

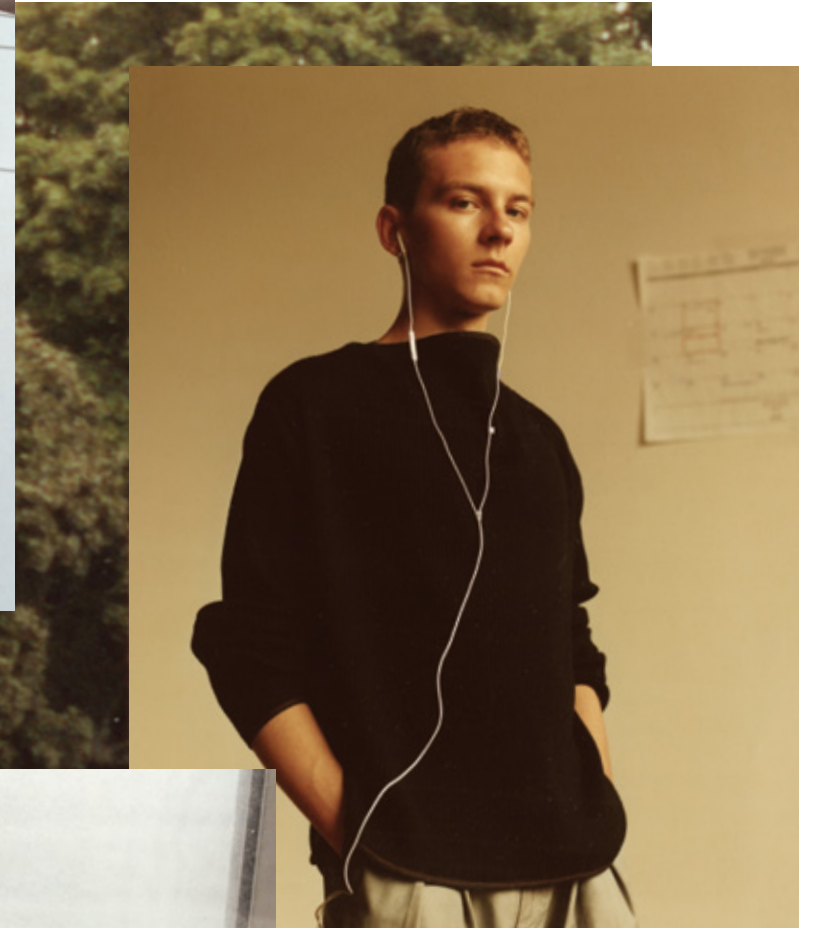


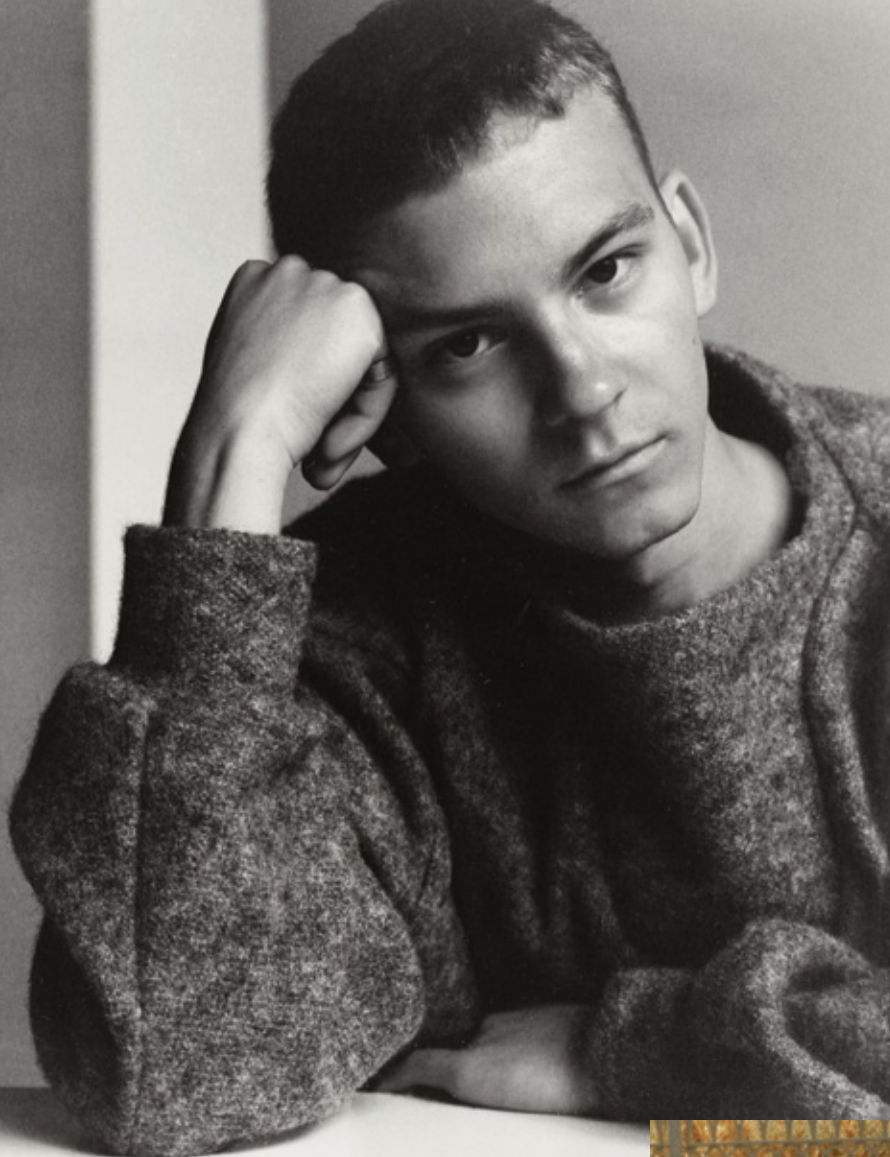
# THE NEXT BIG THING

*The 19-Year-Old Designer of Vejas Is Upending the Fashion Paradigm Not in New York, London, Paris or Milan, But from a Studio in Toronto's Chinatown*

There is a constant itch in fashion to anoint a new young designer as the Chosen One: the savior of all brand fatigue and a shining beacon of the new and next. For Vejas Kruszewski, who grew up in Montreal of Lithuanian and Polish descent, fashion wasn't even a viable plan until high school, when the now-19-year-old designer started teaching himself how to sew jeans and sweatshirts from Japanese how-to magazines, taking a summer gig working at a local garment factory and putting his designs up on the Internet. As such, Tumblr did the talking, hooking Kruszewski up with a network of creatives, most notably Hari Nef, who has been an early supporter of the young gun. Based in Toronto, the fledgling designer oversees a slowly growing staff of pattern makers, seamstresses and interns along with his business partner from a studio in the city's Chinatown.

Interview COLLEEN KELSEY  
Photography ÉTIENNE SAINT-DENIS





*Those in the know have fallen for Vejas's reconstructed, dystopian versions of classic pieces. His asymmetrical-buttoned flight jackets with curvilinear seams; shrunken-fit, snap-closure sweatshirts and paneled, zippered jeans are future-cool, gender-unspecific riffs on closet staples, much like another brand of the zeitgeist, Vetements. At present, Kruszewski is upping production, filling orders for stocklists in New York, L.A and Tokyo, and fielding a flurry of attention, much of which is coming on the heels of the June announcement of his win of the Special Prize at this year's LVMH Young Designer competition — as the youngest participant ever. All this, and he still finds the time to make custom clothing for another hometown hero, Drake.*

*Are you over the fact that a lot of people, and the press, have focused on your age?*

Yeah, but it makes sense. I don't like it when it's, "Oh, look how young they are and what they're doing," because that seems condescending. I have an agent now, because it's eventually

anyway [laughs]. There always is going to be a solid men's edit within the collection. Then we're going to show on both men and women, but then it will technically be a womenswear brand.

*Do you think about that when you're designing?*

The men's edit is just stuff that I, myself, end up wearing. Then the women's edit is what the women in my life are wanting or would be wearing, or what I would imagine them to be wearing.

*What's a typical day like for you these days? What are you working on?*

We're doing some of the Fall production in studio. Then we have been doing private orders to make a bit more money. Then there's Spring sampling that's being done at the same time. That's pretty much it.

*When you first started thinking about working in fashion, did you have a good idea of what this would all entail?*

No, not at all. I think I was pretty naive.

because they were, like, really ugly. They were leather and I wore those during the summer.

