

THE ARDENT

TRAILBLAZER

In 1996, AMANDA RETTIG FOUNDED Australian HANDBAG BRAND Mimco from \$5000 in savings. Just over a DECADE later, she sold it for a cool \$45 million. Now focused on A-ESQUE, a luxury leather-goods label, she relives her ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY with MAUREEN JORDAN, revealing the roles played by LOVE, FAMILY and FEARLESSNESS

photographed by SEAN FENNESSY

AMANDA RETTIG was in her early 20s when she launched Mimco on the back of six handbag designs. Drawing on a range of attributes, including a growing business acumen, she turned it into a fashion powerhouse, selling it for a fortune in 2007. Five years later, freshly inspired, she swapped high street for high-end, founding A-ESQUE, at the heart of which is its Melbourne atelier, where every bag is hand-made from premium materials. As is usually the case with ‘overnight success’, Rettig’s wasn’t that at all. Hers, she shares, began in childhood, where she learned the value of hard work, perseverance – and routinely looking yourself in the eye.

Harper’s BAZAAR: Tell us about yourself. How do you see yourself and your life?

Amanda Rettig: I was born into an incredible family with a strong traditional Jewish heritage. My grandparents were very involved in our lives and set a foundation for me rooted in hard work, family values and the ability to express love. My parents raised me with unconditional love, honesty and the space to become my own person. My own family – three sons and an incredible husband – is now equally contributing to my ability to pursue my passions and interests. On reflection, I feel like we’ve raised our sons with a similar independence.

HB: What led you to where you are now? Where did the inspiration come from?

AR: I feel like I have to emphasise my upbringing – the love and confidence imparted by my parents. I was brought up [in Melbourne] in an entrepreneurial environment by people who made me believe I could try and do anything I wanted. I always felt that anything was possible. I don’t feel like I was brought up with fear around me, and I’ve carried that through my adult life and as a parent. Just the honesty and vulnerability that my parents shared with me about themselves. So, while I have the confidence to do what I want to do, I’m still aware of the vulnerabilities and the truth and complexity of life.

Working has always appealed to me. I see work and life as one. I got my first job at a milk bar when I was about 15. I loved working on the till, although numbers weren’t natural to me. I really enjoyed that

challenge of working out the change. Other memorable jobs included a deli in Caulfield, promotions in supermarkets and then my first [fashion] retail role was at Cue in the city. I have strong memories of those times, dealing with customers and how each boss dealt with their teams and the work culture. I just always liked working. I thrived on responsibility and exposure to people. I am passionate, interested and curious about the world around me – and it doesn’t always feel right. But I feel like being able to sit in that, persevere past it and sometimes share it is critical to continuing to evolve and achieving what is publicly regarded as success, though I never use that word for myself about myself. I don’t think about success per se.

HB: Looking back on your life, what have been the keys to reaching where you are today?

AR: My husband. My parents. My sons. The teams I’ve worked with. Human support and friendships. I could not hold friendships in a higher regard. People you’re honest with, who know you, who can hold up a mirror to you. I don’t mind being criticised, and that’s part of why I feel I can continue to pursue professional dreams, because I’m happy to be wrong. I’m happy to improve. I don’t need to be the one in the room who’s right. I’m happy to make mistakes and then deal with the outcomes.

HB: BAZAAR has selected you because of the influence we feel you’ve had on women. But let me ask you this: who are the women who’ve influenced you?

AR: My mother, grandmother, sister and important friends. Each of them has shared their vulnerabilities, their emotions and their truth. My genetics have obviously had a huge influence. I have friendships that continue to shape me – with those friends who hold up a mirror. That is so valuable and meaningful. Talking, listening, asking questions: those things play a huge part in influencing me. A female biography that has influenced the second chapter of my work life has been *My Journey* by Donna Karan.

HB: What guidance did you receive during your early years in business? Was it all plain sailing?

AR: I’ve always sought out guidance from people with different skills to mine and sponged on ideas and observations through conversation,

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WOMAN OF INFLUENCE



Amanda wears a Saint Laurent silk shirt and Wardrobe.NYC pant.

travel, reading. I'm always taking things in. My brain is active. Things flood back that I heard, read or listened to 10 years ago and last week. Life and experience become a body of work that impacts us. However, I'm always looking forward. Not a big reflector. I'm excited about tomorrow. No life stage or business is ever plain sailing, in my experience.

