

VOGUE

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A SNEAK PEEK INTO VOGUE'S BIGGEST NIGHT OF FASHION



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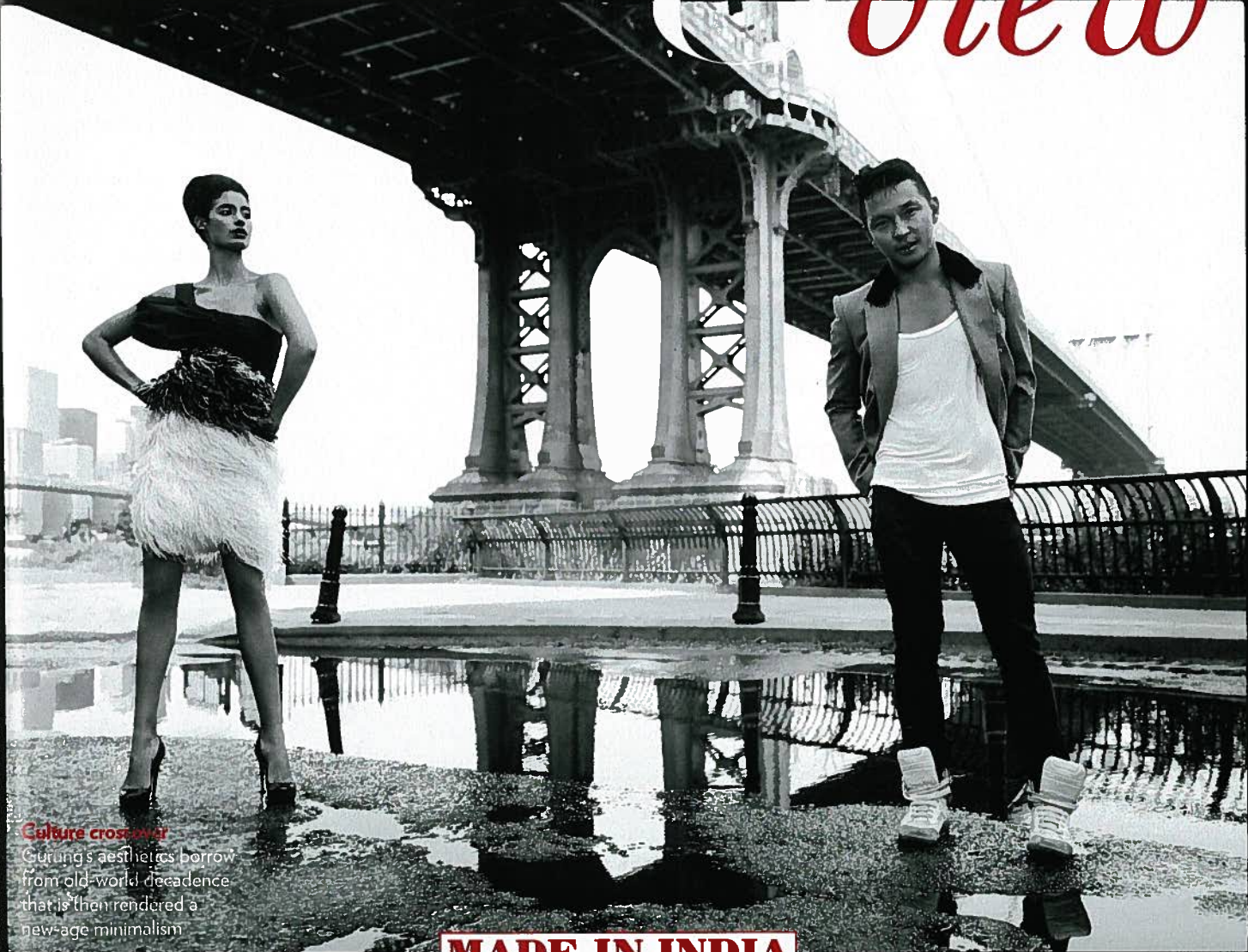
VOGUE

view

EDITED BY BANDANA TEWARI

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Culture crossover

Curung's aesthetics borrow from old-world decadence that is then rendered a new-age minimalism

MADE IN INDIA

THREE MEN AND A CITY

In the city that never sleeps—New York—three designers with roots in the subcontinent are putting their unique, global stamp on the fashion world, discovers SAHAR KHAN

