



A BRIEF CHAT WITH...

Fashion Favourite Cybèle Wiren

A quiet, leafy cul-de-sac in Avondale, Auckland, is not where you expect to find one of our hottest young designers. I fear I might have the wrong address. The simple, silent villa nestled in a garden of flax and ferns hardly seems likely to harbour a hubbub of fashion design and production.

But Cybèle Wiren answers my knock, just off a plane from Australian Fashion Week in Sydney (one of just three Kiwi designers showing). She's wearing a sweet smile and billowy black dress on a pixie-like frame. A screen-print of white-grey swirls runs down the front of the silk chiffon number — one of her own designs, of course. Black tights and boots complete an all-black outfit, uncharacteristically so “because I love colour”.

That love speaks loud in her label. Not yet five years in the making, high-end-boutique range Cybèle is known for bold colour, striking patterns, ingenious panelling and innovative details, like last season's chain-link-motif dresses. It's been dubbed streetwise, sexy, rebellious, edgy, even “slightly unhinged”. The designer herself prefers “Feminine with a bold graphic edge. Energetic. Quite youthful.”

Wiren looks closer to 25 than 31 (in August) sat at her kitchen table stroking her cat Poi. She also shares the pristine pad

Wiren requested an early slot and organisers obliged, scheduling her show for the first morning of the five-day affair. “It was great to get it out of the way, because a show's never finished. You just keep thinking and working on it. By the time the show started, I felt delirious.”

Watching from the wings, Wiren had no idea one of her Australian models had food poisoning. In between catwalk spots, the girl dashed off to vomit in a rubbish bin, then changed and set off again down the runway. No-one noticed and the show went off without a hitch, impressing local and international media representatives.

More importantly, buyers from Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Ireland, Britain and the US were on the phone within hours, then visiting her hotel selecting pieces from the 50-strong range. Five new accounts are confirmed with more pending and Wiren says the label's making a “tidy profit”.

Currently Cybèle stocks 15 boutiques at home, 13 in the larger Australian market, and one store each in London, Los Angeles and New York. Extending export sales heads Wiren's to-do list.

“There's a lot of talk about our fabulously high standard of fashion design — and it's true. Larger New Zealand labels which have found success overseas show it can be done. That



with boyfriend Kelly Bewley, an Auckland Museum display technician: “we co-own it with the bank”. Contemporary New Zealand paintings colour the lounge walls, including a self-portrait Wiren did at art school when she had a longer mane but the same translucent skin and welled eyes.

Eight years on and Wiren's tired. Her first solo show at Australian Fashion Week, (in late April) an annual showcase of the brightest fashion talent from the Asia-Pacific region, was her biggest-ever project — hours upon hours squeezed out of her already-busy schedule for planning, casting, choreography, fittings and rehearsals.

In Sydney, a black-walled room was located, a black vinyl catwalk built and props kept minimal to focus attention on the bold colours of her Spring/Summer 08 collection Hi-Fiction Science. “It's based on a visual science project,” Wiren explains, “with elements of maths, geometry, chemistry, physics, mechanics.” Think bright geometric panelling — hexagons, rectangles and circles — on black, and swirly prints evoking vapours and the lab. Especially commissioned for the show were brightly painted wedge shoes by Sydney's Tristan Blair and oversized black lacquer jewellery based on nuts and bolts by Melbourne's Nyssa Marrow.

inspires the rest of us.” She's also had a leg-up from New Zealand Trade & Enterprise, which provided business courses and mentoring.

Wiren's now looking to break into the lucrative Asian market, after an “out of the blue” invite by the Chinese government to the Shanghai International Young Designer Showcase in April last year. “We made a snap decision to throw a show together.” It was attended by 150 fashion journalists from Asian versions of such magazines as *Bazaar* and *Cosmopolitan* (later a Cybèle creation made the cover of Japan's *Nippon Vogue*).

Wiren was straight on the plane afterwards to her second big date of the week, the 2006 Australian Fashion Week, where presenting as part of a group show earned her the coveted solo show invite for 2007.

“Shows are really important for the profile of a label like mine, poised somewhere between newbie and household name. Plus they make you get your A into G and hone your complete vision for the collection.” Every new order for Cybèle creations has been placed by fashion show scouts.

While designers everywhere attach titles and themes to collections, Wiren also assigns a person. “I often have a girl in my head — not so much the potential wearer as the muse.” Like

her Hi-Fiction Science muse girl: “Practical in her everyday way, but also a dreamer. An inventor with things to make and do, with many visions in her head.”

