



DAVID KOMA

DAVID KOMA SHOWED HIS FIRST COLLECTION AT THIRTEEN YEARS OLD IN SAINT PETERSBURG, RUSSIA, WHERE HE JUMPED AT THE OPPORTUNITY WHEN HE SPOTTED A POSTER TO ENTER A STUDENT FASHION COMPETITION. OTHER PARTICIPANTS WERE, ON AVERAGE, A DECADE OLDER THAN HE WAS. "THAT WAS THE FUN PART!" KOMA RECALLS. HE APPLIED AND WAS GRANTED PERMISSION TO SHOW A COLLECTION OF THREE COATS. "OBVIOUSLY I DIDN'T WIN ANYTHING!" HE SAYS. BUT KOMA HAD FOUND HIS CALLING.

PORTRAIT BY **PAUL SCALA**

INTERVIEW BY **SUZANNE WEINSTOCK**

PEOPLE NEED TO THINK BIG. YOU NEVER KNOW HOW FAR YOU CAN GO. I NEVER REALLY SET MYSELF A LIMIT.

Koma loved the company of fellow designers, the models, and seeing his ideas come to life, not to mention plentiful attention from judges who must have been fascinated by the pint-sized wonder youth in their midst. Koma was hooked. From that day on he took part in every competition he could find.

Although Koma has grown up, his creative vision remains shockingly consistent with the first collection eleven years ago. "To be honest, the things I loved when I was thirteen and the things I do now didn't change much!" Koma admits with a laugh. "The style is still the same! It is quite weird. I got more mature, better educated and I'm just a different person now. But the things I felt then, I can still feel them now." There are no rhyme or reason to why Koma was such a natural at fashion design, seeing as he certainly didn't inherit it from his family. Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, a small town in the former soviet bloc that gained its independence in 1991, the Koma family's genes suggest he should have excelled at

athletics or academics. His father Nikolay was a professional football player who holds degrees in sport, law, and economics, and his mother is a geologist. His younger brother Beka is pursuing a professional tennis career. "I know how to play tennis and I sometimes play football, but I never really liked sport a lot. I was quite lazy with that," says Koma, who began drawing and dreaming of fashion design at eight years old. Although he grudgingly joined in sports activities on family holidays, he ultimately prefers his sketchpad.

When Koma was ten, he and his family moved to Saint Petersburg where he immediately enrolled in an art school named after Russian painter and stage designer Boris Kustodiev. He raced through art school while participating in fashion design competitions and graduated at fifteen. More than anything, Koma wanted to move to London immediately and study in the famed fashion program at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, but an age requirement of eighteen kept him in Saint Petersburg. While he was waiting, Koma pursued his second passion, art, at the Saint Petersburg State Academy of Art. "If I could have moved at fifteen I would have. I was waiting for that," he says. "But I'm really happy that I didn't." He received a classical fine art education in subjects like art history, life drawing and anatomy, and developed a love of oil painting. "I don't have time for that now, but one day." Shortly before leaving Saint Petersburg, Koma had the good fortune of meeting his wife and business partner Sasha. "We met at a friend's party and fell in love," he says simply. Three years ago the pair got married in a small

ceremony with close friends. Despite appreciating his fine art education, Koma dropped out as soon as he was old enough for Central Saint Martins, where he flourished. His "quite cool" BA collection received the best womenswear award which led Koma straight to the two-year MA program to study under fashion's master-maker Professor Louise Wilson. Wilson has trained the late Alexander McQueen, Christopher Kane and Marios Schwab, among endless others. Roughly twenty students are admitted each year to the highly selective program that culminates with its students showing during London Fashion Week. Afterward, more than ninety percent of students either start their own labels or take over a major fashion house, according to The Telegraph, which also notes that about a third of the designers showing in London Fashion Week are trained at Central Saint Martins.

Koma lights up when he talks about his time in the MA program and says the most memorable and emotional moment of his career was not on the catwalk, but when the notoriously brash and judgmental Professor Wilson first told him she liked his work. "The best time in my life was my time in Saint Martins studying with her." The raves his MA collection received from the fashion world didn't come as a surprise to Koma because of the joy he felt designing and working hard on it. "You know when you're doing something and you're really happy and really loving what you do?" he says trying to explain what he was feeling. "When you love the college, when you love your tutor, and you love the thing you do and you feel happiness and power? I was in that kind of mood."

