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ETRO LIFE & TIMES

Willow's way

She wowed Melbourne with her rare and lovely designs, then left to conquer the world. Now 'our' Kit Willow is back where it all began. Fashion editor Janice Breen Burns reports.

KIT Willow Podgornik was a born-and-bred "Melbourne girl" in 2003, the year she blasted the cobwebs out of a tiny, crowded venue at Australian Fashion Week with her first high-voltage, sparkle-arkly collection of embellished silk knickers and brassieres for sale. Then "our" "It-girl-turned-instant-top-designer" moved north, graduated to bulls-eye collections that entranced buyers around the world and became part of the Australian global fashion phenomena — from Sydney.

I mention all this when we meet on Friday, a hot, blustery morning with the smell of smoke in the air and a crew of tradesman painting, plastering, scraping and banging about in the airy white shell of Podgornik's new shop, Willow, ahead of its imminent opening. Podgornik listens politely, but is unimpressed that anyone could possibly be miffed to lose the girl once dubbed "the jewel in Melbourne's fashion crown" to "Sin City".

"It was a business decision to move to Sydney." End of story. And anyway, she's back. Sort of.

Podgornik's second stand-alone store (the first is in Sydney, naturally) is here now, where her mum and dad live, and where she can bring beloved daughter Missia — now two and named for a Parisian woman who was Picasso's muse and Coco Chanel's dearest friend — for more visits. "I grew up here and Melbourne's got, um, I love Melbourne. There's a refinement here — of design, um, aesthetic, in fashion and interiors and architecture, food, restaurants, service. It's... unique here..." Her voice trails off and I sense her heart's not in it; she's paying lip service to the old Sydney/Melbourne rivalry chestnut.

Podgornik is 33, slim, perpetually wide-eyed, with long, fashionably straggly sugar-white blonde hair and a voice that has a gravelly base note that projects it at least an extra metre. When we sit on the windy terrace of a little cafe next to her new shop, four women at the next table don't even have to lean in to eavesdrop. "I love a high armhole that sits close to the body so you can move your arm around." She is describing a jacket that sells so quickly she can't make enough of them. And she's demonstrating the ease of this invisible jacket, whirling her arm around like a helicopter blade. The women

are amused. Podgornik rattles on, oblivious. "It's got a pad which gives you a beautiful square shoulder and lots of easing in the sleeves. The body is fitted, with longer tails at the back than at the front." She sits back, satisfied she's got across the Willow message of comfort co-existing with beauty. "It'll take six goes to get our block right for a jacket, but once it's right, it's very fabulous and very flattering."

Podgornik seems low-key and disarmingly casual, but admits she can "drive people mad" with her perfectionism. I suspect her daily levels of vigour and passion might be wearying for mere mortals too. At Willow headquarters in Sydney, she employs 18 people, including the young French

When I point this out, again, Podgornik is unimpressed by her own seeming importance. "Well — she worked for Martin Margiela, Valerie Hash..."

When she stumbled across her dream assistant three years ago, Podgornik had sent herself back to school and was studying classic Parisian drapery under a master at the same Atelier.

"If I can hone any skill, I will. If I can improve anything, I do. I've always believed you can be better than you are, however good you think you are. I want to know I've given women the best I can give them."

Perfect, flowing drape was a void she felt compelled to fill in her talents. "I never trained in pattern making. I've always worked with the fabric, I play with it on a dress form, then I start playing with things like zips — the fashion hardware, the scaffolding." She shows me how flow can be frozen on her own dress, a taut black Jetson-style in thicker-than-your-average jersey with tiny structured cap sleeves, wide sweetheart neckline and gently flaring A-line skirt. A long brass zip veers in an elegant curve, accentuating the frock's complex structure of joined asymmetric gore panels, each a handspan wide and flowing left to right around and down her body into the skirt.

Since graduating from Monash University with a degree in marketing and psychology, Podgornik has bounced, with all the naive self-belief and energy of a child, from challenge to challenge. From public relations to the complexities of lingerie and corsetry construction to equally complex tailoring and the slippery intricacies of drapery. From that first explosive show of jewelled knickers and bras in 2003, she's clocked up regular fashion weeks at Sydney, Melbourne, London and New York. At last count, her collection was stocked in 80 stores around the world and her lingerie — recently paused following the end of a licensed manufacturing agreement with Forbes lingerie — by David Jones and her own stores until the current stock runs out or she finds "the right" new partner. She says her fashion designs are the culmination of everything she's ever learned.

Podgornik's freshest challenge is to support Australian artists. How could she do it? Simple, really. Adapt her boutiques to double as a gallery space. Hence, against the white walls of the newest Willow store she's installing sculptures, paintings and a series of the ethereal backstage photographs of her New York show taken by Melbourne-based Elli Ioannou. She says the works will change "like transient wallpaper" every couple of months. "It's an idea. I have a lot of those."

A STYLISH LIFE

- 1976 Born in Melbourne.
- 1981 Christchurch, then Malvern Primary.
- 1988 Lauriston girls' secondary.
- 1993 Monash commerce degree, majoring in marketing psychology.
- 1997 PR, Georges, then Witchery.
- 2003 Launches Willow jewelled lingerie, Australian Fashion Week, to applause and immediate orders by David Jones, Belinda, Browns (London).
- 2004 Shows London Fashion Week, to applause and plaudits including from British Vogue. Adds Selfridges to stockist list.
- 2004 Marries Mark Podgornik.
- 2005 One of only 10 labels worldwide invited into sponsored show at New York Fashion Week. Orders by Barneys, Nordstrom, Saks and Neiman Marcus.
- 2006 Daughter Missia born.
- 2008 Opens first WILLOW, continues to show in New York. Now stocked in 60 stores worldwide.
- 2009 Opens first Melbourne store on March 3, at 582 Malvern Road, Hawksburn.

design assistant she sponsored to Australia, sight unseen, on the strength of the girl's graduate folio from the Atelier Chardon Savard fashion school in Paris. "I just loved her work!" And, when Podgornik loves something, she's got to have it, do it, covet it, own it. "I'd never met her but she got here and she's heaven on a stick, six foot two... fabulous." And no doubt happy to work with Willow, despite the fact that many Australian fashion students move heaven and earth to hone their graduate skills under masters in Paris.



Podgornik — home again, and (below) the evolution of her style.

PICTURE: ROGER CUMMINGS

