

DIANE PERNET

by Richard Nahem

I loathe using the word legendary, as it is the most over-used word in the dictionary, now referencing Instagram influencers who have been around for six months. In a rare exception, I can say **Diane Pernet** (www.ashadedviewonfashion.com) is authentically legendary.

First off is her instant recognizability. She has been wearing the same uniform for over 30 years: black from head to toe, with a long black skirt covering her massively high platform shoes, and above the neck she dons a black lace mantilla, affixed with a jeweled spider pin, which travels from her hair down to almost her waist. The clincher is her cat-woman like sunglasses, which she never removes in public.

Pernet's legendary status comes from her over five-decade career in fashion, working in almost every aspect of the business from fashion designer, to fashion editor, writer and blogger, to creating the world's first fashion film festival. Pernet has witnessed the industry from many sides, always with a sharp eye and keen wit. Much of her sensibility and knowledge stems from her first love, film.

Pernet's legendary status also comes from her ardent followers and cult status. Emulation is an everyday occurrence for Pernet, as her fans send her images they've made of her in the form of street art, posters, photo and art portraits, and T-shirts.

Although, Pernet may seem unapproachable in her black armor, she couldn't have been more friendly and down to earth when we sat down for tea during this interview. Just to enforce her cult following, two fans in the space of 90-minutes came to our table, effusing their admiration of her and asking to take a photo.

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born in Washington, D.C. but left at the age of three so I have no memory of it at all. I grew up on the Mainline outside



of Philadelphia.

At what age did you start your attraction to fashion and what are your earliest memories that impacted you later on?

I was always into my clothes. As a young child I loved the color pink and was a bit obsessed with it. My room and my clothes were pink and very girly. I was probably more impressed by cinema stars than fashion designers. I poured over movie magazines and dreamed. I loved actresses like Sophia Loren and Anna Magnani. Films like *The Rose Tattoo* with Anna Magnani in a black slip stayed with me and I was always into the idea of innerwear being outerwear when I designed years later. I always had slip dresses in my collections. I loved Lucia Bose in *Story of a Love Affair* by Michelangelo Antonioni. The first designer that really made me want to do fashion was Charles James, a sculptor who only in the past few years has finally gotten his due. Also the Bauhaus movement in art had a big effect on my designing.

You lived in New York City for an extended period of time before you moved to Paris. Please tell me about your early years in New York.

Both of my parents were born in New York, so New York was always in my life. Living in

Philadelphia one felt like you could be a big fish in a small pond, as the cliché goes, but that did not appeal to me so I moved to New York. It was after University where I studied film and communications at Temple. At first I did reportage photography then I went to Parsons and FIT for 9 months to study fashion. I quit and decided to open my own brand with zero experience, just a desire to create. The brand was my own name and I was in business for 13 years up until I decided that New York was unlivable with all the crime, homelessness, and the AIDS epidemic that wiped out 85-90% of my neighborhood. When I first moved to New York I was living at 873 Broadway in a

loft above the ABC Carpets store. It was across the street from Andy Warhol's factory. It was a great time for New York in the mid 70's. Something about all the violence gave the city an energy, but it just got much worse by the end of the 80's. After a few years doing photography, and after 9 months at two fashion schools, I launched my brand and worked out of a small apartment on West 11th street. It is funny, when I moved there in the mid 70's there was an old time candy store on the corner of Bleeker next to me where teenagers used to hang out. They were great because if anyone bothered me they would tell them I was "neighborhood" and to leave me alone. Then rents went up, the candy store closed and then a bookstore moved in for years, it was Biography Bookstore, and now it is Marc Jacobs Bookmarc.

It was an exciting time in New York when you could get a loft with a theatre in it for \$700 a month; imagine that? Artists could afford lofts and there was a great club scene. It was good for me because when a new club opened and they needed attention I could get the space for free for my shows and they took care of all the expenses. I met some great people like Anotonio Lopez. I finally got to meet Andy Warhol because I was friends with his PA Benjamin Liu, who

Photo: Mauro Del Signore

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later did the press for my last fashion shows in NYC. He was amazing and I might add so efficient. But from around 1987 till I moved in the end of 1990 New York was on a downward spiral, Tompkins square park was cardboard city. They cleaned up Washington Square Park and all the junkies moved to the park across from my window and life became unlivable. You could not walk on the street, crime was epic, people were dropping like flies from AIDS. The city changed and it was not a pretty picture, and especially not inspiring as a designer.

