



INSTANT CLASSIC

One of New Zealand's newest labels was born out of 15 years' design experience and lessons learned from a life-threatening episode. Frances Chan on the story behind Shen. Photography by Stephen Tilley.

Her garments exude self-confidence and have a timeless quality. Her premiere collection is called "Forever Lasting". The name of her label means "eternity". Introducing Shen – and its creator, 38-year-old Mary-Ellen Prendergast.

The look book of Shen's winter 2012 range is an exposé of the cool, calm and collected. "I would describe the woman I am designing for as sophisticated and self-assured, someone who's not afraid to make a statement with her clothing and appreciates the finer things in life," says Prendergast.

Fine silks, chunky cable knits and leather feature strongly in the collection, confirming Prendergast's love of natural fabrics, but she also teams them up with some faux fur, sequins and hand-dyeing for texture, shimmer and intrigue. The colour palette – black, white, cream, charcoal, taupe – is intentionally subdued but classic. Up close, the garments achieve exactly the designer's intention: "to look and feel luxurious".

So how does a debut collection impart such a sense of maturity and aestheticism – as opposed to a trend-driven "one day you're in, next day you're out" look?

Opposite page: Winter faux fur jacket with silk sequin dress with racer back. Right: Cable merino cropped jacket with Shen crane print silk dress and silk leggings.





For one thing, Prendergast is no newcomer to the industry, which she entered 15 years ago. After graduating from Wellington Polytechnic with a Diploma in Fashion Design and Technology in 1996, she became assistant to haute couture designer Patrick Steel. Steel's skill and extravagant design was a notable influence on Prendergast. "He was a very talented man and had great taste in fabric. It was a highlight, racing down to Centrepoint [Fabrics, Auckland] every day to buy the most beautiful fabrics," she remembers.

From 1998 to 2000 Prendergast's fast-paced OE was spent in London, first at original T-shirt and leathers house Savage London, then at clothing giant and Top Shop stockist Poetic Gem. She returned to hometown Auckland in 2001 and spent a decade at High Society as a designer for the Obi label. Her mentor there was Laurinda Sutcliffe. "She gave me invaluable training on how to merchandise a range and the ins and outs of commercial viability. I was also introduced to creative design networks through frequent and fabulous trips to Europe, Asia and the States."

Over the year it took Prendergast to develop Shen and its inaugural collection, European and Asian sensibilities continued to inspire. "I love the Europeans' demure elegance, in particular French culture. Although I don't have a particular muse, I constantly admire the stylish finesse that so many French women possess." Trips to Japan and Hong Kong also left an indelible mark on her creative vision. "I love everything about their clothes, from what they wear to how they style it," she says.

Which brings us to the label's monogram. In Chinese Mandarin, Shen means "awareness, consciousness". In ancient Egyptian, Shen meant "encircle" and in hieroglyphics a shen ring represented eternal protection. The symbol has a deep resonance with Prendergast's personal journey, too. Eight years ago she was diagnosed with breast cancer, but after enduring invasive surgery and chemotherapy she now has a clean bill of health.

"Without such a life-changing experience I may not have had the drive to start my own label," she says. "I wanted a name that embodied the personal values I have and also reflected the qualities and aspirations of the women who buy Shen."

Prendergast works out of her home studio in West Auckland, where she lives with her partner Richard and their two children, Kingsley, five, and Madison, 18 months. It's a challenge to maintain the work/life balance with a young family and a growing business, but nature provides solace and stimulation – she looks out over native bush to the Waitemata Harbour and, in the distance, the lights of the city.

The Shen business model and ethical standpoint was not negotiable for Prendergast: "Being New Zealand-made was the most important part of starting my label. I was very keen to support the industry, which has been having a tough time over the last few years." Indeed, many designers have struggled with local costs and have had no choice but to go offshore. Shen's garments are designed and manufactured "out West" and they are currently

Left: Wool tailored tuxedo blazer with Shen crane silk print shirt.
Opposite page (left to right): Faux fur jacket in oatmeal with high-neck silk shirt with pleating and wool silk satin pencil skirt; Coocon silk dress hand-dip-dyed with plaiting detail.



available in selected boutiques in New Zealand and Australia.

New Zealand has a wealth of young talent in the fashion industry and Prendergast is impressed with designers such as Ingrid Starnes, Twenty Seven Names, Company of Strangers and Lonely Hearts. "I think they are pushing the boundaries creatively and being successful at the same time. They are moving with the times and creating a new niche," she says. And inspiration from abroad? "I love Stella McCartney. She has beautiful taste in fabric and has that great mix of sophistication with an edge."

For next season's collection, Prendergast will keep working with her favourite natural fabrics, "swapping wool for linen in summer, but silk will continue to be a signature look for Shen". In the future, the designer sees an exclusive accessory line to complement the brand's styling. "The Shen hieroglyph will lend itself to some beautiful jewellery designs. RMIT in Melbourne is currently doing a project around the Shen collection, so it will be interesting to see what comes out of that."

Within five years, Prendergast hopes to open a flagship Shen store and sell into Asia. And the grand 10-year plan? To showcase in New York. We wish her well. ®

Below: High-neck top with pleats and hand-dip-dyed.
Right: Merino scarf with sleeve inserts, merino rib long-sleeve top and wool tailored pant with satin insert.