Photographed by KEVIN TRAGESER

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN TRAGESER. STYLING BY SAHAR KHAN. HAIR BY JAMES BURNETT. MAKEUP BY JAMES BURNETT. DRESS BY SAHAR KHAN. JACKET BY SAHAR KHAN. TANK TOP BY SAHAR KHAN. PANTS BY SAHAR KHAN. SHOES BY SAHAR KHAN. BRIDGE PHOTO BY JAMES BURNETT

'IT' BOY

In a bright East Village café, over a cup of milky iced coffee, designer **Prabal Gurung**, donning a slouchy V-neck T-shirt and skinny jeans, recites lyrics from the movie *Ijazat*. "There is the sound of leaves falling off a tree," he says in accented Hindi. "The sound reached my ears and returned, but the tree branches are still shaking."

A former design director at Bill Blass, Gurung is being hailed as part of the vanguard of new American fashion after the debut of his eponymous collection of sleek separates earlier this year. Fashion editors are abuzz; department stores have placed orders; Demi Moore, Rachel Weisz and Zoe Saldana have shown up at red carpet events in his creations.

Gurung is taking the attention in his stride. "I'm not that fancy," he says. "But I make fancy clothes." He credits his South Asian upbringing as a major factor

hand-embroidered in Kathmandu and Mumbai. "The beauty of couture is that all the seams and the beads are hand-sewn. It took them a week to make a simple blouse. My training at Bill Blass is what my take on fashion is now."

For spring 2010—inspired by his mother's 1970s YSL Rive Gauche perfume bottle—a charmeuse dress crisscrossed with tulle, blouses exaggerated with effusive bowties and fitted pants with ribbon-tied ankles were effervescent translations of the idea of packaging.

The biggest influence on his clothes, however, comes in part from a more decadent arena: Bollywood. For elegance to Gurung is Meena Kumari's glittering jhumar in *Pakeezah*; Rekha's peshwas in *Umrao Jaan*; Sridevi's white churidar kurta in *Chandni*. "The way I drape, the starting point, is how a sari is draped, that subtlety, that lachak," he says. "Unless you know it, it's not obvious."

"I attended an all-boys Catholic school and all my books had sketches in the back. Even then I had started creating this woman in my head" —PRABAL GURUNG

in his success. "When you're not comfortable in your heritage, you're trying to hide something," he says. "If I was brought up here, my designs wouldn't be the same."

Despite arrogance-inducing accolades—Demi Moore has posted rave reviews on Twitter, writing he is "a wonderful young designer to look out for"—a sweetness remains in Gurung's arrestingly handsome face. Perhaps his humbleness is the result of growing up in Kathmandu, where the undulating hills, mist-shrouded temples and gnarled banyan trees are sure to impart a spiritual soul.

But his spirit was in fashion. Alumnus of the National Institute of Fashion Technology in Delhi, Gurung started his career as a stylist for international fashion shows and magazine shoots. In 1999, he entered Parsons in Manhattan, followed by a stint at Cynthia Rowley, which led to Bill Blass. He designed for the all-American couture house for five years before launching his own line.

"When I saw the tailoring room at Bill Blass, that sold me completely," says Gurung, whose pieces from his new line are

Indeed, when examined, the coquettishly feminine ideals he desires to project in his constructions—"I want adayein"—become evident in their details: a soft fold on a dress is redolent of a sari pleat; a trail of red on a black dress is evocative of dark tresses marked with sindhoor. "I attended an all-boys Catholic school and all my books had sketches in the back," laughs Gurung. "Even then, I had started creating this woman in my head."

RENAISSANCE MAN

Then there is jewellery designer and actor **Waris Ahluwalia**. An Amritsar-born, Brooklyn-raised Sikh, Ahluwalia fell into designing jewellery after years of undertaking various artistic projects. In 2003, while shopping at Maxfield in Los Angeles, a buyer for the store noticed two rings Ahluwalia had designed for himself and placed an order.

"The universe opened a door," he says of the birth of his line, House of Waris. "It was my job to walk through it."

Dressed in a powder-blue coat, dark jeans and turban, Ahluwalia, 34, greets acquaintances, scattered around the

lounge at The Bowery Hotel, with an easy grace. The muted lights highlight the intensity in his almond-shaped eyes and the flecks of grey in his black beard, which frames a ready smile. Offbeat and witty, the designer, like his jewels, conveys a playful depth. In his latest collection, Ahluwalia uses meenakari to etch lockets into enamelled plumage-flaunting parrots; gold netting to enmesh citrine rings; and, in a nod to the Mughal era, kundan to encrust gold pendants with sumptuously fat emeralds and rubies.