*When did you decide you were going to be serious?*

After I graduated high school, I moved to Toronto. Then I tried finding a job very half-heartedly. But I was making some money off selling clothing, in various ways, and then I decided, "Well, I should just do this." Then I did Fall '15 in New York.

*Did you ever expect that your label would be garnering so much attention so quickly?*

It's a good thing it did. But I wasn't really expecting much, really. I was just putting something out there and seeing what comes back.

*How important do you think the Internet has been for you?*

Absolutely invaluable. There's a lot of people that I never would have met, or met in person, or have had any interaction with if not for having

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about brokering consulting contracts, creative directorship, stuff like that. That's the trajectory that one usually takes. But in the real world, being young is a risky investment. It's a mark of inexperience, and if someone is hiring you to do something, that's not a good thing. It's just a press thing. A lot of things are press throw-arounds.

*Is anything getting lost in how people are talking about you or your work?*

Everyone's always like, it's genderless, or it's gender neutral, it's gender fluid. I feel like that's such a vague thing to say about something, especially now that everyone's doing men's and women's looks together, combined runways. The distinction between men's and women's is disappearing because it's so clear that people shop in either section regardless of their gender. But what's kind of silly to me about it is that it's not so much about the idea of clothing being genderless, it's more about how things are constructed to fit different body types. So much of people's everyday wardrobes in North America and Europe today are jeans and a T-shirt or a sweater, shapeless things. We're not wearing corsets anymore

*When did you first start thinking about designing?*

During the last two years of high school. I was working at a grocery store, but then the grocery store owner's parents had a sewing factory and a variety of things. So I worked there for one summer. I wasn't there for very long, but they taught me a couple things. That's when I decided I should do something with clothing. They were doing ready-to-wear for local designers, high-end stuff in terms of the finishing, but then they were doing nurse scrubs. There was one day that I just sewed nurse scrub collars and I wasn't very good at it. There was a dog show that everyone needed a uniform for, so we made those. Random stuff.

*Were you conscious of the "fashion with a capital F" world of magazines and editorial?*

I would see it and read reviews on Style.com, stuff like that. But I never interacted with it.

