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The reality TV star talks about fame, family and her future

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IF THE SHOE FITS

NICHOLAS KIRKWOOD's heels have been described as architecture, sculpture and even trophies. The sought-after designer takes a break from work to chat with VIVIENNE TANG about his forthcoming men's collection, visiting Hong Kong and working on weekends



MOST PEOPLE MIGHT recognise Nicholas Kirkwood's vertigo-inducing platform stilettos from his collections with Rodarte – particularly his Mad Max-meets-cyberpunk couture creations from the spring collection, or his latest ones with melting candle wax dripping off the heels – or from Sarah Jessica Parker's celebrity snapshots, sporting the strappy blue suede shoes, which have been circulating on the Internet.

Even though the rising star has already racked up numerous awards, has deals with the hottest fashion labels under his belt – including Erdem, Rodarte and Peter Pilotto – and gets speed-dialled by celebrities wanting priority on all the towering shoes he contrives, the young footwear designer isn't blinded by the sudden fame.

The first time I speak to Kirkwood is over the phone. There was no fanfare or allure about him or the way he talked. It was almost like chatting to an old schoolmate. But he seemed to be tied up that afternoon, so we arranged to speak again the following day, which was a Saturday morning. One would think that the 30-year-old London-based designer would be out clubbing on a Friday night (he's known to be a bit of a party animal), but for that week it seemed highly unlikely, as he requested the interview take place at 9am the following morning.

"I'm a bit mad," he says with a hoarse voice

and a chuckle. "I don't really do anything but work a lot. I work on the weekends, because the phone isn't going off all the time. That's the best time to work."

All the overtime and the extra night shifts have definitely paid off, though. The Central Saint Martins (he did the Fine Art foundation course) alumnus' love for shoes grew during his job of five years at milliner Philip Treacy's boutique, which was roughly around the same time he was lodging with fashion icon Isabella Blow. "People would come into the shop and bring their outfits, their full looks, and I would sort them out with a hat," he says about his odd beginnings. "At the time there was amazing clothing, bags and all these incredible things, but the shoes were just bloody awful, like from another era. There were lots of pointy heels and kitten mules. And it was almost like an escape for experimentation. I really wanted to do something different."

The curious designer enrolled in a shoemaking class at Cordwainers in 2001 to study the craft, and by 2005 he had designed shoes for the catwalks of John Rocha and Ghost, which funded his eponymous collection for that year.

His recognisable breathtaking skyscraper-like designs all have an architectural feel, and his choice of innovative and exotic materials, such as printed suede, python, dégradé fabrics and laser-cut leather all carry the same eccentric DNA. But strangely



enough, the designer reveals that he dislikes excessive garniture.

He created his first pair of flats last year. But this doesn't mean that his daring heels aren't comfortable. On the contrary, they are said to be very wearable. He assures me that much thought has gone into the slightly wider fit. And I believe him, even though he admits that he's never tried on a single pair.

Several times throughout the interview he also reaffirms that he's trying to reach out to more women and that he's adding more variations to his series of dizzyingly high heels. "For the last six years, the heels have all been pretty high," he says. "I've been in a very niche market. So I'm trying to see if I can expand on the range. I'll still always have what I'm known for. But I want to be able to offer more. I've been doing either flats or 10-millimetre heels. But 90 percent of the market really lies in between [flats and high heels]. So for spring/summer 2011, I'm starting to look at other heel heights. If I want to be an established shoe brand, I need to be able to offer a wider range."

The footman has his fingers in many pies. Apart from expanding his own collection, he has created a small collection of Linda Farrow sunglasses for autumn/winter 2010, and he's working on shoes for 12 different ready-to-wear shows. "I always feel that something's missing in my collection," he admits, "whereas in the work that I show at Rodarte, Erdem and Peter Pilotto, it kind

of fulfils me in a way. I feel like I would be missing out if I wasn't able to do that.

"They all have a very different look," he adds. "It's important for me to be able to show a different style. Each one has a different customer. One may be much more feminine and the other one might be very adventurous or whatever it might be. In some ways I'm designing outside of the box that I've made for myself. I get to work on certain things I would never do in my collection."

But the footwear designer doesn't stop just there. Kirkwood is also dabbling in other collaborations - not the likes of high-street collaborations, which he thinks are a very big mistake for designers with small brands - but more "sophisticated" projects, such as the one with Hong Kong's On Pedder.

For this season, the accessory boutique is launching a dedicated Nicholas Kirkwood space, and Kirkwood himself will make an appearance and host a private shopping event on September 1, followed by a customer cocktail gathering the following day (something he's looking forward to, as he gets "quite excited about seeing other markets and being able to understand what the customer wants"). In addition to the meet-and-greets, the store will also exclusively preview his Keith Haring capsule collection of ballerina flats before the official launch at London Fashion Week. "It was a great opportunity to use this amazing artwork," he says about the unique collection. "I'm using his creative

patterns across the shoes. There'll be a couple with his prints in black and white. It'll also be my first one to do a ballerina."

With all the co-branding, one can see that it won't be long before Kirkwood branches out into men's shoes, jewellery, bags and even ready-to-wear. And to no surprise, he confirms that he's been thinking about all the above (except for the rag trade, as he hates sewing and stitching on buttons), starting with his forthcoming one-off men's line for next year's autumn/winter collection. "I used to make men's shoes at home," he says nonchalantly. "I had a couple of customers, and I used to make them myself. But now I want to launch a small line of men's shoes. I think it will be fun to do. And it's really about the subtlety. A guy is not going to wear pink. I wouldn't want to wear something that is overly tripped out or that shows off in any way. I would love to do a lime green one, but it would be a very simple shoe. I want to do shoes for the sort of guy who's going out with a girl who's wearing my shoes. But a cool boyfriend, not a boring one, somebody who appreciates his girlfriend's shoes." ■

*The Nicholas Kirkwood collection and his shoes for Rodarte are available at **On Pedder**. The forthcoming collections for Rodarte, Erdem and Peter Pilotto will be available online at kirkwood.com for one week after the shows and again after six months in selected boutiques worldwide.*