

Stealing the Show

Emma Wheaton catches up with savvy S2 designer Chrissie Catling, whose architectural designs were showcased at September's Perth Fashion Festival

Loud, edgy music reverberates through the room, and out of the black shadows a model in an S2 silk organza creation with her undergarments peeking through struts forward. The S2 collection stays true to the brand with a dark palette permeated with punches of hot red chilli and a distinct minimalist and structural style.

Such was the vision I got from Perth-based designer Chrissie Catling when she spoke passionately about her stand-alone show ahead of last month's Perth Fashion Festival. As we chatted she was busy preparing for the show, rolling fabric as she told me of her "great love for design and architectural shapes, simplicity and minimalism."

S2's contemporary, structured style using quality natural fabrics has been turning heads since Chrissie founded the label in 2004. Her individual designs show her strong flair for style, and though she has a background in design Chrissie says she is self-taught. She tells me design is something she has always been interested in, and prior to creating S2 she studied interior design before travelling and living in London. While she was in the fashion capital she was influenced by the timeless fashion shows from Japanese designers on the scene there at the time.

S2 is beautiful, individual and interesting. Aligning with the brand, the namesake store has a bold aesthetic that's different to the Perth standard; clients often tell Chrissie they feel as though they're in Melbourne or overseas. "It's an individual store space and aesthetic," she says. "I like the old and soulful influence of Japanese."

As well as her flagship store in Perth – in which Chrissie stocks other labels from Australia and internationally – S2 is carried by boutiques Australia-wide.

After studying food and wine, living in Margaret River and working in events, Chrissie moved to Perth with her daughter. With a young one to support and being a self-driven character, Chrissie says she knew she wanted to work for herself. She became immersed in the fashion industry – but with no technical background, looking back she says: "I look at what I've done and I think if I knew then what I do now ... it was only my brash ignorance of not



knowing what it would involve that has led to where I am.”

Chrissie grew up in the South West of WA and comes from a proud wool producer's heritage. Though it's not a lifestyle she says she'd go back to, her roots continue to have a definite influence on her life today. "It's the connection of nature and of old and new together ... I prefer working with natural fabrics: silk, wool, silk cotton and cotton.

"I find natural and textural fibres drape beautifully and, importantly, last: I'm not a throw-away. Although I do want people to buy my clothes each season, it concerns me. I'm all about making something well and making something beautifully. It might cost a little bit more but you can enjoy it more, and it's something of quality."

S2's current collection is called Shadow Play. The inspiration, Chrissie tells me, comes from the fringe dwellers of society, as opposed to a commercial influence. "It's driven by the minimal, the architectural," she says. "And we have a wow colour in this collection, chilli, which is different for me. I've also sourced designer prints."

This will be the fourth year S2 has participated in Perth Fashion Festival. It marks the label's inaugural stand-alone show, and the designer speaks of it excitedly. With a whole show to herself, she knew she'd need more clothes and went into her vault of past collections to cut down others and recreate some favourite pieces. The collection will abound with S2's signature dark, moody, structured and modern designs. "It's a show that is more art-driven, which is my great love," Chrissie says. "I've told my father he might need ear plugs – the music will be strong and heavy, it will tap into that sort of subculture."

And there's no slowing down for the designer after the show, with S2's autumn/winter collection to work on as well as sourcing other like-minded, architecturally inspired labels for the shop.

A 'directional' label that goes against the grain in terms of following trends, Chrissie's aim with S2 is to appeal to all women. She says it's important to be constantly mindful of the body.

"Women have bosoms and bottoms and we all want to look good," she says. "The majority of my clients are fairly strong women, they know themselves well, they're intelligent and have a good sense of self."

Prior to S2, Chrissie created Passion Seed, an art-wear label that saw beautiful, Japanese-inspired one-off pieces using kimono fabric and screen prints. But she realised that to make a living and she needed to create pieces that were more wearable and had larger collections. And so S2 was born.

"S2 is a clean and strong brand, it's bolder. The name doesn't mean anything, it just fits," she says.

The effortlessly cool label has experienced many highlights since its inception, including being voted the 'standout' collection at the 2008 Perth Fashion Festival.

And in March this year, the flagship store put on a parade in the nearby laneway for the launch of the winter collection. An atmospheric evening, it was another special



moment for the designer. "It was really intimate and we slowed the whole pace right down, it's been the most 'wow' event for me," she says.

When asked for her third highlight memory Chrissie recalls a fundraising event in 2010, for which she created an LBD with lowbrow local artist Stormie Mills. She goes on to describe in elaborate detail a black pleated shift dress made from silk that Stormie screen printed a black skull onto "with hearts for eyes".

"We had a big fundraiser selling those, and were able to give a sizable amount of money to the AIDS Council, which also supports WA Fashion. It was amazing to see so many people I've never met come forward and support the cause," she says.

For Chrissie there is no such thing as downtime, and she admits she'd rather be working on something and moving forward than relaxing on a holiday. And perhaps spurred on by the success of last year's fundraiser she hopes to weave a philanthropic ideal into the label for the future.

The designer says she wants to take her love for what she does, and what she creates, and use it to manifest S2 pop-up events. She envisions these as parties at which people can dine, and businesses and charities can come together for not only a good time, but also a good cause. "It will be clearly linked with S2, but it's all in the pipeline at the moment." ●

Opening pages and above: Creations from S2's spring/summer collection.
Photographer: Romaine Duquesne;
Vivien's creative: Bobby Bujisic; **Vivien's model:** Emily Green.
Below: S2 creator Chrissie Catling.



