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Fletcher posing beside a Gisela Insuaste installation



GET TO THE POINTE

Designer **Emma Fletcher** throws a Brooklyn tea with an art-world twist to celebrate her ballerina-influenced spring collection. By **Véronique Hyland**

“You know what we’ve got in common? We both like pretty girls,” says the artist Duncan Hannah, paraphrasing something his friend, Tocca designer Emma Fletcher, once said to him. In an era of artfully mussed, street-influenced looks, *pretty* might be a dirty word, but Fletcher, now in her ninth season at the label, manages to fuse her feminine designs with a certain devil-may-care dishabille that reads more hipster than prim. (Inspirations

for previous seasons have included hot-air ballooning and murder trials.) Fletcher has added grit to the girly ethos behind Tocca, a label founded in 1994, when its signature barely there slipdress was favored by downtown It Girls, including Gwyneth Paltrow and Helena Christensen. Twenty years later, their equivalents, who are more likely to live in Brooklyn than downtown, are eagerly snapping up Fletcher’s reinvented take on

sweet dressing. The young female subjects of Hannah’s paintings—which Fletcher has collected since the two met via the photographer Richard Kern—are not a far cry from the Tocca ideal, their girlish attire mixed with a naughty edge. Today, Fletcher has invited him to do some in situ sketching at a gathering of her Tocca-clad friends, including painter Elliott Puckette, costume designer Heidi Bivens, and musician Heather Boo. The venue: Fletcher’s stunning nineteenth-century brownstone in Clinton Hill, complete with skyscraping ceilings, a Gisela Insuaste book-spine sculpture installation by the staircase, and Hannah’s paintings of delicate girls covering the

(Clockwise from top) Hannah sketching his model; the mantel, decorated with Hannah’s paintings; Boo and Heller enjoy a tea break

walls. “All my paintings start with drawing. It’s a great way to get to the essence of the model,” Hannah says as he leans over his sketchbook, producing a series of Degas-like studies.

Fletcher used to have an office in New York City’s Garment District next to a ballet studio, and every day she’d watch from her window as the ballerinas headed off into the night—with a look somewhere between sugarplum fairy and nightclub ready. She drew on that memory for her spring 2014 collection, which takes

Christian Harder (hair: by Joshua Blaine at The Magnet Agency; makeup: by Virginia Linzee at Ray Brown Pro for Chanel); prop styling: by Beth Flattery; china and tabletop decor: by Little Vintage Rentals; cakes: by Billy’s Bakery)



The group in front of a painting by Richard Anuszkiewicz



Hannah and his muse, Martynka Wawrzyniak, in front of his painting of her



Photo director Jen Pastore, Leyland, and curator Nicola Vassell

her Tocca girl from ballet rehearsal to a very different kind of dance floor. Think petal-pink leotards topped with rehearsal skirts, suits in macaron colors, and diaphanous gowns straight out of Studio 54. (“I am always all about the ’70s—I grew up in the ’70s and they are ingrained in me,” says the designer.)

As the group tucks into pastel cakes that match the guests’ frocks, Puckette says, she’s been a Fletcher fan since the designer started her first ready-to-wear line, Lyell, in the early aughts. “That’s when nobody was doing anything that loved the female figure,” Puckette says. Adds Boo, who is wearing a cloud-print floor-sweeper, “It’s really feminine, but there’s some kind of soft strength to it all. It’s not too hard-core. I feel like technically I’m lounging, even though it’s a gown.” Bivens, taking a day off from costuming the indie film *5 to 7*, pirouettes downstairs

in a silvery pleated gown. “You’d think the idea of pleats running through the whole dress would not be sexy necessarily,” says Bivens. “But the way that she cuts it is very feminine.”

While ethereal ballerinas might be her stated inspiration, ultimately Fletcher designs with her friends in mind: accomplished women for whom fashion is not the end all, be all. Sabine Heller, the founder of social club A Small World and one of the day’s guests, says, “I think in American fashion we have a struggle with youth. [Emma]’s designing for women in their twenties and thirties and forties, but it doesn’t look ‘mature.’ It’s very rare that a designer can do that really well.”

When night falls, the close-knit group is reluctant to leave the makeshift salon. Chelsea Leyland, a DJ who’s headed to a gig at MTV, pouts, “I just want to stay here and eat cake.” ●

Christian Harder