

## FASHION TO KNOW

## KAROLINA ZMARLAK

Written by LYNN FURGE Photography by JOANNA TOTOLICI

*Karolina Zmarlak knows New York. Having graduated from FIT, she's emerged with a viewpoint that is both structurally sound and socially realistic. Women want pretty clothes that they can work and play in. So like a fine Mercedes, she has made them convertible. "I initially worked in the custom and made-to-measure realm for women's evening wear. With the change in the economy, we had to consider how to evolve the collection for very special/smart client who has seen everything in the luxury market—we translated that idea in ready-to-wear. Convertibility."*

Not an easy task, considering she is creating pert little tea party dresses, sleek trousers and Jackie O bateau neck jackets. "Reversibility was super difficult and challenging in the beginning, but it makes our design stronger and better. Every piece has to be well-thought-out and well-constructed. Every little detail—piping, trim, pockets—you have to think of every aspect presented on both sides of the garment."

I stood in the Hotel Griffou nose to fabric with every piece, judging, admiring, and trying to decide whether Zmarlak would end up one of the three in the Fashion to Know category. Not until this interview did I realize her "convertible clothing" was way beyond the usual designer's method of 'cinch it here' or 'un-snap the collar there'. These are flawlessly constructed pieces that are reminiscent of a young Oscar de la Renta or Giambattista Valli, shapely and textured with just enough stiffness to the fabric.

The navy "bedford file" group and the satin taffeta longer jackets and skirts are all reversible, except for the trousers. All black waffle silk grouping is reversible as well, while the waffle silk pique jackets and skirt reverse to the satin taffeta. The prints and the millefeuille pieces are the exception. They are made from gazar and stand alone as strong beautiful dresses, reversible or not. The remarkable quality is in the details: fabric covered snaps, grosgrain ribbon, adornments that simplify and streamline the collection. The fastenings also allow the wearer to snap the hemline in different places to wear the piece in several different ways.

"As a business woman, I myself rarely see my apartment. During the day it is meetings, nighttime, business meetings or events. I constantly need to change over and re-create." Said Karolina in between appointments on a Wednesday morning,

"Clothing needs to serve multiple purposes. At the price point that we are, we need to be careful with how we present the product. I work with brilliant pattern makers. There is a whole team that is trying to figure this whole look and reversibility out. I have excellent pattern makers and we just try until we get it right."

Describing who she sees wearing these garments, the same thoroughness is evidenced. "The woman has a very strong self-awareness. For now that usually happens to be a woman who works in a creative field because she would appreciate the organization of how things are made. Tilda Swinton comes to mind, and is a great inspiration to me because she has a clear-cut vision of who she is and what she chooses to be a part of. It is all about the choice and sophistication of style. It is the way she wears things, it isn't about the piece or the designer. I want the woman who wears my clothes to have that same sense of self."

What she has ended up with is a Spring/Summer collection that infuses classic feminine silhouettes with a Japanese influence. While always present in her label, this time Zmarlak started looking at Japan in correlation with the *Neuromancer* movie, cult obsessions with cyberspace, and futuristic theories of traveling without moving. The traditions of Japan are apparent—the physical lines in the design, clean and bold; patterns and sleeves are based on kimonos. Another theme of the collection is the high-waisted bubble skirt silhouettes and peg leg trousers of the mod 1960s. Combining those two ideas, the kimonos and '60s mod, is what makes up the look for the season: clean lines, yes, but more of the bolder, rounded silhouette. The structure of the necklines is very clean but funneled; coverage with an openness. No reference is too literal, nor is the pop of color too bold, with bright fuchsia and red, cherry blossom floral patterns on white silk.

"At the end of the day, I think with clean tailoring and very structured silhouettes, I have a tendency to go to darker colors, but to me, injecting a little bit of bold color, a touch of something very strong, isn't a risk in the luxury market. In fact it is still very wearable and what makes the pieces feel new and exciting as the weather warms up. The garments become reversible and many go back to black so our color it isn't such a risk for a modern woman." Karolina explains.

And the designer has had some good role models for modern thinking, previously working for Carolina Herrera, Theory and PR consulting. Each job taught her about different aspects of technique, detailing, and business. Watching the precision of her past employers really gave Karolina a leg up on the New York fashion competition. "From the minute I started at FIT I would take on internships that weren't necessarily about the design aesthetic I wanted to follow. My first internship was for PR consulting to let me know how the overall business works. Theory is a very big company and I would spend hours watching the tailoring fittings. Theory is all about the specific fit of the 20 different pants they have. That's what they became great in... the pants, the ¼ inch change over in the inseam or changing the pleat can change the entire look of the garment. At Carolina Herrera, it is much more of a fantasy-based luxury business. Exploring the garment district and sourcing something as simple as trim. The people that bead, bead by bead, how it takes a team to build each piece. It is literally like building a house."

As the fashion business evolves now, the newest success needs to struggle to stay relevant. The Internet being so prevalent is sometimes a drawback for young designers. Consumers think they can grab the same styles quicker and cheaper at fast fashion retailers. A designer doesn't have the opportunity to romance the buyer and court the press, getting the proper exposure rather than mini-blurbs and URL links that sometimes don't properly exemplify what their true vision is. But on the other hand it has made really smart consumers who are educated about how things are made. "They want to know what they are getting. 'Nothing good comes easy.' For me, part of greatness comes with certain obsessiveness. For example, a chef and how they cook food and get it to taste perfect. An architect making all of the lines fit into nature." Says Zmarlak

Lessons are also learned from business partner Jesse Keyes, urban development consultant and restaurateur. His work, too, is part of the constant inspiration for Karolina. A lot of his experience in architecture and business echoes the discipline of making a garment. On a visual and design level, meeting the architects and being part of those conversations is eye-opening. On a social level, it is beneficial to be part of an environment where she gets to mingle with other creative and lively city people. It is very easy to see why in Karolina Zmarlak's world a girl might need a reversible dress.



Styling: MAGDALENA BUJAS.