

New Oregon Arts & Letters (formerly 2GQ)

INDEPENDENT FASHION: The Seaplane Interview



The New Oregon Interview Series kicks off with **Holly Stalder and Kathryn Towers**, founders of Seaplane. Join host and interviewer **Nora Robertson** for live events and public conversations starting April 22 at Blackbird Wine Shop.

I first walked into the original Seaplane shop in 2001. It was located on then-gritty SE Belmont street. Intense walls were hung with band posters and local art. Dresses made from fabrics, photographs and papers were strewn on vintage furniture. I loved it.

Founded in 2000 by house designers Holly Stalder and Kathryn Towers, Seaplane is Portland's most celebrated clothing boutique. In addition to showcasing their own lines, Stalder and Towers provided a regular platform for more than 60 designers and became

the epicenter of local independent fashion talent since launching their first fashion show.

Soma magazine wrote that the designers represented at Seaplane were “leading an independent fashion movement” within a year of their launch. By 2005, the Portland Mercury reported that “Portland has been building momentum towards national and international recognition, the attention being mainly focused on Seaplane,” a sentiment echoed by magazines like W, Women’s Wear Daily, Elle and Bust.

On busy NW 23rd street, Stalder and Towers talked with me over coffee and croissants in their bright, mostly white retail space with the back wall covered in silver tin-ceiling wallpaper. It’s a space that highlights the clothes, which tend towards avant-garde silhouettes often deconstructed or one-of-a-kind. Shortly after this interview, Stalder and Towers sold Seaplane in order to focus on their individual collections. The store they founded continues to be involved in Portland Fashion Week and projects like Fashion Design Camp. —NORA ROBERTSON



NR: How would you describe the project of Seaplane?

KT: I like the fact that you are calling it a project because it has been very grassroots as far as the way we started. We were at this place in our lives where we were working at the café, but also wanted to make a living of our art, the idea of clothing as art. A lot of people we knew were in the same boat. The next thing you know, lots of people were making things left and right and we were attempting to sell them, putting on little shows.

NR: Tell me the story.

KT: We worked at the Pied Cow Coffeeshop together on Belmont, which is three doors down from where the old store was. The first few times we hung out, we were making things. It was almost like we were little kids or something. That was the start of our friendship and the start of our business at the same time, whether we knew what we were getting into or not. There was this little vintage store up from the Pied Cow where we all went shopping. *[Ed. note: the fabulous Kitty Princess Boutique.]* The husband wanted to bring in some fresh

people that would be excited about it. Somehow that was Holly and I. After about a month, this guy was like, “You know I don’t think I want to be doing this anymore.”

It happened all within a couple of months. We were working with pennies. We would maybe paint a wall here or there. We had this big fashion show. People were coming up to us and telling us they were making clothes as well or had always been interested. There were maybe 300 or 400 people all gathered around next to the Aalto Lounge. It wasn't a cohesive show. Looking at Holly's pieces, it was really more art-based. She made a dress out of photographs. I ended up making men's clothing somehow. I think I saw a bunch of cute guys and asked them, "Hey do you want to model for this show?" And then I was like, "Oh my god, I have to make something." I was doing all these weird futuristic kinds of things before all the lacey antique stuff came in.

That's really how we got our start. This show launched this store and caused this commotion in this weird way that we weren't expecting.



ABOVE MAKING THE RENT

Some of the first reportage on the local independent fashion scene came from future collaborator Elizabeth Dye who was covering the LOOK column for Willamette Week and also wrote this missive in a 2001 piece for Women's Wear Daily: "Call them generation DIY. These progenitors of Warhol's Factory and punk's do-it-yourself mandate are tending their own labs. Making a scene might rank above making the rent."

KT: That was in 2000. We would never say we were the first people to be designing clothes in Portland or whatever, but at the same time looking back, there wasn't a whole lot going on.

NR: I feel like it was about then that I started to read Elizabeth Dye's column, that I first realized there was a scene in Portland.