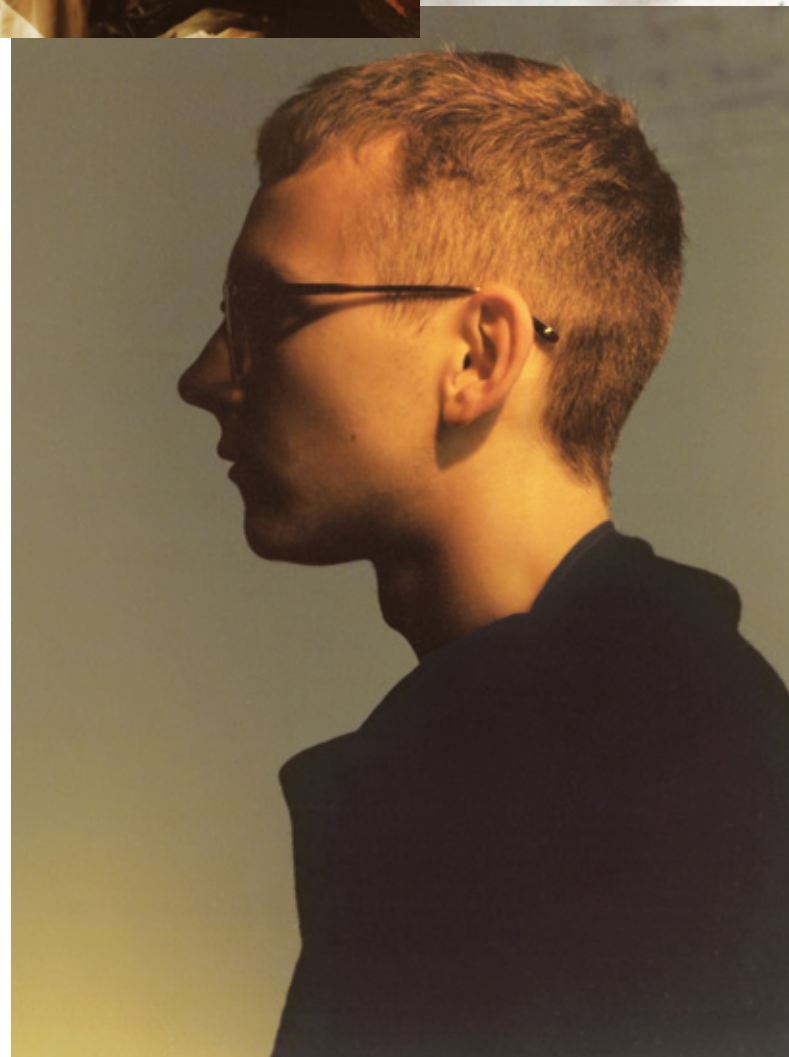
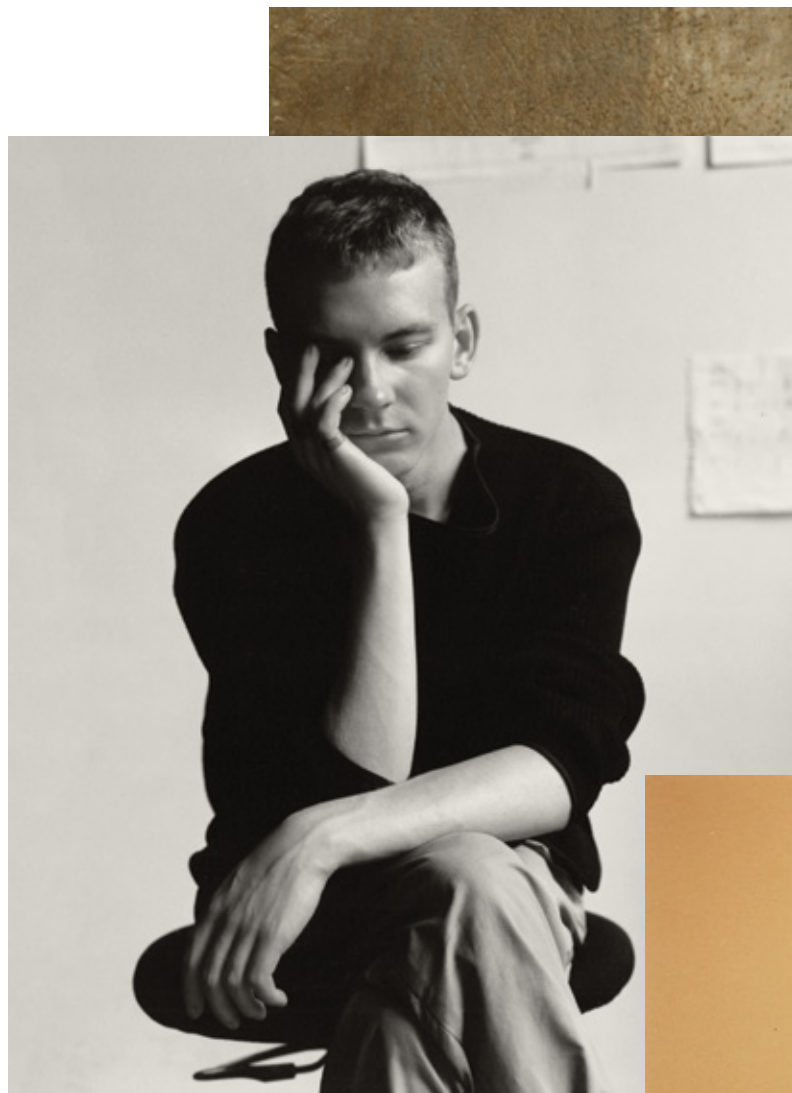
*What were the first pieces that you made?*

I made a really ugly T-shirt that I wore for a long time. I made this pair of pants, and I'm so embarrassed to have worn them for so long,

an online presence and communicating through social media and stuff like that.

*What are the building blocks of what you've been doing and what you want to do aesthetically?*

The first season I was clear. There was a concept of taking very American clothing and perverting it through the construction of it, versus like splashing paint on something. Looking at changing things from the inside, the construction of things. Then it was presented in a way that was the narrative of a "final girl," like the horror film *Carrie*, that I thought was really interesting. Spring '16, I was doing production all myself, I think I had intermittently one or two people helping me. For Fall, I got a lot of nicer fabrics. It was pretty commercial, taking basics and playing with the construction. I didn't really do anything grandiose. But then the next season, the one I'm working on, it will be a little more concrete and more refined, and there's just going to be more product in general. Now the big thing I feel is like designing product categories versus whole looks. You look at Gucci and Vetements and that's



pretty much the way things are designed. That's interesting because there's a clear commercial thing going on. But then again within the constraints you have a lot of freedom. That's the way I'm doing things going forward.

