

Interview with Alasdair MacKinnon - Fashion Designer and Fashion Design Council Shop Manager

Can you briefly tell me about your involvement with the Fashion Design Council (FDC) including the year you joined and your own label?

My involvement with the FDC started as a passionate onlooker. I used to go along to events and meetings wanting very much to be part of the action - it was about belonging at that point. At some time in 1983 or '84 I put my hand up and said I'd curate and exhibition at Christine Abrahams gallery called 'Supermarket Style Fashion - Cash and Carry Couture'. The idea was to turn the gallery into a supermarket (literally) stocked with young Melbourne fashion designers.

During all this I was working as a waiter and making clothes in my spare time - I was insecure about my ideas and skill level - I trained as an artist not as a designer. I enrolled in 2 separate courses, one for men's pattern making and the other for women's. Soon after I went to England and Europe to check out what my heroes were up to. I got back (sometime in '85) and offered to get involved in 'Fashion 85'. I also launched my label - **Alasdair Duncan MacKinnon** late in '85 for Spring/Summer 86/87. The next major FDC parade was in '87 (I think) in which I showed a Winter '87 collection.

How did you become the manager of the FDC shop?

After the 1987 show I started to run out of money and couldn't keep the label going - I wasn't part of 'Fashion '88.' Robert Buckingham (RB) asked me to be his assistant as director of the much larger Nestle backed 'Fashion '89'. This was presented in Melbourne at the now Tennis Centre and the Entertainment Centre in Sydney - this was unheard of for a fashion show let alone for young designers. Immediately after this wrapped up the FDC had to open a shop which they had received funding for by the State Govt. The FDC had been granted the money the year before but could not find a suitable space for a store. The obvious place at the time was Chapel Street but there was conflict with existing stores who also represented young independent designers. A space was looked at in the Banana Alley Vaults, but this was thought (rightly) to be too risky. The CBD was settled on as the best place, unfortunately at the time rents were high. A space that had been a fashion store for the famous House of Merivale and Mr John was taken - below ground on the corner of Collins Street and Manchester Lane - (now Sires suits)

I got involved finding sponsors for all sorts of stuff like paint, wall fittings and helping the designer/builders to put it all together. At some point RB and some of the board of the VFDC (the FDC had to become a different entity to run the shop - they became the Victoria Fashion Design Corporation with a board of 12 advisors) began interviewing for a store manager. Somehow, I sat in on the interviews - they would later ask my opinion of the candidates. I guess I must have been rather candid and disparaging and they asked me if I wanted the job - despite having little retail experience. They convinced me!

What was your experience running the shop - how many labels did you stock, years of operation, quality of the clothes etc?

I loved the space and the designers - I just found the work, and my lack of self-belief a tough combination. It became a frightening experience for me - I was out of my depth and I suffered pretty heavy anxiety over it daily. I was good at promoting the designers and running the education component - we had eager school groups through the store a couple of times a week with students

desperately wanting to know how they could become designers. I think we used to say we represented 50 designers across all categories, clothing, jewellery, accessories etc.

The quality varied from superbly made leather coats to more homemade items - in between there were designers like, Morrissey Edmiston, Abyss/Galaxy, Kara Baker and D-Zug who were having their items commercially manufactured and printed.

The store opened in 1989 and closed in 1991 - I left before it closed.

How did some Designers fair with selling their items? You mentioned some Designers were great as part of the overall Fashion parades but couldn't cut it in a boutique setting?

The better-known designers - Kara Baker, Morrissey Edmiston, Abyss/Galaxy, Bankussi and D-Zug all sold well - their marketing meant that the public knew them already and so this impacted their sales. At the time there were some talented designer/makers people like Peter Zagouris (his parents were manufacturers I think) who made amazing and detailed pieces with a strong sense of theatre. These works always look great in a parade setting but didn't always wow the public. I think too it was a time where you could appeal to your tribe of followers and not care about a broader public. Right about then some designers began to realise their business aspirations while others stayed within their niche. It was also interesting to observe the next crop of designers that were coming into the store they had been to RMIT and had witnessed all of the attention that young independent designers were receiving, and their expectations were higher. They were by and large more commercially minded, and their designs reflected a new era less obsessed with subculture and DIY.

How did the shop end?

I wasn't there right at the end - I was offered a job in TV wardrobe sometime late 1990. It had been very tough - soon after the ink dried on the lease the economy went into a nosedive. There was a pilot's strike, a large building society (whose office was up the street) crashed, and Sportsgirl who had occupied the building opposite forever began to build a giant new multi-level complex - still there now at 234 Collins. There was disruption to the flow of foot traffic across the street and the great adjacency we had shared with the established, commercial but youthful Sportsgirl on the other side was gone. With money tight and reduced foot traffic we really suffered. We didn't have money for extensive marketing so did what we could to drive traffic to the store. We had exhibitions and small in-house parades.

We were successful at raising public awareness to the independent and largely unknown designers that had been bubbling up all around Australia over the previous 10 years and providing a retail context that reflected that energy and design - and that was solely for the designers' benefit. It was an amazing place that people who were outside the scene and or who aspired to be a part - found engaging and fascinating. We did an effective job of promoting fashion as a career and certainly inspired quite a few to have a crack.

The store was successful from the designer's perspective as they made money.

The FDC shop was largely a kind of retail fashion philanthropy and for it to continue it would have required external funding so that it continue to build the careers of the designers it set out to support. This didn't happen and the tough marketplace and weaker sales forced it to close.