KT: I was talking with my mom and she was saying that Elizabeth's first article on us was really what launched this whole thing, and she's right. Elizabeth was the first one that really got what we were doing. She came in and thought it was really cool. She had just gotten back from London. She saw something good in what we were doing and wanted to write an article. That was a big deal for us.

HS: I always thought we were in the right place at the right time because there was a real need. We were really overwhelmed. A lot of people were coming in, and a lot of them were our friends that saw an opportunity.

KT: We were hanging around with a lot of creative people, and that was our group of friends. It was true; there was never a plan to take off with this whole fashion scene.

HS: It was this thing of art, music, and fashion. We had a little music section.

KT: We had dated a lot of musicians.

HS: We had art on the walls.

KT: We dated a lot of artists as well.

HS: We were these really naïve girls at the time. We thought if we named it something really ambiguous that it could turn into anything; we had a lot of ideas.

KT: I still like the milk truck idea. Before Seaplane even happened, we were sitting outside that weird café and talking, and we were like, "What if we got this old milk truck and started selling clothing out of it?" I still love that

idea.



NR: Almost like the bookmobile.

KT: Yeah. Like when you were a kid. You just picture these girls running out in their slippers trying things on.

HS: It would be like a yard sale on wheels.

NR: So why did you guys stay with clothes, as opposed to music or art?

HS: People love clothes. You maybe can't afford to buy the painting on the wall, but maybe you can afford...

KT: A \$400 dress.

HS: Or maybe have more of a need for it. Being able to justify it because it is useful.

KT: It may sound silly, but as girls, we liked clothing and always went thrift store shopping. I think we liked fashion, but not in this mainstream sense of big brand names and stuff. Clothing is art. There was a need for it. People are unique and individual, and they want something different. People just ate that up. It was like you said, the right place at the right time whether we knew it or not.



“ANYBODY CAN DO THIS”

About this time, the number of small independent boutiques began to increase, expanding from just a few stores to separate shopping drags dotting the city. Ateliers like Adam Arnold's self-titled shop and Jess Beebe's Linea began to open. In 2001, W Magazine reported that “Seaplane, a boutique/lounge/gallery, has made it a mission to give the city's indie fashion designers a launchpad.”

NR: What would you say the role of Seaplane has been in shaping fashion in Portland?

HS: I feel like Seaplane is a mix of really high fashion juxtaposed with this sense of “anybody can do this.” We don't judge people on their sewing skills. If we like it, then we're going to sell it. It's not like you have to graduate from Parsons Design School. There are people that have graduated from there whose stuff we thought was kind of boring.

KT: Well made, but boring.

HS: I think some people come in to the store and think, “Clearly this designer has not gone to school, but there's something about it that I love. It's intriguing.” That's what makes our store different I think, that combination of things.

KT: We don't want to say that things aren't very well made.

HS: Local designers have gotten really good over the years.

KT: We have gotten good. It's keeping up with the idea of integrity, and what makes it interesting. Some people have even gone on to get a line produced or something, but you can still pick out their style. Everyone has really evolved their actual style.

HS: I feel like Seaplane has opened the door for a lot of designers that don't sell their stuff at Seaplane, but they're going to get out there and have a fashion show. Maybe Seaplane made that possible or more acceptable. We showed that you can do this independent thing and people are going to be really interested in it. It's a way to launch your little business, I guess. Not to say that everyone copies the Seaplane model, but maybe Portland is such a supportive place of that kind of business. Young people in Portland can have these art shows, and it doesn't have to be this super high budget thing.

NR: It seems like it comes just as much out of art and collaboration.

KT: There has been a lot of collaboration, and not just two designers coming together. Holly and I have certainly collaborated on things together just as business partners through Seaplane. We've done physical pieces together, but more so our ideas. That's what Seaplane is. If one of us weren't here, it would change a little bit. We have the general idea, but sometimes we merge to the middle. As a larger group in Portland, we designers are supportive of each other. We cross over into a lot of shows or whatever.

HS: Maybe what's gotten us a lot of attention is the big fashion shows we used to throw, and those were definitely collaborations of ten or twelve different designers. Then all of a sudden, there were over a thousand people at a show, and it got a lot of attention. The strength-in-numbers thing. We haven't put on a big fashion show in a couple years.