While filming *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* in Rome, Ahluwalia wandered into a family-run workshop where the owners had been making jewellery for 70 years. He decided to stay to study under the head goldsmith. Ahluwalia's diligence paid off. He was nominated for this year's Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Fashion Awards in June. "I'm blessed," says Ahluwalia,

whose ornaments have adorned the likes of Cate Blanchett and Spike Lee. "But I work my ass off."

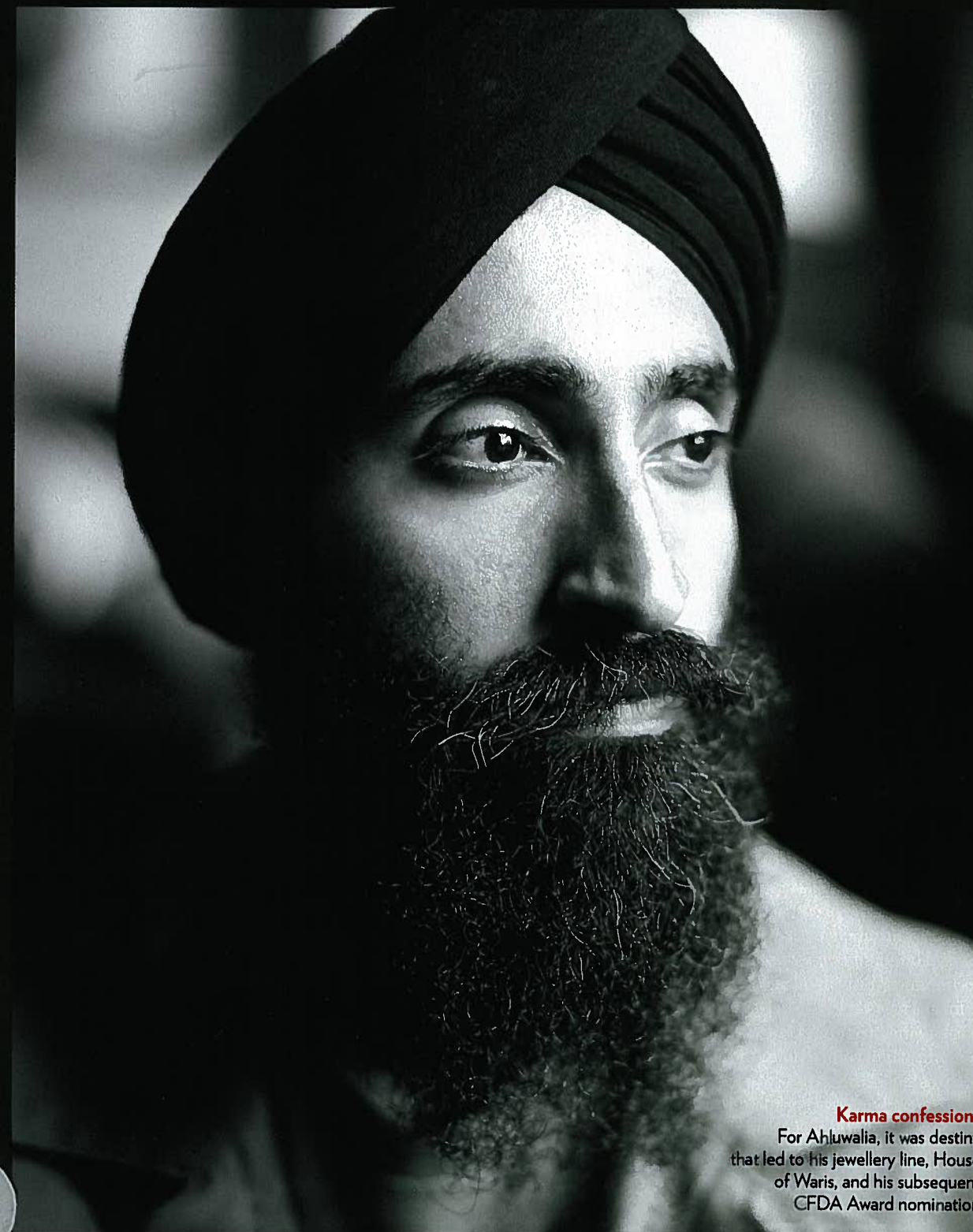
Though the collections are produced in New York, Rome, Bangkok and Jaipur, the latter is where the majority of the work is done, and where Ahluwalia spends six months a year. There, in a dusty old workshop, he labours over his craft and engages in dialogue about the pieces with his craftsmen.

