

world VISION

Fashion maverick Denise L'Estrange-Corbet is outspoken about age, bad clothes, mental health and almost anything else. Now she flies the flag for the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation

WORDS SARAH LANG PHOTOGRAPHS EMMA BASS

WHEN DENISE L'ESTRANGE-CORBET confirms that she's 12, she's not lying about her age. She's simply a leap-year baby. Not that Denise tells anyone she's officially pre-teen because, really, she's on the brink of 50 – and is perfectly happy to be there.

"I just don't have a problem with ageing," she says, talking of her frustration with "frightened-rabbit women who deny getting Botox". "It's sad that people have this idea that unless you're young and beautiful you're not accepted. Some people are scared and lie about their age. That's stupid, it's what you are. From conception, everything ages, everything has a shelf life and eventually we pass on, we make history."

This is one woman who's already staked her claim in the history books. The co-founder of global fashion label World (with business partner/ex-husband Francis Hooper) became New Zealand's first female fashion designer to be honoured by the Queen, with a 2002 MNZM (Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit) for services to fashion. Thinking it was a wind-up, Denise phoned one of the prime minister's staffers who informed her that the Queen didn't play practical jokes. Gradually, it sank in. Quite a tribute for a woman whose label is proudly anti-establishment, and who always considered herself the "black sheep of the family".

We're talking in a hotel lobby, as she doesn't do interviews among the stuffed animals (taxidermy, not →



toys) at her Auckland villa. Wrapping her trademark slash of red lippy around a weak trim latte, she calls the waiter darling and says "Oh my God" a lot in what's still a Pommy accent, despite 22 years back in her birth country. That coiffed bob is streaked with grey and a trademark all-black, all-World outfit sheathes less of her, after recent (not purposeful) weight loss through swimming.

As she gets smaller, World keeps getting bigger. From humble beginnings at a bus stop in 1989 with just \$400 to its name, the boundary-pushing brand was among the first New Zealand labels to show at Australian Fashion Week and London Fashion Week, has graced myriad other international fashion shows, been exhibited in museums, and is now stocked in 10 countries across Europe, the US, Australasia and Asia. Dubbed "witty effrontery" by *Time* magazine and lauded by fashion bible *Vogue*, along the way World diversified into menswear and beauty and is primed for further expansion.

Success soon shut up the smarmy naysayers, but as World nears its 21st birthday, it's in no danger of becoming staid. Adjectives hurled at World over the years include avant-garde, courageous, colour-clashing, irreverent, idiosyncratic, ironic, inventive, quirky, gimmicky, over-the-top, experimental, eccentric, eclectic and even seditious. An Auckland Museum exhibition dedicated to World was titled *We Fought Fashion and Lost*.

From the word go, the stop-and-stare outfits copped the bitchiness of New Zealand design circles, whether

trouble so often.' I've always been forthright and some people probably find it quite abrasive. But that's just me and I don't want to be a false person or pretend I'm something I'm not. If someone asks my opinion I'll tell them truthfully, 'That looks horrible on you, take it off.'

Despite – or perhaps because of – that big mouth, Denise hasn't courted as much media exposure as most designers. When she does it's for a good cause, as when she agreed to go public about her depression for the late-90s mental health campaign *Like Minds, Like Mine*.

Being splashed across our TV screens was more than worth it, if only because of the difference she made to the teenage goth who stopped her in the supermarket to say thank you. Denise has also been approached by countless others who she'd never have dreamed would have depression, and has witnessed a sea change in social attitudes to an illness that one in five women in New Zealand will experience. And baring her soul in her 2008-published memoir *All That Glitters* (Random House, \$36.99), which Denise took a year off work to write, wasn't about money or celebrity – all royalties go to the Mental Health Foundation.

Denise is particular about the charities she gets involved with (including the Starship Foundation, Aids Foundation, SPCA) and is passionate about them. Now she's been announced as ambassador for the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation (NZBCF). In the lead-up to October's Breast Cancer Action Month, she and

SOME PEOPLE ARE SCARED AND LIE ABOUT THEIR AGE. THAT'S STUPID, IT'S WHAT YOU ARE. FROM CONCEPTION, EVERYTHING AGES, EVERYTHING HAS A SHELF LIFE

directed at their plastic-tablecloth fabrics, drag-queen models or those "F**k Fashion" T-shirts. Dubbed the problem children of fashion, the duo were treated as a couple of "whack jobs" who'd never make it, says Denise. "People would laugh at us or feel sorry for us, like, 'Oh it's so sweet they're trying.' Pathetic and jealous, really."

Not known for self-editing, this veteran of the professional speakers' circuit is frank about everything from uptight designers with their made-in-China labels, to celebs who use fleeting appearances at charity events to boost their status, through to function-hopping "beautiful people with the personality of a wet fish. Sometimes I think, *Oh my God, do I really have to sit and talk to you today?* I can do shy, but not personality minus."

