

Scoop Magazine

Head / A Seamless Success

As I sat in the trendy DreambagsJaguarshoes bar in London's East End I had already decided who Richard Nicoll was. Having never met him and possessing very little background information this was quite a feat. Obviously he was a creative and therefore someone that surrounded himself with other artistic folk, visiting hip venues unbeknown to the mainstream and generally sticking it to the man. After all, he had stuck it to me with a 9pm interview slot at an establishment where it would be difficult to record the music let alone a polite conversation. I took in my surroundings in an effort to further validate my findings: Walls dripping with graffiti murals, tables sprouting empty Beefeater bottles propping up red candles – the only source of light for the diners and drinkers – and chairs reminiscent of eighth grade home room all perpetuated my theory. Richard Nicoll was a wanker.

I was thirty minutes early and used the time to secure a table and jot down all the scene setting observations you just had the pleasure of reading. I also found a moment to order a beer. Just before nine I caught myself gazing out to the street where my attention was drawn to a man peering through the window. It was Richard. He was waving. I was wrong.

It turns out that Richard has chosen the venue solely on its proximity to the studio, which is just across the street. He has shut up shop for the night and come to meet me before he heads home; a new concept given that until recently he was living above the studio. But, having been in London for the past fourteen years, he's lived a lot of places and is happy with his new postal address in Bethnal Green.

Richard moved to London two weeks after he finished the TEE with his sights firmly set on attending Central Saint Martins, the art school that boasts John Galliano, Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen among its list of graduates. Having spent quite a bit of his childhood schlepping back and forwards between Perth and the UK he remembers that it was always his intention to return. "I romanticised the idea of going to Saint Martins to study sculpture and fine arts. I think it was one of those childhood fantasises that you want to make a reality".

As a kid, Richard used clothes as "a way to communicate" and as "a form of self expression" and so decided to take fashion as his third elective in the foundation course at Saint Martins. "I didn't even know fashion existed as an industry, I didn't even know what it was really. For me it was more about youth culture and identity". He put his childhood experience to good use and, after completing his foundation year, returned to the school as a fashion major.

It was at his graduation parade in 2002 that things really started to kick off. His catwalk collection was snapped up by fashion giant Dolce and Gabbana and the show also prompted a commission to design his

first paid collection for a catalogue company out of Manchester – the memory of which leaves Richard cringing but an experience he also credits as the catalyst for developing his own brand. "They were relaunching their catalogue and trying to create a mail-order style Topshop. They chose myself and one of my peers to design a range for them and in return they sponsored us to start our own labels. Nothing else was going on for me at the time so I just took the opportunity and did a really disastrous collection. It was never my intention to start my own label. Sometimes the situation just takes over you and that's what happened with me, I've taken every opportunity that has presented itself".

Once he had completed his catalogue commission Richard began making small collections for William Baker – long time fashion advisor to Kylie Minogue – and other industry folk as well as taking odd styling jobs to maintain his profile. He was of the belief that hard work would eventually land him the job of his dreams. That job turned out to be a freelance post with Louis Vuitton.

"Louis Vuitton was kind of the turning point for me because I realised that if there was a job I was going to be happy with it was going to be that one. The whole experience was phenomenal – working really closely with Marc Jacobs was amazing – and one skirt from the catwalk ended up on the cover of British Vogue. I had a ball but it made me realise I didn't really want to be working for someone else, I enjoyed the freedom of doing my own thing". And so he did.

And so Richard returned to the catwalk under the Fashion East banner, an organization committed to giving young designers the opportunity to show their talents during London Fashion week. His efforts were rewarded with the prestigious Topshop New Generation gong that fuelled his label launch with a Richard Nicoll concession in the flagship store at Oxford Circus.

