



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAXTREE

ULLA JOHNSON FALL 2019

Raw Samples

When Ulla Johnson's dresses are on sale, things get ugly fast. **Olivia Stren** discovers that bargain hunting has its own risks and rewards.

It's noon on a cold, seasonally confused June day, and I'm standing in Manhattan's SoHo under a torrent of sharp rain, its drops as fine as sewing needles. I'm somewhere in the middle of a queue that squiggles its way like rickrack down two city blocks, and there's a thrum of anticipation and anguish in the air. It's day one of beloved designer Ulla Johnson's four-day sample sale, and I've already been here for an excruciating 1.5 hours, passing the time by chatting with Nicole (the woman ahead of me in line), a twentysomething student at the Fashion Institute of Technology and sample-sale junkie.

"I go to at least 20 sample sales a year, and I've NEVER seen anything like this!" says Nicole. "I have an engagement party in Great Neck, Long Island, tonight, and I need something to wear. And I would just feel stupid going to Saks and paying full price, you know?" I do know, but I am well versed in that sort of stupidity. I am not a sample-sale veteran. »

and I lack the stamina and emotional resources to excel as a bargain hunter. I am too non-aggressive (too lazy?) to go to war for a discount. I begin entertaining fantasies of breaking free of this lineup, but that would seem like failure. So I resolve to stay the course, thinking that I may never have summoned this level of commitment for anything else in my life. I cannot recall feeling this committed as I stood next to my husband on my wedding day.

I learned about this sale last week in Toronto and texted my friend in Brooklyn with the breaking news. She immediately replied to this intelligence: “I cannot brave it again. I went last year and emerged a shell of myself.” (I feel I must add here that my friend may have emerged a shell—but a shell with a lovely new skirt.) Apparently reliving the trauma, my friend continued: “It reduces women to their most primitive impulses—no teamwork, no compassion. The place was every woman for herself except for the few who hunted in pairs.” You know you’re bourgeois when shopping for a discounted Ulla Johnson prairie dress passes for harrowing.

I shared the news with another (Toronto-based) Ulla Johnson fan. “How do you know about this?” she asked, suspicious of my sources, a wildness lighting up her eyes, her face suddenly flushing and febrile with emotion. “I think I have enough Air Miles to fly down,” I said. The math—spending money on a flight in order to save money on clothes—is, of course, inarguable. But fashion—like, say, love and joy and pleasure—is no place for logic. I engaged in some light number crunching (i.e., a charade) along with some psychological aerobics (when it comes to justifying a new purchase, I can suddenly muster the agility and fitness of a Romanian gymnast). I booked my flight (on points) the next day.

After a two-hour (!) wait, I am thrillingly let into the sale—a massive room lined to the rafters with a delirium of silk ikat, Peruvian alpaca, floral georgette and cotton poplin. Women bonded by the same Ulla devotion (disorder?) that I have are busy caressing, lunging, grabbing and prowling, many fixed with a look that I can only describe as the kind of focused and appetitive gaze I see in my cat’s eyes when she spots a songbird through the

window. I collect a few lovely frocks as a young woman yells to her mother across the room: “Ma! MA! They are bringing out new stuff. NEW. STUFF.” Ma replies, “They are bringing out new stuff!” Meanwhile, a staff member yells in the kind of deep, disciplinary tones generally reserved for locker rooms, “Ladies, DO NOT try on clothes outside of the change room.” At this point, I notice the interminable queue to this communal “change room.” Finding emancipation from the two-hour wait outside only to be delivered into this new lineup makes me feel like I’m sojourning through the circles of hell in *Dante’s Inferno*. This thought occurs to me, among others (WHY am I here? Am I insane? Where did that blond woman find that white-lace prairie dress—it is a marvel!), as I stand in this fresh 45-minute queue to the change room. But my musings are interrupted by the woman behind me—carrying about 16 dresses, be-ruffled and be-tasselled, sequined and embroidered—who shares, “I want to die.” Right. Though perhaps not as much as she wants a new summer wardrobe. We start chatting—about death and if I had, perchance, seen a patchwork cotton-silk lettuce-edge-ruffled maxi-dress in size 4. I had not, so our friendship was over.

The change room—the sort of final circle of hell—is a frantic press of flesh and fabric. Women are trying on blouses in nothing but their thongs, jostling one another for access to precious slivers of mirror space, giving one another the down-stare and occasionally doling out support. As one college-aged woman tried on a jumpsuit, another (older) woman appraised it: “That is *so* you!” The two women had never met before.

Post-sale, I float out onto Wooster Avenue feeling as light as an Ulla frock. It is now warm; the sun is high in a crystalline sky, as if an entire season has passed. (It basically has. It is now 3:30 p.m.) I am tired and hungry and in desperate need of a restroom. I’m a shell of myself—but a shell with two new dresses and a superb pair of cork-soled suede slides.

Perhaps as a sort of palate cleanser, I visit the Ulla Johnson boutique in NoHo the following day. The store is an extravagantly quiet, sweet-smelling fantasia of tender shell pinks, creamy travertine and sheepskin. I lock eyes with Paola, a birds-of-paradise-print silk midi-dress, and whisk her into a plush gold-carpeted change room with lighting as tender as candlelight. Paola is full price. But I love her. Flirting with financial (and conjugal) ruin, I consider the prospect of purchasing her—because, I mean, just think of the money I saved at yesterday’s sale. □

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