"My friends say to me sometimes, 'You've got such an enormous mouth.' I say, 'I know, it gets me in so much

12 other female celebs moulded sculptures from Bostik Blu Tack's specially created Pink Tack – and these will be auctioned on TradeMe throughout October. Every cent raised will go to the NZBCF, while Bostik's also donating 20 cents of every Pink Tack packet sold up to \$10,000.

As well as raising awareness, Denise wants to aid education about, and prevention of, a deadly disease that strikes at random, and can be aggravated by factors such as alcohol abuse and obesity. "Unless it's caught early on, there's no cure," she says. She knows people who've died of breast cancer and tells the story of a close friend – a doctor – who only got checked because a friend did. "And she had it. We were all shocked because she was a professional in her 30s – way younger than me. You just don't think it can happen to you." The friend got better, "but it was very traumatic".



Denise is no stranger to trauma herself, as you soon learn in *All That Glitters* – gripping, no-holds-barred account of a life stranger than fiction. Her depression has its roots in a grim, working-class south London childhood steeped in violence, poverty, infidelity, dislocation and instability. Her mother left her violent, alcoholic husband when Denise, nicknamed “alley cat”, was three. Her mother beat her. Neighbourhood children were abused; someone in her family was killed.

As the family prepared to return to New Zealand to rejoin her supposedly newly sober father, the news came that he’d bled to death after cutting himself while in an alcoholic stupor. He was 46. After hearing the news Denise, 14, tried to kill herself with sleeping pills. And lost her Catholic faith. “I thought, Well if there’s a God he’s seriously missing out something here. I do believe things happen for a reason but I couldn’t work out the reason, and that’s when I find things hard to deal with.”

It wasn’t until her late 20s, back in New Zealand with a new business and daughter, that her doctor gave her black moods a name. “That was an incredible weight taken off my shoulders, because until then I couldn’t understand what it was,” Denise explains.

Described as demons, a black cloud, a tightrope and a bottomless ocean in the book, her depression becomes almost three-dimensional. But its invisibility still makes it hard to handle. “With another illness or ailment, you or the doctors can usually see it,” she says. “But there’s no writing on the ugly-looking mush that’s the brain to say ‘this bit is the happy bit, this bit is all your horrible

IF YOU DON’T WANT TO LIKE ME, DON’T LIKE ME. THAT’S FINE, AS LONG AS I’M HAPPY AND DOING WHAT I BELIEVE IN. THAT’S HOW I’VE ALWAYS LIVED MY LIFE

thoughts – we’ll just whip that depression out’.” Although it’s managed with medication, Denise knows there’s no cure. “It’s always there,” she says.

While being a parent forced her to deal with the demons of her childhood, it also made her determined to give her daughter the unconditional love absent from her own upbringing. Denise didn’t want to use nannies or daycare so, until kindy beckoned, Pebbles became a cling-on: Playing and napping in the workroom; making fabric-scrap collages. “Some people see children as an interruption in their lives but she just became part of us,” says Denise, who speaks of birthing and nurturing Pebbles (now 20) and the business simultaneously.

The stranger to downtime still speaks as “us” and “we”

– not in the royal sense, and not just about World or parenting. “We’re separated but we’re very good friends,” she says of Francis. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Denise will talk about change though. “Sometimes we don’t want things to change but we just have to accept that they do.” She’s open to the idea of meeting another partner – “If it happens it happens, and if it doesn’t it doesn’t. It’d have to be a very strong man who’d be willing to take me on since Francis,” she admits.

There’ll be no posting an internet dating profile either. “I’d be on the front page of every newspaper in the country, and I’d probably get no hits, which would be even worse!” She also appears to genuinely – astonishingly – believe she’s “unemployable”.

Denise has come to accept her faults, including her temper. “Everyone wants to change something about themselves, whether physically or mentally. But age makes you more mellow and more accepting.”

And although she may seem not to, she does care what people think. Well, some of them. “It depends who it is and what it is. But if I did worry about what people thought of me, I’d probably worry about nothing else. I don’t go out of my way to tread on people’s toes, but you can’t please everyone, and I’m not answerable to anyone. If you don’t want to like me, don’t like me. That’s fine, as long as I’m happy and doing what I believe in. That’s how I’ve always lived my life. We have such a short time here and it’s a shame if you look back on your life and don’t have pleasant thoughts about it.”

Given the powerlessness of her childhood, it’s hardly

surprising Denise mentions her urge for control a few times. That’s mainly in the work arena – she has no strict health regimen. “I’ve never been one of those people who thinks, *I need to do this to keep healthy.*”

She hasn’t let her father’s alcoholism put her off enjoying a glass of wine, and as a vegetarian of 36 years – who can’t cook but loves good food and eating out – she’s never felt pressure to worship at the skinny shrine. “I just eat what I want to eat. It’s a shame when women diet and give up so many things they love and then crave that Flake. Who’s judging you? *I can’t go out without my makeup on – why not? Or I can’t do this or that because of my age.* You so can. If you want to, you can do anything.” **N**