

Gn

LEADS *The* PACK

FASHION DESIGNER ANDREW GN CREATES LUXURY GOWNS FOR A GLOBAL TRIBE OF LOYALISTS—INCLUDING SF'S MOST STYLISH SWANS

BY KATIE SWEENEY

The excitement in the air is thick and contagious in the back room at Betty Lin on Sacramento Street in San Francisco's tony Presidio District. The most exquisite clothing—heavy jackets with oversized sleeves covered in intricate gold embroidery, long-sleeved satin 20s-inspired jewel-toned dresses, strapless ball gowns with cinched waists and white damask bodices—hangs on clothing racks that overflow with items, crammed into the small space. Everywhere you look there is sumptuous details. Feathers, brocade, iridescent fabrics, ruffles, lace, fur, and fringe abounds. A publicist and the shop owner converse in one corner, while two assistants press their way in between the hanging masterpieces. One gently steams the wrinkles out of a luxurious deep-purple drop-waist dress. The other assistant carefully unwraps a multicolored printed long-sleeve look from plastic. At the center of all this is a man dressed in all black. Despite the elegant chaos that erupts around him, fashion designer Andrew Gn is calm, his shiny head and relaxed smile make him appear Buddha-like. Although he's based in Paris, the couturier visits San Francisco twice a year to host trunk shows at Betty Lin's boutique. Today's frenzy is in anticipation of tomorrow's show.

Gn has a huge following here: Everyone from plastic surgeon, Dr. Carolyn

Chang, to interior designer, Hillary Thomas, wears his designs. "Most of these girls were introduced to me by [the aforementioned publicist] Allison Speer. Allison is a friend of mine. I don't even see it as a working relationship—we are just having fun," Gn told *Haute Living* over coffee at AQ on the eve of his trunk show. "Allison introduced me to all her girlfriends, so we all became friends. Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, and even Mr. Valentino, they were all friends with their clients." His biannual visits not only cultivate the friendships and increase sales, but they are also reason to celebrate. When Gn comes to town ("I normally stay at the Mandarin Oriental," he says of the downtown hotel which is now actually a Loews Regency) there is always a special lunch or dinner in his honor. For his next visit, in late October, Gn will be the honorary chair at the San Francisco Fall Art and Antiques Show. It's an ideal fit: all of his friends, like gala committee chairs Dede Wilsey and Alexis Traina, can wear his confections.

The ready-to-wear designer enjoys dressing the women of the Bay Area because, he says, "San Francisco is even more adventurous than New York society. New York tends to be a little more severe or austere. San Francisco can be elegant, but it can be cha-cha at the same time. I think that cha-cha factor is im-



A PASSION FOR DESIGN

Creative genius Andrew Gn poses for a picture in Ken Fulk's loft at a party that was hosted in honor of the international designer being in San Francisco.

portant—being able to take risks is important in fashion.” Gn also thinks that chic San Franciscans are extremely sophisticated and that the social structure, our mixture of old money families and new young techies, makes it an exciting place for high-end fashion. “The most interesting thing here is the blend of people. I dress people from those two worlds. Also for the fact that there are lots of balls, symphony openings, lunches and dinners, makes it [San Francisco] a very socialite place with lots of opportunities to dress up and we all love that. I love seeing women dress up.”

Although his designs are constantly being worn by celebrities—everyone from Kendall Jenner and Emma Stone to Jessica Chastain and Marion Cotillard have donned Gn’s creations—Gn says, “I always prefer to see a real woman wearing my clothes.” Real women like the well-heeled ladies he dresses in SF. The collection he’s showing at Betty Lin, pre-fall 2017, is something he calls “global tribal” and is perfect for the everyday fashion-forward-thinking female. “I believe that all of us belong to a tribe in one way or another generations ago, ages ago, and now what is a tribe?” he wonders when referring to the global tribal look. “There is no such thing as ‘I am a pure Irish,’ ‘I am a pure Chinese’—it’s all so mixed.” Gn, who speaks seven languages, is a quarter Japanese and three-quarters Chinese, but he grew up in Singapore. He studied design at Central St. Martins in London and got a Masters from the Domus Academy in Milan. “I’ve lived all over the place. There is no such thing as a pure tribe anymore. That’s why I call it global tribal, so it’s kind of nice. This is our culture today. We don’t have something that is pure, someone who says, I’m 100 percent American — and even that means you are a mix as well.”

