

Thom Solo, the man behind the shoes

By Cheryl Fenton | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 04, 2013



JAN BLOCH PHOTOGRAPHY

“I went to my first fashionable New York nightclub when I was 15,” says Thom Solo.

In studded Christian Louboutin driving shoes, a draped Rick Owens knit, and his signature leather jacket, Thom Solo cuts a slender shadow in head-to-toe black. But don't let his sweet face and perfected pout fool you. He's a force.

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Precise with his words and intense in his designs, this 23-year-old shoe designer is seasoned well beyond his years though he only graduated from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Tufts University in 2012. In his Newton studio, he handcrafts heels in leather and pony hair with the skill of a veteran designer. His coveted creations reach skyward on 6- to 8-inch spikes, making other heels look strangely inferior.

Solo is beginning to grab attention with his ethereal Specimen line being sold on Solestruck.com this fall and his second collection, Giger, serving as the focus of a recent runway show in Boston.

He finds inspiration around every corner — in the work of the late designer Alexander McQueen, the photography of Nick Knight, the gorgeously outlandish hats by milliner Philip Treacy, and Treacy’s dearly departed muse, Isabella Blow.

Solo introduced his own designs with the launch of Thom Solo Shoes in 2008.

It was a lifelong fascination with footwear that led Solo to his adventurous design work; he recalls being quite taken with his preschool friend’s jellies, and traveling to far-flung locales with his mother, Pam Solo, founder and president of the Civil Society Institute. Years later, he was hanging out with stylists and making friends with models in New York City nightclubs — which soon became just an average night in the life of the eager young designer.

“It sounds really movie-esque to talk about it, but that’s what I did,” says Solo. “I wasn’t a party boy, but I traveled around with a fabulous group of people.



Solo launched his own line of shoes in 2008 and his newest collection, called Giger (pictured), was the focus of a recent Boston runway show.

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“I went to my first fashionable New York nightclub when I was 15. God bless my mother’s heart, she trusted me enough,” he continues. “She and I would go to New York five times a month for her work. From a young age I knew where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do, so I would spend time trying to figure out how to get into these places. I would go to nightclubs like the Beatrice Inn, where I met Mary Kate Olsen and Lindsay Lohan, and build up contacts. I wouldn’t come home until 5 a.m.”

With contacts in his book and design on his mind, Solo began studying photography at SMFA in 2008. Upon discovering as a freshman that he couldn’t get his hands on couture fashion or shoes for his shoots, he turned to his talent for sculpting and began creating his own.

“One thing I’ve always admired about Thom is that he’s equally interested in visual art as a discipline and as a design. Even though these can be very different worlds,” says Megan McMillan, Solo’s sculpture teacher at SMFA and one-on-one mentor during his senior year. “He treats his shoes as sculpture.”

He admits he began with a bit of trial and error.

“I bought cheap women’s heels to see what I could do to them. I covered one pair in plastic fish tank gravel,” he laughs. “It was great for me to play and make some hideous creations. It let me realize I was moving in a creative direction. I just needed to refine my edge and taste. I started thinking about my personal inspirations and what really meant something to me. That’s where Specimen exploded from.”

The collection will be his first that’s commercially available. While Solo’s custom design work hovers around \$1,000 per pair, shoes from the Specimen collection, slated to be part of Solestruck.com’s Fall 2013 capsule collection, can be had for around \$350.



Solo’s shoes draw on his fascination with visual design that he explored at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

Specimen blurs the line between sweetly demure and seductively dangerous, with soaring platforms blooming with life-size dahlia. His inspiration was the femme fatale Poison Ivy, DC Comics' sexy supervillainess modeled after real life siren Bettie Page.

"She's this spitfire with this fabulous pull to her combined with a deadly edge," he says of his muse. "You never knew which would come out."

It was here that Solo's connections paid off. A stylist from his past, Sonny Groo, took notice of Solo's Specimen design and used it in a Candy magazine editorial spread paying tribute to Lady Gaga. More recognition followed when fashion icon Daphne Guinness wore Solo's heels in a spread for German Vogue.

"I was working with him at the time," recalls McMillan of Solo's editorial feature in the European glossy. "It was exciting to be working with a student who was so young and still in school but with all of these amazing professional opportunities happening."

Solo has gone to a darker place with Giger, a custom collection that's an eerie homage to Swiss surrealist/designer H.R. Giger and his chilling, otherworldly creations for the "Alien" movies.

"The story line fascinated me," Solo says. "There was this alien queen, dangerous and dark, obviously scary but also beautiful. The collection was born right then and there. This strong alien woman almost birthed herself in front of me out of this black goo. This is a more serious, darker representation of my imagination and who I am as an artist."

Solo sees these darker designs as experimental and boundary-pushing.



One of Solo's designs.

"A lot of people take the term 'dark edge' with a seriousness to it that means something bad. To me, it's having the capability to put out something that's a little more in your face and a little scary."

Solo would love to see more pop divas donning his creations, after all what designer wouldn't? (Carly Rae Jepsen reportedly wore a pair of Solos.)

“I’m obsessed with iconic pop stars because they’re the epitome of that dangerous girl on the edge of something progressive and fresh,” he explains. “I was raised by strong women, some of my best friends are women. I value them so much. A woman can be charismatic and so chic. Think about the major icons of this world. They are basically all women.”

A third collection is in the works that Solo is fine-tuning. Think childhood classics, fantasy, and the last unicorn (minus the hokey My Pretty Pony connotations).

“It will be fairy tale but with glamour and the dark edge,” he says. Obviously, they will boast his signature sky-high heels. His motto? “If a heel is under 5 inches, it’s merely a flat with a raise.”

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