





*ABSOLUTELY
ASHLEY*

*As JOHANNA LENANDER discovers,
Ashley Olsen means business. Literally.*

*PHOTOGRAPHY by JASON MCDONALD.
STYLED by ERIN WALSH.
FASHION DIRECTION by SUSIE
SHEFFMAN.*

Ashley

Olsen is two minutes older than her fraternal twin, Mary-Kate, and in many ways, Ashley seems like the archetype of a big sister. She talks about her companies as if they were babies. She worries about other people's feelings. When we first meet at the cozy café Cluny in the West Village in New York, she apologizes for being late (by eight minutes) and for being so difficult to track down (she rescheduled once). Later, she tells me that she avoids selling her and Mary-Kate's fashion line The Row to downtown stores because she wants to open a shop for the brand there one day. No, she's not afraid of competition—she's afraid of offending the other retailers. "I'm someone who definitely doesn't like confrontation at all," she admits.

For someone so sensitive, it must be excruciating to not be treated with courtesy in return. Ashley is famously more wary of the spotlight than her sister, who has continued to pursue acting and other Hollywood activities such as going to parties. The reason for Ashley's withdrawal, she says, is mostly that she can't stand being hounded by paparazzi. "When you have an aggressive man approach you with a lens up in your face, you never really get used to it," she says. Her solution is to keep an extremely low profile. "If I were constantly bothered by cameras, I'd have a complete meltdown. I just go to work and hardly ever go out, and I'm much happier that way."

So does all work and no play make Ashley a dull girl? Apparently not. She radiates pride when talking about her fashion endeavours. The twins are the creators and designers of the unfailingly on-trend contemporary lines Olsenboye, Elizabeth and James and the new vintage-inspired denim division, Textile Elizabeth and James, which will be carried exclusively in Canada by Holt Renfrew this fall. But the project that seems closest to Ashley's heart is The Row, the acclaimed collection of luxury basics that the sisters built from scratch.

"It started with two pieces of clothing that I made for me and my friends," she says. "I showed them to Maxfield in Los Angeles, and they asked me to expand on the concept. So we did!"

That meant learning the fashion industry from the inside out. Ashley researched materials and manufacturers, and she and Mary-Kate went to Paris to sell the collection themselves.

"It was a real ground-up experience," says Ashley. "We wanted to tackle this new industry and do it by ourselves. It was purely just my sister and I taking an idea and expanding on it and bringing it to life." The elegant, subtly avant-garde and slightly austere collection is so sophisticated that it's hard to believe it was conceived by two 24-year-olds. But then, they're about 45 in fashion years.

"We would try on hundreds of outfits every week," Ashley says, recalling the twins' childhood spent in the spotlight. "We »



CARDIGAN, \$510, BY TSE.
BUSTIER, \$570, BY DOLCE
& GABBANA. SKIRT, \$5,285,
BY LOUIS VUITTON.
DIAMOND PAVÉ DOME
RING, \$21,770, DIAMOND
BRACELET, \$25,900, GOLD
BRACELET, \$15,025, AND
WATCH RING, \$5,180, ALL
BY FRED LEIGHTON.



TOP (WORN AS A DRESS),
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\$195, BY STELLA MCCART-
NEY. PEPLUM, \$580, BY
MARNI. SHOES, \$895,
BY PRADA. BRACELETS,
FROM \$10,365, AND RINGS,
FROM \$2,335, ALL BY FRED
LEIGHTON. SOCKS, \$50,
BY MARIA LA ROSA.



would have adult designer clothes altered and fitted to us.”

Some memorable looks? “I was always baggier and my sister wore really tight things. Mary-Kate liked her biker shorts with fringe; I would wear shoes and pants that were three sizes too big!”

Ashley seems to have gone back to her love of volume—when we meet, she’s wearing a light, loose-fitting cotton shirt over a long black dress, with a leather jacket tied around her waist. On many, this outfit would look like maternity wear, but she manages to turn it into the height of nonchalant chic.

Speaking of maternity, it’s a subject she enthusiastically endorses. “Kids are the most fascinating!” she exclaims. She has been happily involved with actor Justin Bartha (of *The Hangover*) for two years. “I absolutely want children. I always wanted to be a mom and have a family,” she says. But for now, her business seems to be the beneficiary of her nurturing. She speaks about brand building with the tenderness of a parent: “At first, you have to keep it small and focused, and nurture it for a while until it gets to a place where it’s OK standing on its own. Then you have to figure out what it needs to go to the next place. Though it’s never completely out of your hands, it has a mind of its own.”

Contrary to popular belief, Mary-Kate and Ashley are two very different women with different roles in their companies. Ashley is the main brain behind the brand building, while Mary-Kate’s creative strength is storytelling—she often works on the “narrative” of a collection.

“I come from a very different perspective,” Ashley says. “I think it pushes you further creatively and emotionally. And we always want the same thing in the end.” Her vision for The Row and Elizabeth and James involves growing them into lifestyle brands with home and furniture collections, and, of course, her pet project is to eventually open that flagship The Row store in N.Y.C. “I would love a retail venue that would really help people see how we envision the label. I would want to create a very homey place where people could feel comfortable and know that they would be taken care of.”

As for her own publicity-free zone, she may step out of it soon. “If I said that I wasn’t interested in acting ever again, that would just be a lie,” she confesses. “The entertainment industry feels like a second home still. If I could work with a Woody Allen or a Sofia Coppola, I would definitely think about it. Talk to me in a couple of years!” □

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”



TOP, \$2,975, BY MARNI.
PANTS, \$680, BY THE
ROW. GLOVES, PRICE
ON REQUEST, BY
CAROLINA HERRERA.
BRACELETS, FROM
\$5,180, AND RING,
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