

January 12, 2006
Front Row

Nicole Miller Designs Look Good on Paper

By ERIC WILSON

THE end of a season at a clothing store typically holds more excitement for bargain-seeking consumers than for members of the sales staff, who must contend with refolding sweaters and calculating the impact of how 40 percent off applies to their commissions. Ten years ago Nicole Miller devised a project to inspire the associates at her stores on Madison Avenue and in SoHo. She invited them to dress mannequins for her window displays using only the tissue paper normally reserved for the lining of shopping bags.

As the Nicole Miller retail presence has expanded to 20 stores across the country, so has the level of competition among them. A decade ago the sales clerks might have made simple shifts of hot pink tissue; today they work with a jungle of leopard spots and zebra stripes that they assemble in elaborate paper gowns that recall the rage for disposable clothes and furniture from the 1960's. (Scott Paper Company sold half a million of its \$1.25 paper dresses back then.)

Ms. Miller supplied her stores with rolls of the diaphanous tissue printed with animal motifs, on a whim, she said. The results were far more considered. In SoHo employees recreated two dresses from Ms. Miller's fall collection. One was strapless with a handkerchief hem, worn with a wide braided belt; the other was a cocktail dress with a full 50's pleated skirt.

In Los Angeles they designed a ball gown with a notched bustier and crinkled skirt, which would not look out of place at the Golden Globes, while the Boca Raton, Fla., shop offered short and flirty cocktail dresses, one with a skirt of alternating zebra and leopard ruffles. In some stores the sale announcement was limited to the printing on black and white balloons scattered beneath the designs.

"Instead of putting the same old clothes on sale in the windows, this is something exciting that draws people in the stores," Ms. Miller said. She acknowledged, though, that handing over the design reins could be considered a check to her ego.

"Sometimes people try to buy them," she said, "but they are not for sale."

We Love What's-Her-Name

The overflowing crowd at Alain Ducasse, the restaurant with exorbitant prices in the Essex House hotel in Manhattan, suggested an event was taking place of extreme fashion importance on Tuesday. Antony Todd, the event and floral designer, was there, and so were Tinsley Mortimer, the young socialite of the moment, the stylist Ann Caruso and several others one would expect to see at a party for Dolce & Gabbana or Calvin Klein, but probably not for someone few of them had heard of before that night.

This is how fashion works these days, a strange hustle of working connections or hiring people who can get the right crowd to take notice. Mr. Todd, relaying the reason for his interest with amused candor, said, "I had nothing else to do tonight."

Anait Bian, who moved to New York from her native Armenia, started designing just after graduation from the Fashion Institute of Technology. That was in 1995. Since then she has not become an editorial darling or a commercial success but, admirably, has stayed in business with her offbeat designs. Her mix of tailored evening wear and some pieces that have a more experimental feel to their construction could be mistaken for some of the late 80's work of several Japanese designers. Few noticed.

But Ms. Bian, wearing an ivory suit of her own design with disks of white cloth dangling at the neckline, now appears to have a society following. This may be because Ms. Bian hired Susan Shin, a marketing consultant, and Montgomery Frazier, who describes himself as an image guru, to produce her event.

Mr. Frazier introduced Ms. Bian as "a designer to watch." Ms. Bian offered clothes to several of their friends, hoping to make them aware of her work. This made all the difference, as several wore her dresses to the party and told the designer they would also attend her fashion show in Bryant Park next month.

Adelina Wong Ettelson, for one, said she was lucky to be a sample size, so she borrowed a fitted black dress with a black leather top, then offered Ms. Bian the highest form of flattery. "I feel like Angelina Jolie," she said.