



Johnson

SHE'LL TAKE YOU THERE

Forget “uniform dressing” and “five easy pieces.” Olivia Stren escapes reality in the fluid, feminine designs of gypset dream girl **Ulla Johnson**—a cult figure some 17 years in the making

I recently purchased an unreasonable number of outfits in shades of white and cream. When I wear them, I feel fresh, well-leisured, like the kind of person who lets other people worry about the tedium of laundry—i.e., rich. That is, totally unlike myself. Not long ago, as my two-and-a-half-year-old, Leo, approached my creamy new dress, his jam-sticky hands gleefully outstretched like little stars—the way Jackson Pollock might have considered a blank canvas: an artist given, well, *carte blanche*—an onlooking friend remarked, “That looks dangerous.” You know you’re bourgeois when wearing white is what passes for danger. But she had a point. My current reality is no place for white dresses.

I’ve long engaged in the kind of wishful shopping that brings to mind the Oscar Wilde quote, “One’s real life is so often the life one does not lead.” A stranger perusing my closet could easily conclude that I lived in the climate of a toucan: I have more floaty frocks (in cotton voile, poplin, linen, gauze) than sunbeams in which to wear them in my native Toronto. And while as a freelancer I spent my thirties in pursuit of the farthest-possible-flung stories, these days I traverse more drugstore diaper aisles than oceans. You’d think motherhood might

have made me more practical, or fiscally prudent. Instead it’s inspired me to buy—and pine after—clothes suited to life on a yacht somewhere off the sun-sequined coast of Sardinia.

Mostly, I pine for all things Ulla Johnson. The New York designer’s signature floral-printed, midi-length, blouson-sleeved dresses look like they have a plane to Montenegro to catch (not, say, a paycheck to earn). On a recent trip to New York, I cabbed straight to Johnson’s first stand-alone store: a warm and eminently strokeable sanctum of tender blush pinks (a UJ signature), with travertine walls the color of nougat, housed in a nineteenth-century brownstone on a tree-lined stretch of Bleecker Street. That was the day I figured out that I wasn’t alone in my love. A woman in a pale denim Ulla pinafore dress (I have the same one) caressed a prairie skirt with an anguished sigh. “I’m in town from L.A. for one day, and I think I may spend the whole day in this store!” she said, then scurried back to the changing room, where an Andean foothill of embroidered frocks was busy forming on the plush gold carpet. Another customer, a cute millennial, chimed in: “We’re all obsessed with Ulla! *Ob-sessed*.” When I tried on a poplin jumpsuit, the L.A. woman cooed, “It’s amaz-

ing. You look like you already own it. It’s *you*.” I had never laid eyes on this woman before, but I believed her.

Johnson may feel like a relatively new discovery, but she is in fact a veteran; she founded her line in 2000, and Barneys New York has been a longtime stockist. Her recent success is at least partially due to the worldly, fluid, feminine, free vibe of her clothes: They have an air-welcoming weightlessness about them and, in her promotional materials, are photographed in the sort of open landscapes toured only by wind, seashells, or galloping horses. Perhaps this lightness conjures a fantasy of the easeful, worry-free existence we all crave, one thrillingly unperturbed by the CNN news ticker. Or maybe after seasons of strict minimalism followed by an influx of sport-influenced, painfully hip streetwear, women just want something really pretty to wear.

Whatever the reason, Johnson is becoming something of a cult figure among citified bohos, arguably on track to become the American answer to Isabel Marant (though Johnson’s clothes are more playful, optimistic, and approachable than Marant’s—more American, in other words—not to mention more affordable, starting at around \$300 for one of her instant-hit dresses). Johnson showed fall 2017 on the New York Fashion Week runway for the first time; an Ulla Johnson billboard currently gazes over Sunset Boulevard; and when she debuted on Net-a-Porter this past winter, her Milena, Natalia, and Neela dresses (a sisterhood of patchwork, embroidery, and tassels) sold out instantly. “The brand has grown feverishly,” says Jen Mankins, owner of Bird, the beloved, Brooklyn-founded chain of indie boutiques and one of Johnson’s biggest retailers. Why now? A few years back, “I think Ulla realized that the brand needed to more accurately reflect her. She realized that she could be her own muse.” Suddenly, Mankins says, “it was knockout collection after knockout collection.... We had to double our order.” When Mankins opened Bird’s newest outpost in L.A.’s Culver City, “I watched women come in and beeline to Ulla, and I watched them have these immediate and visceral reactions to the clothes.” This past spring, Michelle Williams, Sarah Paulson, and Greta Gerwig attended the opening of Johnson’s NYC boutique, all clad in an amalgam of her vacation-ready designs.