He is quick to name Helmut Lang and Marc Jacobs as industry leaders and designers that he finds inspiring, "I've always been a great fan of Lang and I like Marc Jacobs' approach. I like them for opposite reasons. Helmut Lang for the architectural simplicity and Marc Jacobs' for the infused character – it's less about the product and more about the girl that is wearing it. I kind of feel my work is somewhere between those aesthetics".

His design ethos stems from a similar sensibility, infusing "personal expression and idiosyncratic style" in all of his garments and banishing overt sexuality and status dressing. "It's light-hearted and quite joyful. It celebrates individuality. It's not like a Gucci or something really homogenised. It's very idiosyncratic, perhaps a little eccentric which is not necessarily a conscious decision but probably a manifestation of what I am about".

And it is the classic cuts with cutting edge nuances, which have made the label a success with buyers and stylists across the globe. Stocked by over thirty boutiques, Richard feels it is important to appeal to a broad demographic and actively designs pieces he feels will translate.

"My work has a lot of dimensions to it and the pieces individually can fit into many stories. We have a huge age range of customers so we get women in their 50s and girls in their 20s buying the label which I really like and we have the same kind of coverage from magazines. We get more mature press like Harpers Bazaar and Vogue as well as the younger publications like Dazed (& Confused) and i-D".

Celebrities are also desperate to get in on the action with Tracey Emin, Bjork and Kylie Minogue strong supporters of the label. "We've had things shot on Sophia Coppola and Chloe Sevigny, not your general WAG celebrity. Strong, intelligent women like it and I really love that. It's meant to be about people understanding the strength of individuality". One celebrity he is keen to convert is US/London 'it' girl, Beth Ditto, the plus size front woman of Punk/Soul/Experimental band, The Gossip. Richard sees Beth as "someone who is doing her own thing and pushing the stereotype boundaries" with a real depth of character. No doubt an excellent ambassador for a fashion line that believes that the girl should wear the clothes and not vice versa.

Like many designers, Richard finds balancing commercial viability and creative fulfilment both challenging and, at times, frustrating. Sponsorship programs and awards, such as his recent Westfield London win, have been crucial to the label's longevity and Richard's personal sanity. "It gives us more freedom to explore what we want to do. I became really synonymous with a certain style and it started to bore me. Now I have the freedom - financially and creatively - to do what I want to do rather than what I feel will keep us afloat".

So, for spring/summer 2008 Richard has produced a pre-collection that pays homage to the signature Nicoll style but that also introduces elements of his new direction. Luxurious silks and striking satins have been merged in a beautifully tailored range across a clean colour scope as preview to the muted metallics and clean nudes that dominate spring/summer. Richard has also maintained his pleat-work across both stories but completely repurposed it for his show in tiered pencil skirts that are both dramatic and entirely feminine.

Career highlight to date? He's had quite a few. But, the recent Andam win is something that Richard finds especially rewarding. Historically only open to French designers, with Martin Margiela and Viktor & Rolf two of the previous victors, Richard took out the top prize earlier in the year and tells me that it is his greatest professional achievement. "You win stuff and when it's in your own city you think it's because people like you but when it's in a city where no one knows you it's based purely on your work - that for me is a big accolade".

I ask him what the future holds and he maintains that the past may be the best place to look for answers. "I think things happen really weirdly, really magically in a way, I was quite fatalistic and I'm really surprised how things really have just worked out. The more recognition and affirmation you receive then the more confident you become and as a result your work becomes stronger and more solid. And that is when you can really identify your point of difference".

It's midnight when I leave Richard, who has randomly run into a couple of kids he used to kick about with in Sydney. It looks as though he has settled in for the night and, after my fourth Tiger, my bed is calling. He has invited me to attend his catwalk showing at London Fashion Week, which I am both flattered and slightly unnerved by. I have already started stressing about what to wear. I know I'll arrive early to absorb the atmosphere. I also know I'll take a notebook to record my character summations that will no doubt force another retraction down the line. But the thing that I absolutely know for sure is that you can be unbelievably talented, incredibly successful and a really great guy. And then some.