HB: *And now you're building A-ESQUE. Tell us about this business. How is it different to your previous success with Mimco?*

AR: A-ESQUE has picked up from where I left off with Mimco in 2007. One of my last ideas before exit was developing a personalised experience for customers through the aid of in-store technology. I feel like I took a break and then continued [my] ideas with an about-face on where things get made. I don't really contemplate the differences I see [compared to] my first chapter – an incredibly positive experience that was built from nothing with what ended up being an amazing team. A-ESQUE springboarded from a woman who was 20 years more experienced, more considered, a mother with a new lens on design based, more than anything, on personal life choices. I don't want to travel away from home so much. I don't want to go on sale. I want to run a lean production model. I want to blend work/home life with less friction. I want to bring the making of product, content and studio work together and make it my customer space and make that global using technology.

HB: *What's your secret to staying on track and motivated?*

AR: I'm not wedded to the status quo. I'm not scared to have and explore new ideas. In fact, I enjoy that. I like to move and change, and I think that's the most important part of evolving and staying relevant. That's on a professional front, but on a personal front, as well, with health and wellbeing. I'm very into women's health. I've read a lot about the changes my body's going through and how to navigate them. In my experience as a woman, I would not be able to do what I'm doing professionally and personally if I weren't understanding what my body is going through and having respect for it.

If there's one piece of advice I'd give to women, it would be to have blood tests – to learn about what's happening on the inside. When you look after yourself, it's not just the effect of what you're doing – it's the positive result you get from doing something for yourself. This looks after your superpowers as a woman, in a way. So, when you go for an LED, when you take care of yourself, it impacts motivation and staying on track. Self-care cannot be underestimated for women. I don't mean overindulging in it and becoming obsessive about it. I mean as a partnership with what you're trying to do in your work and personal lives.

HB: *You've done so well selling Mimco and now growing A-ESQUE. Do you have a word of advice for other women who want to start and grow their own business?*

AR: I think life, love and work are too complex to be condensed into a single piece of advice. They're all a puzzle. I love flow and encourage people to see [business] as a body of work, with every experience and decision impacting the next.

HB: *We all make mistakes in business. What have you learnt from your biggest one?*

AR: I see every decision as part of the puzzle and as having contributed to where I am today. I don't pull it apart and see mistakes. However, in the last decade, staying on track with where my intuition is guiding me has been important because this venture is so out of the box. There are no references and generally everything I want to do is unusual.

HB: *What gets you out of bed each day?*

AR: I get excited to start the day. In the last year the new atelier space has been something I can't wait to get to. I love looking over sales, social, results, and I have the best ideas from 5am. And exercise first thing is the most defining part of my day.



HB: *When we're young we tend to charge ahead, often not foreseeing consequences. What advice would you give to your younger self (assuming she'd listen)?*

AR: Be less frustrated with how you're being received and understood. Be more considerate of the impact you're having on others with your competence and power. Find your peace in both being an outlier and enjoying conventional life pleasures.

HB: *What's something people don't know about you or your work?*

AR: Everything! What I'm doing now – having an atelier, manufacturing locally, selling online – is not understood. But I have never sought to be understood. The more I think about that, it's the truth.