"When I'm there, I have lunch with them every day. I eat whatever they bring from home," says Ahluwalia, who has also starred in *Inside Man* and *The Darjeeling Limited*. "I have no airs. I'm very grateful to them for what they're doing for me."

TECHNICAL EXPERT

On a muggy September evening, the grey rooftops of New York's Soho pulsate a palpable energy from the setting sun. Framed in the dying light, **Bibhu Mohapatra** sits in an ivory apartment, clad in all-black garb and discussing the inspiration for his Autumn 2010 collection—*The Last Song of Dusk*, a book set in 1920s India, written by his good friend, Siddharth

"The universe opened a door, it was my job to walk through it" —WARIS AHLUWALIA



Karma confessions
For Ahluwalia, it was destiny that led to his jewellery line, House of Waris, and his subsequent CFDA Award nomination

“As a kid, I spent a lot of time with my dad, dissecting machines. We would open up a motorbike and figure out how the engine was constructed, how the gears worked”

—BIBHU MOHAPATRA

Dhanvant Shanghvi.

Just a day before, the room was emptied for the designer's spring 2010 presentation. An array of models, rotating atop illuminated cubes, displayed playfully pleated chiffon gowns, enigmatically transparent organza jackets and tongue-in-cheek X-ray print blouses paired with hot shorts. The collection was a love letter to the deconstruction of structural elements, a lifelong infatuation for this Orissa born-and-bred designer.

“I was always very keen on the technicalities of things,” says Mohapatra, 35, who counts Angelina Jolie and Sienna Miller as fans. “As a kid, I spent a lot of time with my dad dissecting machines. On weekends, we would open up the motorbike and figure out how the engine was constructed, how the gears worked.”

Mohapatra's mother taught him to sew when he was a child, a skill he used to design outfits for his sisters. Adulthood, however, brought pressure to pursue a more conventional career. He went to Utah State University on a scholarship to study economics. But his heart wasn't in it. “My father was very supportive,” he says. “He asked me, ‘In ten years, will you be happy doing what you're doing now?’ My answer was no.”

In 1996 he moved to New York to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He worked his way up to assistant designer at Halston and eventually to design director at J. Mendel, before launching his own label earlier this year.

As the show finished, well-wishers hung off his shoulders in congratulations. But the celebrations were short-lived, for the

PRODUCTION: IANF; ORALISA; H&B; V&L; SONI; SAZAL; PAJOS PRODUCTION; PHOTO ASSISTANT: ANDREW SUTHERLAND; GETTY IMAGES; REY FEATURES; CORBIS



Changing lanes
Mohapatra was studying economics until he decided to pursue fashion. His designs score high on the technical front

VIEW

following day, Mohapatra was planning his next collection (a very New York trait).

DESI AT HEART

The link to the subcontinent, though, is unwavering for all three. In remembrance of the attacks on Mumbai last year, Ahluwalia, along with two friends, has released a book called *To India, With Love: From New York to Mumbai*, a collection of essays penned by prominent figures who discuss their favourite memories of the country; all proceeds will be used to help families affected by the attacks. Mohapatra, who visits India twice a year, is heavily involved in the cultural scene; he played a cameo as himself in the recently released film *Teen Patti*, starring Amitabh Bachchan and Sir Ben Kingsley.

For Gurung, the strongest connection is family; he speaks to them several times a week. “My parents were waiting for me to say when,” he says, regarding his venture into design. “I just want them to know I'm okay because for me it's not just fashion; it's allowing me to be alive.” ■

PRABAL GURUNG:

Celebrities: Demi Moore, Rachel Weisz and Zoe Saldana
Website: www.prabalgurung.com
Stores: Bloomingdales, New York and One, Jakarta



WARIS AHLUWALIA:

Celebrities: Cate Blanchett and Spike Lee
Website: www.houseofwaris.com
Stores: Barneys, New York and Colette, Paris

BIBHU MOHAPATRA:
Celebrities: Angelina Jolie and Sienna Miller
Website: www.bibhu.com
Stores: Dighton Rhode, Greenwich, Connecticut

