

IN SITU: Editor, designer, muse
– Melanie Ward photographed at
one of her favorite stylist haunts, Keni
Valenti's vintage couture boutique

THE IMAGIST

WHILE OTHER FASHION EDITORS ARE SEDUCED BY THE CACHE OF REALITY SHOWS, MELANIE WARD CAN'T BE CONTAINED ON TV, EARNING HER STATUS BY ELEVATING THE STYLIST ROLE TO THAT OF A CURATOR

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Melanie Ward is hard to define in standard fashion terms. Perhaps that's why she has had so many titles: Helmut Lang's muse and design partner, Creative Director for Karl Lagerfeld's namesake line and Senior Fashion Editor of *Harper's Bazaar*.



A-WARDED: (Clockwise) With Mario Sorrenti, Ward tapped Alexander McQueen's leather look (2007); Styled by Ward, Charlotte Gainsbourg posed for Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin (2000); David Sims shot a trench coat and bathing suit combo with Ward (2004)



"Even if you are wearing an evening gown, it is about the attitude. A certain defiance."

Each description is accurate, but none fully embraces her influence or skill set. For the past two decades, the London-born, New York-based Ward has been a catalyst of change that has steadfastly pushed fashion forward – from deliberately disheveled grunge to rigorous minimalism to the mix-and-match cool now in vogue. "Melanie has had a vast influence in shaping modern fashion and the way women dress," says her brother Anthony Ward, a photographer and her frequent collaborator on *Bazaar* editorials.

Unlike other stylists, who often reference the past for inspiration, she always has her eye on the future, creating new ways to outfit. "I'm more interested in the mix of things and a certain attitude than trends that originate too literally from the past," she says. "I prefer to live in the now; being too nostalgic would limit my creativity." Although her work keeps evolving, there are

certain elements at the core of her aesthetic: strong, graphic shapes, a play with extreme proportions and a fusion of masculine and feminine elements. She never over-embellishes. "You have to know when to stop," she says. And she always avoids an overly polished look: "It will always be about effortlessness for me. Even if you are wearing an evening gown, it is about the attitude. A certain defiance."

That sense of sedition is what first made her an industry force. In the early 1990s, Ward was part of a London cadre of photographers, stylists and models who created the so-called grunge movement that would turn fashion on its head. Together, with shooters such as Corinne Day and David Sims, Ward made gritty pictures that were

the polar opposite of the glossy flawlessness prevailing in magazines at the time. "We were inspired by imperfection. Our muses were real. We captured a beautiful, 5'7" Kate Moss squinting in the sunlight with no hair or makeup," she says.

Ward's styling was just as controversial. For magazines including *The Face*, *i-D* and *L'Uomo Vogue*, she made

Tough
Glamour
in the 1980s

Shrug (with dress, not shown), \$575, and rope jacket, \$1,145, Maison Martin Margiela, 212-989-7612. Gown and gloves, prices upon request, Armani Privé, 212-209-4110. Vintage hat, Early Halloween, NYC, 212-691-2933. Shoulder pads, \$80, Glen Goldberg for Kathleen Kirkwood, 212-967-7488. See Where to Buy for details.



PAGE COUNT: (Left to right) An Armani gown is given an emblazoned shoulder-pad and captured by Mario Sorrenti (2007); Ward tops her one-legged look with a Dolce & Gabbana blazer for a Glen Luchford shoot (2008)

her own clothes and customized vintage garments to create slightly unraveled looks. (She did study at Saint Martin's School of Art where she was awarded Best Daywear for her graduate collection.) "There were pants hanging precariously off the hipbones: louche, raw cut at the hems and dragging the floor," she recalls. "Cashmere sweaters and tank tops peppered with holes. Silk, bias-cut dresses worn with trainers. At that time nobody made low-rise jeans, so I would buy a bigger size, drop them on the hips and staple the crotch up the back, so they looked like skin-tight leggings. I wanted the clothes to have personality and look specific to the model, as if they were wearing their own, a little undone, a bit off," she muses. "Ironically, it's a look that's still the coolest today."

Sims thinks Ward's influence has also made her calling more visible and her craft more respected. "She brought about a whole new cult of the stylist," he says. But Sims also feels her work had a mainstream impact: "Her taste is very unique, and it registered with a whole generation of people both in and out of fashion," he says.

Ward was wooed to New York in 1994 by former *Harper's Bazaar* editor Liz Tilberis. "She wanted me to bring an edge to the magazine," says Ward, by collabora-

rating with some of the world's best imagemakers: Craig McDean, Patrick Demarchelier, Paolo Roversi and Mary Ellen Mark. She also spent the rest of the decade collaborating on design, image and branding for the era's titans: Calvin Klein, Jil Sander and Helmut Lang. "Things became more minimal, and we ushered in a new cool sense of sophistication. Very played down, urban, street, yet luxury," she says. Her relationship with Lang, which lasted from 1995 to 2005, when the designer retired, was particularly close, and Prada CEO Patricio Bertelli (who bought Lang's company in 1999) has called her the "female Helmut Lang." "Helmut and I had such similar tastes," she remembers. "We would often have different starting points to our creative process but would end up at the same conclusions." While Ward worked from instinct, draping herself in fabric, Lang had a more "metaphysical" approach. "He might find a rock on the beach and design a collection around it," she says.

When her job with Lang ended, Ward was approached by another great — Karl Lagerfeld — to conceive a new clothing line under his name. As Creative Director of the house, she hired and supervised a large design team and in-house atelier, created all concepts and developed all products and branding for the line. When the promising

label abruptly shut down in 2006, a casualty of a corporate merger, Ward painstakingly helped everyone in her team find new jobs. "Empathy and ethics are an important part of my life," she says.

In fact, Ward is known as one of the most sincere people in the business. But coupled with her manners is a steely sense of determination to get things right. "Helmut used to say I was the nicest pitbull he'd ever met," she confesses. Sims is also struck by this quality. "She's a gentle soul, but it took me a long time to realize how strong-willed she is," he marvels. This single-mindedness is what has kept her at the top of the game in a community known for its appetite for the Next Big Thing.

She is, almost 15 years later, still relied upon to add a disheveled sharpness to *Bazaar's* pretty and pristine. "[Current editor] Glenda Bailey said to me that sometimes it's hard for her to understand what I'm doing, but then she'll see the looks from my editorials on the runways a season later." And that's the way it should be, according to Ward: "As a fashion editor, one's job is to inform and inspire the readers, to challenge their perceptions. To embrace what is modern. To be adventurous." ▶