That’s where I met the designer on a recent late-summer morning. The store was still quiet, and Johnson, leaning against a wicker-wrapped island, called to mind something Elizabeth von der Goltz, global buying

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director for Net-a-Porter, told me: “Ulla just embodies this effortless, cool, feminine woman that all of us want to be.” Her tied-back hair was superlong—as if born to consort with summer breezes—and her perfect carriage lent a magisterial elegance to a one-shoulder blue ikat mididress (the dress version of a top that, the previous day, Gwyneth Paltrow had posted a photo of herself wearing to watch the solar eclipse). Johnson’s deep tan was acquired on a recent two-week family trip with her husband, Zach Miner, director of a private Danish contemporary art foundation, and their three children—Soren, 11, Asher, 7, and Agnes, 5—to Greece and its Cyclades Islands. (I know this because I am among her more than 100,000 Instagram followers.) When I remark on the distracting perfection of that tan, she tells me, “Life should be enjoyed.”

Not a bad tagline, come to think of it. “Our ethos is rooted in the idea of travel,” Johnson says. “I do think there is something about the clothes that is very freeing and transportive.” Johnson comes by this point of view organically. Her mother is Serbian; her father, Danish. Both archaeologists, they met on a dig in what is now Serbia and, in the early ’70s, moved to Iran for a year and a half with baby Ulla. “Apparently, my first words were in Farsi,” she says. “I just feel like my whole life we were packing a suitcase.”

Johnson is also at heart a New York City girl; her parents mostly raised her in the city, where she attended the prestigious Bronx Science high school. Later, at University of Michigan, she earned a dual degree in psychology and women’s studies, nurturing dreams of a career in academia. “But then I just started to make clothes,” she says. She took classes at FIT but never completed a fashion degree. “I was too impatient,” she says. “I just started mucking about in the Garment District. This idea of making things yourself is something



Looks from Johnson's resort collection; below, from left: stylist Kate Young with Williams, Gerwig, Paulson, Johnson, and stylist Cristina Ehrlich at Johnson's boutique opening



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I grew up with. I was undaunted by it.” Johnson’s paternal grandmother did needlepoint; her father made furniture; her mother was a painter, a print designer, and a passionate collector of folk costumes—nostalgic influences that continue to inform Johnson’s work. A year or two after she started making clothes—she’s not quite sure when—she got the break young designers dream of: “I went to Barneys and put my stuff on the floor of some buyer’s office, and they bought the collection,” she says modestly, as if describing hawking pipe-cleaner crafts at a local fair.

When Johnson had her first child in 2006, her career took a back seat; she kept making her collection and even colaunched a short-lived children’s line, Albert, but production was on a minor scale. “I really believed in the idea of attachment parenting,” she says, “and I was either pregnant or nursing or in this world of procreation for close to a decade.” Being a mother, she says, “changed me profoundly—as an individual, as a creative, as a boss. I’m a much more efficient person now. I’m incredibly good with my time.” Yet Johnson shrugs off the suggestion that there was bravery in focusing on family even when greater career success appeared to beckon. “At different times you make different choices. You’re always underdelivering on one or both sides.”

As for the Ulla Johnson turning point, the designer cites a 2012 trip to meet with knitting

and weaving communities in Peru’s Sacred Valley. “It changed everything for the business,” says Johnson, who still has pictures of baby Agnes, aged two months, lounging on a pile of swatches. The trip inspired a new commitment to working with artisans from around the world. It also reanimated her genetic sense of wanderlust. She recently went back to Peru, to meet with a weaver she’s been working with since that first trip. “We flew to the mountains, then drove four hours through this crazy bumpy landscape, and then we got to this guinea pig farm,” she says. In the mud, there was a hut, and in the hut, there was a loom, “and on the loom was my garment. It was mind-blowing.”

As Johnson leaves the store, her dress catching a noon wind, a woman (dressed in all white, of course) walks in and announces, “I’m back.” She’s in town for a few days, she explains, and this was the first place she headed upon landing. It will also be her last stop before returning to the airport. “There’s just something about Ulla’s clothes. There’s a romance to them that we just don’t get...in life.” I thought of her the other day, when I was back home in Toronto and I got a travel-writing invitation to sail through French Polynesia on a luxury catamaran. (I know.) It was the sort of invitation that made me feel, for once, jealous of myself. The trip fell through, which was a shame. I have the perfect wardrobe for it.



From top: Peter Stangimayr (2); Benjamin Lozovsky/BFA.com