*Do you consider your design process to be more concept-based or more pragmatic?*

If it's not wearable it doesn't sell. Usually you become a ready-to-wear brand, you build a foundation on ready-to-wear, then you open up to accessories, leather goods, etc. and that becomes the core business. But I think at the start you kind of have to be really wearable.

*What is your typical development process?*

I find materials and then I do sketches. Lately, I've been spending days on Pinterest. I don't know where people find these photos. It's this endless stream, when you click on one photo it recommends like 100 others that are visually

here for a year I think, just because we still have production here.

*You've showed in Paris and you've showed in New York. Do you feel like Paris is a better fit for the brand?*

We didn't really do a proper show or anything. We just did a showroom for sales, but it's just a lot better there. A lot of buyers skip New York altogether, especially the Asian ones, and a lot of the European ones, so it's just a lot easier to schedule in more people. Overall, I think the response is better there than New York. I haven't done anything there for almost a year now. But it was working with friends and it was more a scrambled effort versus something that's actually professional.

*Do you feel like now you have to be really strategic?*

Yeah, this is also going to be a weird season because what we're trying to do is move to the pre-schedule, which would mean that we'd be showing Fall '17 sometime in January. [Spring]

Next season there's the pressure of having to show that you're already utilizing the money, so there's that pressure in terms of the visuals and the clothing. But then they have a sales goal in order to keep us growing our market. We have goals in terms of moving, in terms of where we're sourcing, how we're sourcing and where production is being done. We really want to do — something that's a really important category for sales — fashion knitwear, which is something that absolutely has to be outsourced. So we're trying to do that in Italy. We really need to do — like if we're doing a runway in January — footwear, which also has to be done in Italy. We're experimenting with bags and leather goods, and they do sell. It's cheaper than the ready-to-wear so it's a little more accessible, so we'd like to eventually go and have all that stuff done by a third party. The long-term goal is to move elsewhere and have a strong business space.

*Do you have any role models in terms of other brands?*

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similar. I don't know what kind of algorithm they use, but it's interesting if you just kind of find a pocket you like and there's 100 more options. I've just been dragging and dropping things and putting them into different folders according to what kind of construction it is. Is it a stitching detail or a pattern detail or a draping thing? It's a matter of mixing and matching. But after you mix and match, the first sample never really works out, so then you change it from there and then that's where it becomes something a little less derivative.

*How big is your staff right now?*

It's me, I have my business partner, I had one full-time seamstress for a while, and I had a bunch of interns. At this point, we have part-time pattern drafters, and I'm thinking I'll try to get them to go full-time next month. And I have three part-time seamstresses because we're still doing production on a really large private order in-studio. We just moved into a bigger office because our old space was, like, 300 square feet, which is a lot for five people. But we're probably going to be stuck

is going to be small again, and it doesn't really merit a runway show, but then a presentation doesn't always communicate properly. So that's why we're doing the lookbook. We're trying to move to pre-season, just because stores have a lot bigger budgets and they like to introduce new brands or take on new accounts during the pre-season.

*Do you think in the future you'd be interested in moving to Europe or to New York?*

I used to be really obsessed with living in New York. But now having gone to Paris, Paris makes a lot more sense. The biggest thing is the legal stuff with moving the corporation, moving the offices, visas and all of that. In order to properly move we'd need another capital injection of some sort. A third-party investment or something. But moving to New York — I mean I like visiting New York, I just don't know about living there because it's so expensive.

*The money from LVMH has been a bit of a help. Have you set goals for next steps?*

Some of my favorites right now are Wales Bonner — Grace [Wales Bonner] is a really amazing person. What she's doing is so uncompromised in the vision, which is really nice. I really like Craig Green as well. I think the clothing is so smart but also wearable. He seems like he's building a good business. J.W. Anderson has had a really good trajectory in terms of his own label and then doing consulting work, and then doing a creative directorship.

*What do you do when you're not working? Or is it just a constant grind?*

I used to have a really crazy work schedule, but I have weekends off now. Like, I went to the beach last weekend. Sometimes I just sit around and relax. When I'm not working I don't like to be thinking about work at all.