HB: *Do you see yourself as a leader? What kind of leader are you?*

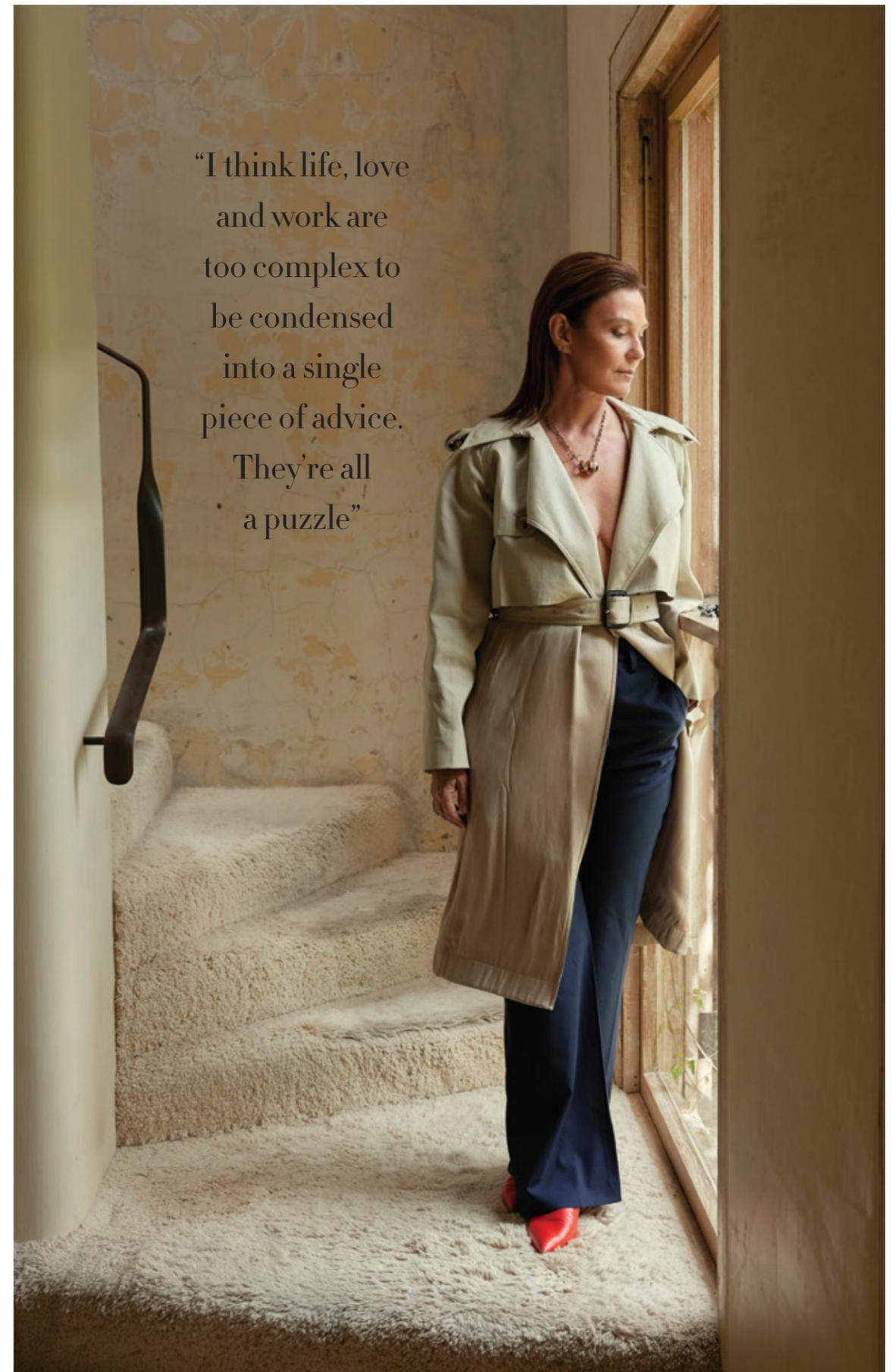
AR: Yes, I do, but not in a high-profile, broadly impactful or amplified way because I'm always so into putting my head down. It's why I'm having this conversation: opening up my story to help others, if it can be of use.

HB: *What legacy are you hoping to leave behind?*

AR: I don't think about my legacy. I think about what I'm doing right now. My legacy will be the confidence my kids have to pursue their own paths and the space I vacate in my profession for others to pick up. Until then, I'll be focused.

HB: *Is there anything you'd like to add that may help other women?*

AR: I don't think other people's stories, advice or mentoring can be the solution for you. Absorb from others, formally and informally, but mainly focus on your own path. Be true to yourself emotionally and intellectually. I highly value knowing myself truthfully, which is an ongoing journey.



OPPOSITE PAGE Maison Margiela knit. RIGHT Céline trench, Jil Sander pants and flats.