You were primarily a fashion designer when you lived in New York. What was that experience like?

I loved designing, I did it with my heart and soul. The fashion industry was never made for independents, not then and not now. Things like ordering fabric minimums were crazy and I ordered all of my textiles from France and Italy, which was crazy expensive, but they were beautiful. I did shows every season, and my big break came in 1985 when Seibu Department store picked up my brand and I got a license, which was wonderful because money came in three times a year and it could help support my own signature line. It also allowed me to travel, which I did after every collection to clear my head and come up with the inspiration for the new collection. That went on for 13 years. When I moved to Paris I had no

strategy at all. I had a license with Dream Studio to design lingerie along with Isabelle Toledo and Estrada, which I thought would keep me going till I managed to figure out my way in Paris. Thing is, the husband of the Japanese woman that owned the brand got in trouble with the Yakuza and pulled the plug on the brand.

What was the fashion scene like when you moved to Paris and who were the important designers at the time?

Fashion was more exciting in the early 90's here with Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gaultier, Claude Montana, Lacroix, and Martine Sitbon. Shows were in the tents. It was strange for me because I was used to being the one on the catwalk not in the audience. My first job was with CBC as an assistant to the producer of Fashion Files where I reconnected with Tim Blanks who used to cover my shows in Paris. People used to sneak into the tents and wait for hours hiding from the guards to see Gaultier and other shows like Westwood. There was less interference from press people. Of course there were the Red Ties at the doors but still it was about energy and fashion—real creation.

You shifted career gears when you moved, leaving fashion design and becoming a fashion editor and writer. How was the transition and did you

miss designing clothes?

If someone had handed me a half a million I would have been more than happy to continue with my design career, but as that was not the case I had to do what ever I could to survive and that took me in different directions. First as assistant to the producer at CBC for which we both knew I was over qualified, but I had to pay my rent. Tiffany Godoy asked me to write for the Japanese magazine *Composite* and that was the beginning of my journalistic career. It was never anything I had thought about at all. From there I went to Elle.com and then Vogue.fr as Tina Isaac was my editor at Elle.com where she initiated a Dr. Diane style column and then she went to Vogue.fr and set up their online and took me with her. I could work at home which was perfect for me. From there I worked for Joyce Ma as fashion editor for *JOYCE* out of Hong Kong and in 2000 I worked making fashion films with Disciple Films for 5 years.

A Shaded View on Fashion was one of the first fashion blogs when you created it in 2005. How did the idea of the blog come about and how did it evolve?

It was February 2005. When filming in Milan with Disciple Films I met a showroom model named Anina Net. She asked me if I wanted to try a new software called Life Blogging with a Nokia phone. I said yes and that is how my own blog began. In

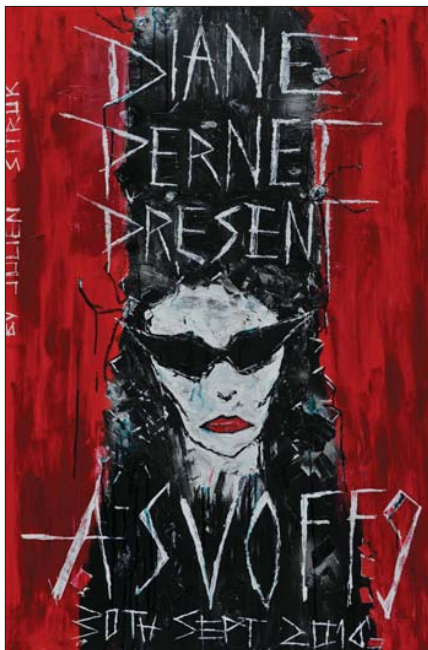


Image: Julien Sitrak



William Klein, Rossy de Palma, and Diane Pernet ASVOFF 5 Centre Pompidou

Photo: Alfredo Salazar



Photo: Courtesy of Diane Pernet

Giving Trophy to Jean Paul Gaultier at ASVOFF

2005 Mark Eley of Eley Kishimoto, a London brand, commissioned me to make a road movie *Adventure of Pleasure*. It was a 3000-mile road trip over 6 days from London to Monte Carlo and I life blogged all the way, plus making this film. It was early social media, long before Twitter and even Youtube, which I think started about the same time. In the beginning I was the only one writing on the blog and now I have contributors from around the world. Because of the blog I was invited everywhere from New Zealand to Brazil to Estonia and beyond.

