

ON THE RISE

# BROOKE ROBERTS

Written by LYNN FURGE Photographed by THOMAS KNIGHTS

*Wandering around London's Fashion Week, I stumbled upon a studious and leggy minx of a woman—the kind that makes the cool boys do a double take. This intelligent bombshell intrigued me, with her cat-eye glasses and a topknot placed square on the crown of her head. She was pulling off a jumpsuit that I secretly desired for myself. I approached her to strike up a conversation.*

We're both pro-Priss (*Blade Runner*), Bruce Weber, karaoke and John Hughes scripts; anti retailers using Twitter as the modern version of men on street corners with sale flyers strapped to their torsos; and neutral on the business of sensible shoes in the work place.

The woman isn't a sales rep, she's Brooke Roberts, the designer of an eponymous fashion collection. Roberts went to university in Australia, studied science, and became a radiographer. Later moving to London, she sought a career change. She was always passionate about fashion, but drawn to the technical side of the business—her focus was on cutting and tailoring. She then studied at London College of Fashion, which reaffirmed her love for construction, and thus became a pattern maker.

The end result is a science-inspired design collection where the patterns found in the garments are actually taken from medical scans. It's hybrid knitwear of sorts, which evolves daily as Roberts balances her life between her design studio and medical work at the radiology lab.

Roberts combs scans, art installations, and books on flora and fauna, all to find possible patterns for her next dress. Just read her blog and you will see everything from superheroes to microscopic slides, all of which end up as garments that frame the female silhouette like a kid glove. Her Fall 2010 collection was devoted to the sinus—as in, yes, the nose.

"I always start with the scan first," says the designer. "I never, ever start with the shapes of the garment. I then start thinking about color; I find the yarns that fit the concept of the collection. I do everything on computer; sketch silhouette ideas, scan, and then body map it digitally onto the scan pattern. I then work out the placement. When we are finally ready to start going [sic] at the physical product, the work goes into the traditional

cutting, sewing, and sampling that you would get from a normal knitwear line. Using graphics, you have to have a huge concept of the female body. I always choose the scans that will either minimize body parts, or cause a flat surface where a woman traditionally has little lumps and doesn't want to show, or curve around the bumps she does. The relationship of body-mapping and digital imagery makes the garments hug the female body perfectly."

Yarns in different weights, colors, and textures make the pieces more like jacquards and less like typical knitwear. The difference in pile is astounding, because although you can see every single detail, the garments lay perfectly on the body. To get the finished product Roberts uses a mix of extra fine merino, plastic, metal, viscose, elastic, cotton and silk to create the jacquard.

"The Fall 2010 color palette was mostly grey, black, and white, which were the natural colors that came through in the original scans. It allowed me to mix very light colored high-tech plastics with natural wool, which also added to the textural finish. It gave me the mood and graphic I wanted."

Many of the pieces revolve around a Rorschach theme. Black and white globs of yarn could be a butterfly's shadow or medieval ink stain. This ambiguity is the essence of the garments' beauty. The EKG pattern (in silver metallic thread on jet black) also runs throughout the collection. Dresses hug the body but give ample room for the hip detail that is still a rather large part of women's fashion for fall. That jumpsuit that piqued my interest in the first place has beautifully exaggerated shoulders and skinny legs, with the x-ray sinus pattern on both front and back. If I were a rock star I would wear it on stage. If I were skiing I would wear it après. All of Roberts' pieces add length to a woman's frame. Who knew a nose had that much potential?

Both critics and mentors recognize Roberts'

talent. She is currently working with the Centre for Fashion Enterprise through London College of Fashion, which has helped such up-and-comers as Peter Pilotto, Holly Fulton, Hannah Marshall, and Louise Goldin. "Working with them not only prepared her for the business side of fashion from PR to retail, but it also allowed her to focus more on her ever-evolving merger of art and science."

"I see my brand on someone who is very confident and interested in the intelligence behind design, someone who is very technologically aware, someone very experimental. I have worked with people like Daphne Guinness, who is very excited about the technology of fashion moving forward, to create custom pieces and I am lucky that the women who I have garnered as fans understand my vision so far."

Roberts' Spring 2011 collection is called Intergalactic, using medical imagery mixed with deep sea and outer space touches. Think futuristic skylines, bright colors, and Swarovski embellishment—a fusion of science and technology. The surface details and colors are the most substantial departures from her usual style, so her supporters need not worry.

While most Londoners spend their Italian vacations sunning or hitting quaint cafés, Roberts spends her time in a steamy knitwear factory. I caught up with her while working on said Spring collection and doing consultancy. She is a self-possessed maniac, rushing between pattern tests, pending photo shoots, and being due back at the radiology lab.

During our next phone conversation, we wax poetic on how cool Halloween is, and why it is OK to balance clear-heeled stripper shoes with her hyper-futuristic hybrid clothing. In the back of my head, I wonder how the jumpsuit would look on my own shape and if I'm better off with one of the body-hugging dresses with a similar pattern. Should I pre-order for fashion week now, or wait to see sketches of the Intergalactic series, which I will then beg her to rush? Roberts pulls me off of my cloud by mentioning she has shaved her head à la Sinead O'Connor.

I have long claimed to be one step ahead of the fashion pack, especially when it comes to scouting the next new superstar, but this woman has surprised me yet again. If she is that bold with her hair, who knows what we can expect on the runways in London come September?

I am a big fan.



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