Gn develops four distinct collections per year. Along with pre-fall, there is fall, spring, and resort/cruise. “Instead of presenting two collections, we are doing four, so the rhythm gets faster and faster, so it’s a lot of work and it’s going to be very, how should I say it? It’s a very demanding.” To stay on top of things he tries to be very well informed at all times. Gn reads a ton—he just finished reading *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in Chinese for the fourth time—and is constantly browsing Christie’s sales catalogs. He also turns to social media, which he has a love-hate relationship with. “Getting into social media is one of the most important things and I think social media is actually changing many things in fashion, but it is really a problem because you see everything.” Gn is referring to fast fashion; when retailers like Zara and H&M quickly make carbon copies of the looks seen on the runway. These imitation looks hit the racks long before the runway originals do and are sold at a fraction of the cost. Although he doesn’t name the exact retailer, he says that one “copied line by line one of my dresses, but it was not as good looking because it’s cheaper looking.” He pauses, melodramatically before adding, “I am certainly anti-fast fashion and big

pocket. My goal right now is to be able to design something which is so luxurious and so special that it can not be copied within 48 hours.” While fast fashion is the downside of social media, the upside is that Gn uses it to further his business. “You know we sell gowns, evening gowns, thru Instagram,” he says. “They send their measurements over and we fit them on Skype. Technology changes the whole thing.” It also makes the world smaller and allows Gn to personally connect with the women who wear his clothes. “It’s amazing because you know we have [Instagram] followers from Brazil, South Africa, and Spain. We follow them and see what’s going on. We are available in Africa, we are available in Australia, and we work with Matches and many other websites”—meaning his tribe of followers is truly global.

Does he ever worry that he is going to disappoint his devoted following? Not really. Gn is a master of design who understands fashion at its most basic level—that it’s all about having fun and finding pure joy in the clothes. “In fashion, giving them what they need is sometimes not the thing to do. You have to surprise them as well,” he says with a mischievous grin. “The thing is they know me. By the time they see the clothing, they say ‘OMG this is exactly what I want and what I need.’ It’s a very complex relationship: of what they think they need and what they think they don’t need. You give them what they need, and they don’t need it anymore. So

you design something that they think they don’t want, but now they need it.” He does worry about running out of ideas. “Not being able to come up with new ideas for the coming season is my biggest fear. I think it’s a fear for a lot of designers.” To ensure that his idea well doesn’t dry up, Gn is in constant pursuit of inspiration. He travels twice a month, has an encyclopedic knowledge of world history that he looks back on, and collects art. “The minute

you sort of panic then you will not be able to think of anything, but I always let it flow, naturally. If I think that I’m running out of ideas what I have to do is go for a trip. Or I go into my personal art collections and I’ll pick up a book. I’ll look at some fabric samples. That is the whole point of collecting art: because I’m always looking at beautiful things and they really inspire me.”

Gn is also inspired by his mother. “My mother is a very elegant women. She was one of the first women in Singapore who used to keep a house in England and she would shop at Ossie Clark, Browns, and Geoffrey Beene. She would wear Chanel gowns. As a child, it was very inspiring to see all these different things.” His cosmopolitan parents traveled frequently and collected antiques. His dad also inspired him creatively. “My father was a merchant, so he was traveling around looking for all these beautiful fabrics—beautiful saris from India, beautiful batiks from Indonesia, beautiful silks from Japan—and my mother would make them into dresses or suits and that was also in the beginning. At a very young age I would see a mixing of all these things and that was my very first

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PARTY PERFECT

A look from Andrew Gn’s 2018 Cruise Collection is the ideal look for the San Francisco Opera’s Opening Ball.



fashion experience.” His mastery of mixing—combining layers, textures, fabrics, colors, prints, and shapes—is visible in all of his collections. Is an intricate folkloric dress inspired by Russia or Mexico? It’s a mixture of both. Is that spectacular print cherry blossoms or sea anemone? It’s a little bit of each. “My collection is never like—just one thing. It’s always a mix of different things. I guess I am a greedy boy. I’m not satisfied with only one thing. I want many things. It’s also like modern cuisine as well, you want a lot of things: different flavors balancing each other.”

While Gn loves the over-the-top opulence of combining many things in his designs, on a personal level he’s much more subdued. He’s rarely seen in print or color. His all-black uniform consists of plain t-shirts, turtlenecks, pants, and jackets. He’s creating so much fantastical fashion then when it comes to himself he’s simply not interested. He equates it to the world of a Michelin-starred chef. “When you are cooking the most fabulous food the whole day, what you want when you go home is a simple salad and an omelette. That’s my explanation. All fashion, all day and I don’t feel like doing that all over again when I’m at home.” Talk of an omelette and a salad turns Gn’s thoughts toward food. He loves to cook and when he does, he treats his ingredients like he does his designs. “It’s no longer just spicy grilled meat and vegetables. I am obsessed with cooking. When I cook it’s all about mixing very unexpected things together.”

Tonight he’ll dine at one of his favorite restaurants in San Francisco—Cotogna, Quince, or Zuni. If he’s in the mood for dim sum, he’ll go to Yank Sing. But before he can eat, it’s back to Betty Lin to finish overseeing the unpacking of his ornate artisanal gowns. Before he turns to go, Gn says he wants to share his motto. “Be gutsy and fearless,” he says. “Ultimate luxury, that is my mantra. Beauty and luxury always—no compromises.” Words to live by from the global fashion tribe’s worldly leader.



MAKE A STATEMENT

Looks from Andrew Gn’s 2018 Cruise Collection are not for the faint of heart. “San Francisco is more adventurous than New York society,” Gn says. “SF can be elegant, but it can be cha-cha at the same time. I think that cha-cha factor is important—being able to take risks is important in fashion.”