Koma challenged himself to encapsulate his essence as a designer into a single, career-launching collection of thirteen pieces. He defines the collection in a vague way that could describe any number of lines. "It was basically a quite sculptural collection, but it was a combination of hard and soft and femininity." However, the spin Koma put on commonly explored themes was obviously unique. Chains and metal tubing as well as geometric shapes tied the show together. Even knits were constructed with metal woven inside to provide structure. These materials and shapes have become a hallmark of Koma's designs, even as his aesthetic continues to mature. The resonance of his work was immediate, beginning with the Harrods Design Award. Then celebrities of the superstar variety came running. Lady Gaga was the first to approach Koma, followed by Megan Fox, Cheryl Cole, Beyonce, and Rihanna followed by many, many others. Out of all the A-listers wearing his designs, it was Cheryl Cole that really brought his name to the public consciousness.

A media storm erupted when Cole wore a David Koma dress on the talent competition TV show The X Factor that the media not-so-kindly dubbed the "dustbin lid dress" because of the two rounded shapes trimmed in metal piping at the top. At one point during the show Simon Cowell told her to sit up straight to avoid revealing her, well, assets. Koma is nothing but positive about the criticism the Girls Aloud singer received. At the time, Koma was working on a similar dress for Beyonce for the MTV Europe Awards, which was ultimately more well received. Surprisingly, Cole bought

the dress off the rack herself so it was a complete marvel to him when it popped up on TV. "I thought she looked fantastic and it was cool that a lot of people had opinions about if it's fashion or art. If it makes people think and makes people want to say something I think it's already good. I was surprised and it was fun!"

Celebrity fans are a huge compliment to Koma, who says it lets him know he's on the right track and encourages him to keep getting stronger. "It means that beautiful women want to wear my dresses even though they have the opportunity to wear anything and everything in the world." His glamorous patrons and early successes don't mean that he is partying it up though. Koma is single-mindedly focused on doing something new each season and growing his small business into a successful, global brand. Although Koma has a few people working with him, an assistant, a few pattern cutters and machinists, the David Koma line is really a husband and wife business. Koma designs while his "lovely wife" commands the other functions. "She is involved 100%. She is a big part of the brand and without her it would be difficult. She does all the business side and sales. She supports everything I do," David says of his partner. Living and working together every day might be difficult for some couples, but Koma gushes with poignant sincerity about the joys of working with Sasha. "We're not just husband and wife. I feel she really is my favorite person in the world. We understand each other and I find it amazing to have that support from someone I love."

Koma considers his personal life a far less interesting subject than his

designs. "I'm pretty normal. I sleep a lot, watch TV, do nothing." Koma mentions House M.D. as a favorite series. "I work a lot and when I don't work I'm hanging out with my friends. I'm not one of those crazy people partying. Just countryside dinners and close friends. That's what excites me."

The eyes of the fashion world have been watching him closely since his graduation in 2009. *The Telegraph's* Fashion Director Hilary Alexander once said in her review of his third collection, Fall/Winter 2010, that she was skeptical about whether the success may have been too much too soon for the young designer. However, the zig-zag and zipper heavy show met her lofty expectations. "It is a pretty weird feeling," Koma says about watching his collections go down the runway. "I always love them and they all feel like my babies. But every time I'm trying to move on and do something new. After I finish one season I have a quite strong feeling about what I want to do next." He goes straight to sketching before taking a holiday and going right back to work on the sketches awaiting him.

Although his hands are full for the moment, Koma dreams of taking over as creative director of one of the French design houses in addition to his own company. "I don't know if I should say which," Koma says cautiously before enthusiasm gets the better of him. "Actually, Thierry Mugler. That would be amazing."

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ALL CLOTHES FROM
F/W 2010-11 COLLECTION

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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STYLING BY **SONNY GROO**
HAIR BY **TOM BERRY**
USING **BUMBLE & BUMBLE**
MAKEUP BY
FREYA DANSEN-HATCHER
USING **SHU UEMURA**
MODEL **CHARLOTTE LOHMAN**
AT NEXT









