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Arch Auteur

Award-winning British shoe maestro Nicholas Kirkwood is setting the bar sky-high with his architectural confections—and first NYC store.

| By Riann Smith |
| Photography by Gregg Delman |



MIRROR IMAGE
Kirkwood in his
shop at 807
Washington Street

In an age when footwear can be a woman's most delicious form of self-expression, Nicholas Kirkwood is gaining a legion of devoted female fans. "Out of habit, I often catch myself looking at a woman's feet two seconds after saying, 'Nice to meet you,' and I have to stop myself," the 32-year-old Kirkwood says with a laugh from his London studio. "People worry I'm judging them, but I'm not... unless the shoes are really hideous." Call

it proper pedestrian research—it's clearly paying off. The British shoe designer's 100-millimeter masterpieces have garnered him numerous style awards, high-profile collaborations and his first U.S. store on Washington Street. "I love the energy of Manhattan, the 24-hours-a-day sense of it," says Kirkwood, whose flagship on ultrachic Mount Street in London's Mayfair is decidedly quieter. "It's exciting to be surrounded by CONTINUED...

HEEL HONCHO
The designer
surrounded by his
coveted creations



...CONTINUED so much change on our corner, from restaurants opening to the Whitney Museum going up. There's a mentality about New York that jells well with how I approach design."

That design approach would certainly involve the mantra "Don't be mediocre." It was wisdom imparted to a young Kirkwood by his employer and mentor, Philip Treacy, the world-renowned haute couture milliner to boldfaced style-setters, most notably the royal family. "Philip taught by example that if you're going to say something, say it with conviction and don't water it down to be more commercial," Kirkwood explains.

It was after a year of studying fine arts at Central Saint Martins that a 20-year-old Kirkwood found himself working in Treacy's buzzing London shop, dreaming of designing shoes. "Watching what Philip could do with a hat—it was extreme beauty and so forward-thinking, and I wanted to take that approach with shoes," he says. "It seemed like little effort was put into shoe design, and I thought there was room for experimentation but with the quality and craftsmanship of a Manolo Blahnik." At the time, Alexander McQueen and experimental fashion ruled the London scene, and Treacy's inimitable patrons

Grace Jones and Isabella Blow (whom Kirkwood affectionately remembers as "Izzy") regularly popped into the store, inspiring the burgeoning designer with their bold aesthetics.

Which begs the question: Who is the Nicholas Kirkwood woman? "She's self-confident, independent and feminine, but with a certain edge," he says, then pauses—perhaps recalling Jones and Blow—and adds, "She loves men, but doesn't like to get bossed around."

It would be five years and two seasons before Kirkwood nailed the right look for that self-assured customer. Though his debut collection did not sell a single shoe ("I had no fear, nothing to lose and made most of the shoes myself because I didn't have a factory," the designer recalls), it gave him access to an Italian shoe factory, garnered media attention and set the DNA for his brand. By his second season, he had learned an important lesson. "I didn't have to put my whole brand into one shoe," says Kirkwood. "I streamlined my method by bringing certain elements into focus and made sure they were really strong." He likens the design process to creating sculpture or even furniture, harmonizing balance and proportion around an initial organic shape, with an out-of-the-box execution. While many designers would follow the thought process, "Women like pearls, so let's put a pearl on top of a shoe," that would be too easy for Kirkwood. "I decided to design a shoe standing on top of a pearl necklace," he reasons. "It's important for me to take chances creatively. There always has to be an unusual element—otherwise, why buy it from me?"

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It was his flair for risk-taking that caught the eye of other designers and led to multiple collaborations. For Rodarte's spring 2009 *Star Wars*-themed collection, Kirkwood designed a C-3PO-inspired creation, followed by a patchwork stunner with a melted-candlestick spike heel that mirrored the candlelight from the house's fall 2010 show. A Nicholas Kirkwood for Prabal Gurung collaboration starting in 2010 led to fierce "Don't mess with me" designs with a graphic mix of leathers, metallics and ankle-kissing straps, while a partnership with Erdem was an exercise in restraint.

"The prints are so beautiful you don't want to disrupt them, so we'd do a simple upper and a strong geometric heel," Kirkwood notes. In his Keith Haring Foundation collection, the designer created a man-as-heel holding up the shoe. "I wanted to be true to Haring's work but use the shapes themselves as a fun way to incorporate his designs," he says. What's up next for the footwear guru? Besides introducing his second jewelry collection for Swarovski for spring 2013, he's busy developing a men's line to show during Paris fashion week. "People forget that it's not about reinvention," Kirkwood says. "They say everything's already been done, but I think there's so much more." **M**

Sole Man

For fall 2012, Kirkwood took inspiration from his idea of 1920s Paris—a little bit of deco and a whole lot of romance. Here's a look at the latest crop of kicks hitting the designer's NYC store.



Nicholas Kirkwood for Peter Pilotto multicolored fabric and satin crisscross pump, \$1,150



Nicholas Kirkwood dark fuchsia and gold suede and metallic leather pump, \$925



Nicholas Kirkwood electric blue suede bootie, \$895



Nicholas Kirkwood electric blue and orange laser-cut suede peep-toe heel, \$1,295



Nicholas Kirkwood ivory and gold python and metallic leather pump, \$1,350