

Fabulosity: Janis Leonard Talks Fashion & Design

Written by By Corbin Chamberlin

Sunday, 27 February 2011 12:05 - Last Updated Monday, 28 February 2011 11:27

"There are those who wear black, and those who don't," Janis Leonard said with a grin and an all black outfit. Leonard is certainly a fan of black; especially those inky garments of Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons. With a preference for pitch-black and the way she constantly wears sunglasses day-or-night, Janis has always been a person of mystery to me. Making brief appearances on rare occasions at particularly chic events, I would see her and mentally applaud her style. With her striking appearance of slicked-back blonde hair, red lips and perfectly-pale skin, her attendance in a room demands observation.



We met at Fred's for lunch for the interview and her associate of five years, Effie Bouras, joined us. Perfectly poised, Janis had a bite or two of a salad and did so without even smudging her Chanel Noir Vamp lipstick. Throughout the lunch we discussed her home in Berlin and her dear friend, the late Jean-Michel Basquiat. "I loved his ambivalent nature, yet his work spoke volumes regarding his artistic complexity," she said of Basquiat. We also discussed her creative ventures and role in the Valley.

Janis who had recently hosted the David Yurman store opening and describes herself as a "muse" is undeniably a fan of fashion. When asked what role fashion plays in her life, Leonard replied in a solemn manner: "Fashion is life; it is all encompassing, I see any space I design as a compliment to the people and context it serves, much as fashion does. A dress is a form of a house to me, it also can express your mood- it explains my penchant for sculptural works of wearable art."

When asked who her favorite designer is to wear, she said: "To name one would do a disservice to another!". Needless to say, my jaw was on the floor. I was so taken back by this lady in black and endless knowledge of fashion and art.

"I've seen her closet. It's more like sculpture rather than clothes," added her design associate, Effie. Leonard's personal style pioneers the definition of elegance. No, not the seized-in-sequins type of elegance but the kind that fiddles in darkness, mixed layers of grey, black and diamonds.

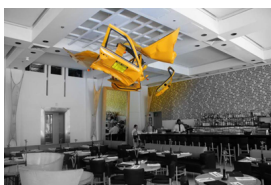
After receiving commissions and interest from friends and strangers Janis decided to open a design firm in 1989. When asked about her initial clients, she said: "They took a chance on a young New York transplant."



She perfectly describes her design aesthetic as "hard edge injected with a dark humor at times." Part artist, part curator, you've probably seen her work in AZ88 where political art is made plausible. You can see Leonard's doings in the running rhinestone greyhounds froze in statue and the famous christmas tree's made from unconventional materials that decorate the Scottsdale cocktail bar.

"It's a subtle form of media. It gives people something to talk about, if they like it or not," Leonard adds while on the topic of her art in AZ88. "It's sometimes political, sometimes playful and usually dangerous."

When asked about her work for AZ88, she said: "I started working for AZ88 at the beginning of my career, we just had a similar aesthetic. The owner was looking for a more industrialized, clean look for the restaurant and his designer of 12 years, Larry, recently passed. He knew I had a similar penchant in my work so it was the meeting of the minds!".



Most recently, Janis Leonard Design Associates have accepted a deal with Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art to work on a lounge space for the museum and a piece of artwork that will be featured in the lounge.

Wrapping up our lunch, I asked Janis if others found her to be as mysterious and interesting as I did. "Not one person in particular," she replied. "I surround myself with interesting, creative free thinkers. These are my friends. I enjoy those with a sense of humor as well- tongue implanted firmly in cheek".

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Janis Leonard is certainly a character in Arizona. I adore her affection towards the arts, her infinite wit and poise. I know she's ready to leave when she flicks her wrist, exposing a Hermes Medor watch and softly says "Shall we shop?".