KT: Every time we do one, we're like, "That was so amazing, but never again." It's just so much work and so expensive.



LIKE IN THE SEVENTIES

This is not the first time Portland has produced local designers, though not to the same national acclaim as Seaplane's roster of talent has earned. Portland's first fashion scene peaked in the seventies and was centered around the Galleria building downtown.

HS: In the seventies, there was this very thriving vibrant fashion scene in Portland in the seventies. It started at The Galleria and this other store. They were making bellbottoms.

KT: It was the disco era.

HS: I've had a couple of older women come in and tell me the same scenario. They had fashion shows and it was this mini New York scene here. The way they told the story was like the eighties rolled around, and everything got really conservative; the disco era faded out, and people started wearing big shoulder pads and shopping at the Gap. These little boutiques [from the seventies] had to move out. Downtown kind of shut down in the eighties. People just shopped at department stores, and it got less funky. I see that recently in the year 2000. I feel like Portland is a real mecca for music and this indie rock scene. I am not saying we were tied into that in a big way, but we were the new version of that seventies fashion boom.

KT: You're right. There was an explosion in music in 2000, and people are still coming here and seeing that Portland is thriving and that it's exciting. We're still on the map. A big population came here around that time and started all these things up. I would be fascinated to see some photos of the fashion or what the stores looked like in the seventies here.

HS: I feel like everyone gives us this major credit. I'm like, "What if this thing was already here in a way and we just sort of brought it back?"

KT: Rekindled the flame.

HS: Things come in cycles, and for all I know in two years, everyone will be wearing boring black. They'll go in a different direction in their style.

KT: I always think about that. I hope that people will always appreciate one-of-a-kind pieces. I think they will, assuming that there will always be pieces like that.



OPINIONATED WORK

Many of the designers Seaplane represents have used construction techniques taken from crafting, such as iron-on felt appliqués, or were a little raw, with unfinished edges, while often making use of retro fabrics or details.

NR: What is the difference between DIY fashion and home crafting?

KT: Right. There is this really fine line between crafts, and what really is edgy and different.

HS: From a store owner's perspective, not a designer's, you have this identity, and you want to protect it. We will try to carry something that nobody else carries. Unless you are going to a trade show or shopping at a national level, a lot of stores, even mainstream boutiques, will say, "Wow, I want to sell this woman's stuff from Portland in my New York store because nobody else has it." These stores want to individualize themselves, and one way they can do that is to sell local designers. That goes along with the whole idea of boutique shopping, and the idea of things getting smaller and more unique.

KT: It's funny. Just the word "craft" or "crafty," along with the whole knitting thing. Crafty books, girls being crafty. There is a difference as far as looks. I appreciate the craftiness, but you can tell when things are crafty and home made versus art-based, opinionated work.

HS: It all depends on what you like. Some people like cutesy. Kate and I like high fashion magazines, really avant-garde; we're inspired by one-of-a-kind mature pieces. I feel like the DIY [movement] is even giving "craft" a bad

name. [By contrast], you can go down to the craft museum and see some amazing stuff.



A BIG BLUR

Both women moved to Portland in around 1998, Stalder from California and Towers from the East Coast. They were not alone. In 2005, the Willamette Week reported a 22% jump in population from 1990 to 2004—compared with 7.3% in San Francisco—mostly 24-35 year-old creatives.

KT: For me, I wasn't going to go back to the East Coast. It was sort of wide open, but I knew that I loved Portland. I would call home and say, "It is the best place ever!" Interestingly enough, my parents live here now. Now that I have family here, I feel like an Oregonian.

I've been here for about ten years, and my husband came out here around the same time as I did. I loved everything: that it was beautiful, that the houses were unique, there are gardens everywhere, people have crazy artwork in their yards, and I loved the people, everyone I met. It's true that you could meet someone in the grocery line. I was twenty and going out all the time. Now I am 30 and much more of a homebody and a mom and everything, but at the same time I just was so happy. I felt like those were some of the best years of my life. There's nothing bad to say about it.