Sounds a little like her creator. To manage a hectic workload, Wiren keeps “separate compartments in her head”. At any one time she’s working on three collections as well as business bolstering. In May, for instance, she produced reorders of the winter range, began mass production of the Hi-Fiction Science collection and met a deadline for initial designs of her Winter 08 range.

All of the label’s organisation and much of the production — pattern-making, cutting — takes place at her Avondale home. “I’ve been ‘about to’ move to a proper workroom for ages,” she smiles.

Wiren contracts out sewing not done on-site to factories around the country. She doesn’t diss designers farming out production to Hong Kong sweatshops but says she’s “passionate about keeping it in New Zealand”.

DOWNAN OUTDOOR STAIRCASE, past a garden of ponga, bamboo and cabbage trees, is the basement-cum-workroom. Hardly any wall space is visible: the room is plastered with a mosaic of illustrations of spanners and beakers of colourful chemicals; ripped-out magazine pages featuring her creations; fantasy drawings and cartoons that inspired previous collections; and pencil sketches for her new range.

Hi-Fiction Science sample garments shown in Sydney fill portable racks. One dress sports big, orange hexagons; another made of lustrous satin is printed with orange and green spanners. “I love this one. I’m going to wear it non-stop.” Wiren wears nothing but her own label. What, no fellow designers or Glassons basics? “I have to buy underwear, but that’s it.”

Four staff work from this room: creative-and-business-operations manager Emma Hayes, who doubles as graphic designer, fulltime sewer Jan Tiria, and workroom assistant Anita Liang.

But who’s the fourth member of staff? “Me. Yes, I do think of myself as staff.” She does “a little bit of everything” and recently started paying herself a “modest” salary.

She starts work at 8am sharp, but unlike the others doesn’t stop at 5pm. “I’m really bad. I like working at night.” Kelly has to drag her away “otherwise he has to work too”, she laughs. “At the moment he’s a trainee cutter.”

Friends and family help out at busy times — four were holed up at Cybèle central in the days before fashion week, including psycho-therapist Dad Dale. While we chat, there’s a knock at the door — it’s Dale stopping by to say welcome back. He lives five doors down and I catch just a glimpse before he’s sent packing, but there’s no mistaking the pride when he asks how it went across the Ditch.

When he calls her Cybèle it reminds me of something. With a name that slides off the tongue like Cybèle, it’s no surprise she made her label eponymous. But did she think about calling it Cybèle Rose Snowflake?

“Bloody Google!” she groans. “Yes, they’re my middle names.” And, yes, her parents were hippies. She grew up the third child of four on a remote rural property in Colville Bay, Coromandel, without electricity or a television. Little Cybèle helped with her father’s weaving business and her mother taught her to sew on a treadle machine. She’s made nearly all her own clothes since primary school.

After school at Coromandel High — her seventh-form year spent on exchange in France — she earned a four-year bachelor of visual communications degree at Auckland’s Unitec (1996-99), majoring in painting, with clothes featuring only as part of installation art. Not until moving to Melbourne did she realise fashion superseded art and photography passions. There she worked as a workroom assistant and later as an independent contractor sewing for various labels.



Returning home in 2002, she set up Cybèle, buying basic machinery with savings and selling an eight-piece collection to four stores. “I started small and built it very gradually, so if it didn’t work out I wouldn’t lose everything.”

Since Anita graduated from inaugural intern to assistant, dozens of students from local techs and Europe have approached asking for internships. Wiren’s said yes to most, and there’s an English girl on her way. “I love the mentoring aspect of my job. That’s something we’re really good at in New Zealand fashion — hands-on teaching and giving young people a chance.”

From being an intern to having her own interns in just a couple of years is not a bad effort. And for four-plus years fashion press attention has been overwhelmingly positive. “It can be a lot to live up to but there’s nothing you can do about that: you either put it out there or not. Things move so fast you can’t rest on your laurels.”

Wiren’s proud to be thought of as one of our brightest fashion stars, but don’t go calling her an It Girl. She screws up her face. “Someone’s always dubbed a fashion It Girl — it’s got such a transitory feel. I’d like to be something more permanent.”

Wiren’s keen to have a devoted Cybèle store “one day”, and a secretive smile suggests it might be sooner rather than later. And she’s already looking forward to celebrating Cybèle’s fifth birthday in November with a glass of champagne and a night off.

SARAH LANG ■

STEPHEN PERRY