Being ahead of the curve again, in 2006 you started A Shaded View on Fashion Film Festival, the first fashion film festival. How did the idea come to you and what was the reception like?

My first fashion film festival was called *You Wear it Well* and was started in 2006 and launched in Los Angeles. Because it was the very first fashion film festival it was invited everywhere from the Guggenheim in Bilbao with the Zinebe Film Festival and beyond. In 2006 no one knew what a fashion film was and you spent so much time explaining. However the first edition at Cinespace on Hollywood Blvd. was a success and now there is not a brand around that does not use fashion films to communicate their ideas on fashion, beauty and style. ASVOFF is a cultural event it is not cliché of fashion.

You've traveled and presented A Shaded View on Fashion Film Festival internationally. What were some of the highlights and which cities did you get the most positive response?

The biggest highlight of course was Centre Pompidou for seven years. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao was amazing, Palazzo Morando in Milan sponsored by Italian Vogue was wonderful, Mexico City with Trendsetera in 2010 at the Metropolitan Theatre 2nd edition of ASVOFF for over 2,000 guests that was the largest so far. Also of course the ASVOFF parties at the terrace of Palais du Festival in Cannes.

I know you love having tea, so if you could invite one person in fashion from the past, who would it be, which tea salon would you choose, and what would you talk about?

If they must be from the past I would say Adrian, the costume designer who also did ready to wear. I would love to talk to him about all the films that he costumed and the actors that he dressed. How different it was creating ready to wear compared to working on films. Maybe a good location would be Le Pavillon de la Reine. Place des Vosges. It is lovely, elegant, and quiet. Feels a bit like a hidden jewel in Paris.

Who do you think are the relevant people in fashion today and do they have a positive or negative effect in the overall business of fashion?

Rick Owens: He has his own path and he keeps challenging himself and never looking at others for inspiration. He's a positive effect and what fashion needs more of. **Dries Van Noten:** It has nothing really to do with fashion and everything to do with beauty and timeless creation. **Alessandro Michele:** A true poet who gives thought to the most minute details. His creations inject joy and fun into a world that is desperately in need of happiness. I love how he changed the approach to fashion and always involves humanity and what is going on in our lives today. Bravo for a big brand to be so outspoken. **Pier Paolo Piccioli:** What he's done for Valentino even makes its namesake happy. He makes beautiful clothes that make people dream. **Demna Gvasalia:** I've known his collections since he was a graduate student at Antwerp in 2006. He has moved things forward first with creating Vetements which was just simply about clothes that everyone wanted to wear, then that blew up into a major trend. I love what he has done with Balenciaga blowing away the cobwebs but keeping the essential of the house and pushing it forward. **Jean Paul Gaultier:** I will love him forever. He has impacted generations and continues to. He is inventive, curious, and courageous. I love him for his fashion and for his humanity. He is a wonderful human being.

You travel extensively for your work. What are some of your favorite hotels and tea salons?

Chén Chè teahouse in Berlin (www.chencheberlin.de); **Les Deux Abeilles** in Paris (www.facebook.com/pages/Les-Deux-Abeilles/173623495986374); **Mandarin Oriental Tokyo** for afternoon tea (www.mandarinoriental.com/tokyo); I always like **The Wolseley** (www.thewolseley.com) in London for tea or breakfast; **The PuLi Hotel** in Shanghai (www.thepuli.com) has to be one of the loveliest hotels that I've stayed in; and the **SoHo Grand** (www.sohogrand.com), my home away from home when I'm in New York. Everything about it pleases me; the **Peninsula Tokyo** (www.peninsula.com/en/tokyo). I love this hotel; **The Shilla Seoul** (www.shilla.net/seoul) is another treasure of a hotel—exquisite and excellent service; the **Stamba Hotel** (www.stambahotel.com) in Tbilisi Georgia. Wonderful hotel. My room had a brass bathtub that I had to experience at least twice a day. ■