HS: When I moved here, I didn't know anybody except for a college teacher. All my friends from college either moved to San Francisco, New York, or LA, and it was so depressing. Rent was so expensive. I would go visit them, and they would live in the worst part of town, and the traffic... it was so depressing. Trying to be an artist, I could not be a poor person in San Francisco. I moved to Portland. The first house that Kate and I lived in was a five-bedroom house, and it was like \$850 a month.

KT: We didn't really have to work.

HS: The rent seemed like a lot at the time. Now we have our own houses, our own mortgages, and things are a little different.

KT: We worked at the coffee shop four days a week. People were into sharing. They were really supportive. People would make dinner and have everyone come over, and then we would do it the next week. There were always gatherings; it was almost like the seventies in a weird way. It was just a big blur. Every day I remember finding something that just made me so happy.



THAT WOULD SUCK

Institutional support for fashion in Portland has been scarce, consisting mostly of the Art Institute's fashion program and Portland Fashion Week. The first 2005 Fashion Week coincided with the third consecutive year of The Collections, a week of fashion shows curated by a collaboration of Stalder and Towers with Elizabeth Dye, Jess Beebe, and a cadre of invitees including Adam Arnold and Emily Ryan.

KT: There is this Portland Fashion Week now. It started a few years ago around the same time that a group of designers here started a group called The Collections. For the first year, it was like there was this battle between Fashion

Week and The Collections, which there wasn't. It was just a coincidence that we were both putting on shows. They will sponsor it and make it happen for you, while we're more grassroots.

In 2008, we finally collaborated and put on The Collections show under Portland Fashion Week. It's been interesting. They've done a lot of larger scale projects. They are definitely very professional in how they get everything going.

What I want people to understand, that if you are doing a show under Portland Fashion Week, The Collections, or with our own little group or store or as an individual, do whatever you want. That is what makes it fun. I don't think people should feel like they have to be part of something established in order to do something.

NR: So tell me more about The Collections.

KT: The Collections started really tiny. It was Elizabeth Dye, Jess Beebe, Holly, and myself. We just said, "Hey guys, let's get together and put on a week of shows." This is before we had heard of Portland Fashion Week. We invited Liza, Emily Ryan, and Adam Arnold or something like that. Holly and I did our shows on the roof of Wyden + Kennedy. Jess and Elizabeth teamed up and did their show at clarklewis. Adam probably did his in his studio. Liza and Emily did their show at Savoy over on Clinton. It was a group of friends getting together and saying let's do this thing. It was kind of casual.

Some people made this weird comparison of Portland trying to be like these other big cities. We weren't. We just wanted to do what we wanted to do here, and that makes Portland unique and different.

As Seaplane we had small local places donate [to help put on our shows] and we could put their name on our flyer or whatever. We had a lot of help, but from other small businesses.

NR: So The Collections shows tend to be sponsored by other small independent businesses?

KT: Right. We never called up Nike or anything. In a way, bigger companies like that have been interested in what we are doing. There has been sort of a cross-pollination going on. We have been extremely successful in many ways, but that doesn't always mean financially.

I think there's this idea that we own Seaplane and have all those pretty dresses in the store. People think you must go out to eat every night and buy shoes every weekend, and it's like, no. I'm happy, and I love being in charge of my schedule and my life. I love being an artist, but it is hard. It's a lot of work and a huge headache, but you've got to love what you do. I could work in an office and have a 401(k) and have to put my kid in daycare. That would suck.

NR: It's about living the kind of life you want to.

KT: Exactly.



Stalder and Towers sold Seaplane in 2008 to Tacee Webb, known for founding vintage chain Red Light and TenSpeed, a consulting firm that designs and builds retail environments for companies like American Apparel. Stalder and Tower's work can be found at Seaplane and online at www.hollystalder.com and www.katetowers.com.

Images: from recent independent collections from the designers. Photography credits are on their way...

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"I ended up making men's clothing somehow." - I'd like to see some examples.

"Clothing is art." - Yes!

I like the photo of the girl in the wheat(?) field.

Posted by: Steve | [April 21, 2009 at 09:31 PM](#)

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