

The Intersection of Pretty & Sporty

Cynthia Rowley talks about how her beloved hobby inspired her designs

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE

A photograph of Cynthia Rowley sitting on a light blue Vespa scooter. She is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt with a colorful, abstract pattern on the front, a dark skirt, and blue high-heeled sandals with white polka dots. She is holding a silver helmet. The background shows a brick building with a black door and a gold door, and some greenery in planters.

Racks of Cynthia Rowley's clothing—dresses, shirts, skirts, swimsuits, wetsuits—line the perimeter of the sunny bungalow at W South Beach. The pop-up shop is here for Miami Swim Week, where the venerable fashion designer also presented her “beachy” Spring Resort 2019 collection.

Cynthia, who participated in a pop-up Pilates class presented by her daughter Kit Keenen + Equinox a couple of hours earlier, walks in wearing a long, white dress flecked with tiny flowers and grey polka dots. Her dark-brown hair is swept into her standard low ponytail and her sunglasses rest atop her head like a headband. "Here, let's just sit," she says as she positions two chairs next to one another near the showroom's entrance.

So, which piece is your favorite? She scans the shop then proceeds to the back of the room. I follow her and watch as she sifts through a rack of swimsuits. Then, she finds it: a black one-piece swimsuit made of lace and neoprene, a fabrication commonly used in the wetsuits worn by surfers. It is beautiful.

One thing you should know about Cynthia is that she is a surfer and a Manhattanite, so if you're familiar with her work, you'll notice both lifestyles reflected in her renowned designs.

It doesn't matter if the designer is hanging out on the beach or in the West Village, this is a woman who takes pleasure in dressing up and showing off her style. Which is why it was so hard for the avid surfer (she spends hours upon hours surfing all over the world) to sacrifice her style while enjoying her beloved hobby. Fortunately, a fateful encounter would change that. "About eight years ago, I was surfing in Montauk and I was in the water with a guy from Quiksilver and he was like, 'Wait, you're a designer *and* you surf? We have surfers that are designing, but it really makes more sense to do the opposite.' I always say, 'I'm a much better designer than I am a surfer, but I love it,'" she says with a smile.

Before Cynthia came along, there weren't any attractive wetsuit options. The market was fraught with "black wetsuits that stopped right above the knee, and made your knees look like muffins... Not attractive at all." A collaboration between a surfwear brand and an award-winning fashion designer was long overdue. Cynthia and Quiksilver teamed up on her first six collections, and once their collaboration ended, she continued building from there, creating vibrant, feminine, and flattering wetsuits. The New York resident often dons one of her wetsuits when she's catching waves in Montauk. "That's kinda what my closet in Montauk looks like," she points to a rack full of wetsuits. "Neoprene is a magical fabrication because it makes everybody look great—it's SPF 50 and it just lasts forever." Today, Cynthia incorporates neoprene into her swimwear, and soon, her dresses. While designers have been using neoprene in fashion for some time now,

she tells me, her brand has taken surf/swimwear to a new level by printing on it and mixing it with fabrics like lace, "reinventing what neoprene has been for an active surf and swim lifestyle."

Next Cynthia gives me a peek of her fab fall collection, which she describes as "pretty urban-looking," and boasts sweaters, jackets, and layering pieces. The DNA of her brand is "pretty-sporty," she tells me (which also perfectly describes her, too), and is a fusion of opposing ideas that work nicely together, just like her Cali York collection. "That sort of started because I live in New York and my daughter [Kit] just started at USC, so I was thinking about California and New York and I was like, *I wish they could just come together and they were closer*, so that's how I came up with the idea Cali York. Sounded better than Newfornia," she laughs. "It's like two opposite things and where those meet is where the excitement is. California is so different than New York, but you kinda want both of those."

Lately, the brand has been doing a lot of collaborations—about one per month. "We did the Greats sneakers that are out now. We also just launched a collaboration with Goop [Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle brand, Cynthia Rowley x Goop]: the wetsuit, the swimsuit, the towel, surf wax. We throw in some rolling papers for fun." She flashes a smile. I admit that I wasn't sure what the latter was when I saw them over there. I thought maybe they're facial blotting tissues. "That's the test. If you know what it is—*alright*." She nods knowingly. "GP likes those kinds of things so I thought that was sort of funny to do that, like a gift with purchase. Nobody has done rolling papers." Their most recent collab is with Bandier: #CRxBANDIER.

With her flowy, floral frocks; pretty, paisley wetsuits; and casual yet chic sweatshirts, CR appeals to so many. To satiate the demand, they have been opening as many stores as they can, as fast as they can. They just opened stores in Boston and Georgetown, and are constantly adding more "nomadic retail" (aka pop-up stores) to the mix. "We swoop in and stay for like 6 months or in the case of Palm Beach, we opened in November and we were like, 'We'll just do it for 6 months,' and we just signed a long-term lease. We test the waters, and if it's good, we stay. If not, we move to another city. We've had a store for the last 6 months on 39th Street [in Miami] and that's about to finish...and then, who knows?" Because you gotta go where the waves are good, right? **ML**

To shop Cynthia Rowley, visit cynthiarowley.com.





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Photo Credit: Nigel Barker

What is one thing you always have on you before you leave the house that makes you feel put-together?

"Shades. I have a million different kinds —some are more sporty and some are big, giant glam glasses. I like to mix it up. I would say that's probably the one thing, otherwise I'm pretty low maintenance. I get dressed in 5 minutes and don't have a big routine."

Do you have a style uniform that you wear?

"That's the other thing, it's really like, people tease me that one day, I'm like in full ripped-up denim, and the next day, in a pretty, girly dress like this."

That's fun, you get to wear whatever you want, whenever you feel like it!

"Yeah, and how you dress in the morning changes the way you feel that day. Everybody has experienced that —where you dress a certain way and you have that kind of day. It's fun."

What do you think fans would be surprised to find out about you?

"I'm a daredevil. I'm a really big daredevil. I've been scuba diving in an arctic fissure in Iceland in a drysuit. I've climbed one of the smaller Himalayan mountains and camped. I bungee jump, tow-in surfing, flyboarding in the Persian Gulf. You know what this is? They shoot water, you're on like a wakeboard. I love to wakeboard, wakesurf, like all that stuff. You name it," she laughs. "Like, give me a challenge."

Is there anything that you haven't done yet, that you want to do?

"There's one thing I haven't done, literally talk about it so much, and I was talking about it yesterday with my daughter and her friend —skydiving. And I don't know, because that's not really up to you, y'know what I mean? But I'm gonna do it. I might wait till I'm like, I just read about this woman who was 90, on her 90th birthday she did it. I'd save that. I like the idea of having one thing that I haven't really done yet, like that."