Then suddenly a rumor rustles through the room, whispered in tones of frank disbelief: Anna is coming. This seems highly unlikely—it's an

incredibly busy week for the famed *Vogue* editor, and to be honest, there hasn't been all that much buzz about Albert. But no, one of the MAO principals says, Wintour's teenage daughter, Bee, has heard about the show and wants to bring her mom.

Ten minutes before the show begins, the audience is shaping up: the usual enthusiastic fashion students; a small number of junior-editor types with stick-straight hair and Goyard tote bags; the ubiquitous Sylvia Miles; a mysterious guy in paisley pants and high rubber boots, carrying a Muppet purse. But then, incredibly enough, Wintour herself materializes. Dressed casually (for her) in jeans and a spectacular fur parka and with daughter in tow, she slips into the front row.

"Now I'm a little nervous," Albert laughs when her attendance is confirmed, but he is not too rattled to tell the girls to smile—"I want happy models, not pouty models!"—and deal with a last-minute pinning emergency.

The lights go up, the music surges, and the models begin their rapid stride down the catwalk. None of the catastrophes that can befall a runway show occur: No one's breast pops out; no one loses a shoe and falls down; two models don't bang into each other. Just minutes after Albert takes his bow, the models are already back in their jeans, slinging their big bags over their shoulders and rushing off to their next jobs; Wintour has melted into thin air. Albert, in his quiet way, is ecstatic.

Over the next several weeks, Wintour will attend scores of catwalk shows in four cities. She will gaze at thousands of pencil skirts and sweater sets and sequined evening gowns. Whether Albert's caramel mink-trimmed overcoat or his chocolate taffeta skirt suit will linger in her memory is anyone's guess.

Meanwhile, by Tuesday the designer will be back in class in Cambridge, trying to keep his mind on his studies but all the while worrying about magazine mentions, boutique orders, and who or what will set fire to his imagination and inspire his spring 2007 collection.

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