

# BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL

*Flair, fantasy and high-octane glamour – a fresh crop of Australian designers are the architects of a brave new vision for local fashion. By Alice Birrell.*

STYLING MIGUEL URBINA TAN  
PHOTOGRAPHS DAPHNE NGUYEN

We were both fortunate enough to be brought up in beachside suburbs,” begins Timothy Nicol, speaking also of wife Katie-Louise Nicol-Ford, co-founder of their fashion label. It sounds like a line plucked from the origin story of a homegrown breezy, resort brand. Not so. “In rebellion, we have each turned our backs on the casual ease traditionally associated with Australian fashion.”

Instead, Nicol & Ford trades in unabashedly high-glamour creations more likely to be seen on burlesque stars or taking the stage in the LGBTQI+ ballroom scene than sun-kissed influencers’ feeds. Its debut Australian fashion week show this year was a languorous parade of tasselled and fringed velvet, silk and brocade 30s-via-90s gowns inspired in part by the French-Mexican aesthete and bon vivant Carlos de Beistegui.

The duo is part of a growing faction of local brands forging their own unique paths with a fierce belief in placing creativity first. In turn, they’re adding new aesthetic facets to Australian fashion by pushing it beyond its comfort zone.

“There is a big difference in feeling with these designers,” says non-binary rapper Jamaica Moana, who walked in a stately Nicol & Ford dress gathered at the shoulder in a suggestion of antique drapery from a four-poster bed.

“It is in my nature to defy all odds and go against the grain,” Moana says of featuring in shows for Nicol & Ford, up-and-coming designer Erik Yvon and multi-disciplinary emerging talent Jordon Gogos of Iordanes Spyridon Gogos.

“When we went to church, my nonna would wear her furs and beehive her hair. My home was glamorous. My dinners were glamorous. My heritage was glamorous. And then I visited my other friends’ houses, and their lives were so different,” says Assyrian-Italian designer Nathaniel Youkhana. Each of Youkhana’s non-gender-specific creations is an architectural feat made up of hand-braiding and sprays



**Left:** Nicol & Ford dress, P.O.A. Chanel earrings, \$2,230, and cuff, \$1,490, from the Chanel boutiques. Gloves, stylist’s own.  
**Right:** Youkhana corset and skirt set, \$1,800, and hat, \$200. Chanel earrings, \$3,480, cuffs, \$3,000 each, and belt, \$1,490, from the Chanel boutiques. Prada shoes, \$1,730. Gloves, stylist’s own.

of frills into body-hugging shapes. Some of these highly labour-intensive demi-couture pieces take up to 10 weeks to make.

“When I started ... the Australian fashion community didn’t know what to do with me. I was typecast as an ‘art-based’ designer due to the glamour, the uniqueness and the craftsmanship of my garments,” he says.

Jordan Dalah, the British-Australian Central Saint Martins graduate who blurs theatrical sensibilities with high fashion in his wondrously voluminous experiments with form, doesn’t feel tied in an aesthetic sense to that prevailing idea of Australian fashion – coastal adjacent, elevated ease. His off-kilter colour palettes, cocooning structures and crinoline-like skirts are geared, instead, for a gentle probing of what modern clothing looks like. “I’ve tried hard to create nuance in what I do,” he says. “Yes, not everyone sees it as wearable fashion. It takes a kind of bold person to wear what I make.”

Many of these designers recognise that what they’re doing is not overtly commercial. Instead success is tied to creative expression above all else.

“If I’m thinking about how sellable a garment is, I’m not being true to myself,” says Youkhana. “I’m trying to reject the idea of rushing a garment and not taking time to think about what you’re doing ... or whether it is even going to be finished in time.”

The lingering impact of pandemic introspection fuelled this shift to more considered creation, says Jordon Gogos whose elaborate resort ‘23 collection featured more than 60 collaborators in a fantastical display of his polychromatic, crafty aesthetic. “Being able to look inwards and pausing for a moment is really productive. A world where we’re accelerating so fast sometimes doesn’t allow you to correctly understand how and where and why you’re making work,” Gogos reflects. “It’s about what it’s doing and what it’s saying.”

It’s also no coincidence that many of the creatives driving change are part of LGBTQI+ communities. Until now, the crossover in Australian fashion has been relatively limited. But now these creators are finding traction by filling a previously unaddressed gap.

“Ever since I came to Australia, I have always been seeking queer Asian representations,” says Jackie Wu of fledgling Melbourne-based label Wackie Ju. “As a queer person, viewing binary-gendered clothing as a concept, still so ingrained in the mass lifestyle, is not something my community relates to. My label ... is focussing on the body and expression but not the traditional social construct of genders. If it is not for all, it is for no one.”

Erik Yvon’s mesh party dresses are similarly informed by his own story of “being a queer, immigrant, creative person of colour”, he says. “I feel like the new phase of Australian fashion is about redefining perceptions of femininity and masculinity and ... an understanding that gender isn’t defined by garment choices.”

“Australia’s relatively small, homegrown fashion industry has traditionally catered to the mass market, often employing queer community within the industry yet failing to represent them,” says Nicol. “I love using fashion to confuse people and their perceptions on gender,” says Moana.

This fiercely expressive attitude, so pervasive in communities such as ‘ballroom’ – the underground dance culture born of the LGBTQI+ community – translates into a potent brand of glamour on the runway. Gogos’s party-like finale saw Basjia, casting director and member of ballroom collective House of Silky, commanding the audience, breaking into ballroom moves to a club soundtrack. “I think what’s really exciting is young people working together, but also embracing each other,” says Gogos, who wanted his models’ personalities on show. “There’s this complete interlacing of people into brands more than ever.”

“As a minority group, we all strive to celebrate and uplift to the best of our ability. We’re all drawn together to utilise our talents, and to showcase creative work that means something special to us,” says Youkhana.

Now, the question is if the resort-heavy Australian fashion landscape will make room for a new look and if this new era of creativity will continue now that travel is back on the agenda. “That kind of scares me a bit now I’m seeing so many people race off overseas,” says Gogos. “Keeping that strength creatively [here] is so important.”

But with the drive and conviction of designers like him and Youkhana, it’s hard to imagine the energy dissipating. “Fashion should be thoughtful and fun and crazy and weird. It should start conversations,” Youkhana says. Or as Wu imagines it: “More local artists holding nothing back.”

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**Left:** Iordanes Spyridon Gogos in collaboration with Nathan Angelis, Angel Robertson and Julia Baldini top, pants and armbands, all P.O.A. Loki Patera ear cuffs, \$415. Jimmy Choo shoes, \$950.  
**Right:** Erik Yvon dress, \$275. Loki Patera earrings, \$400. Valentino shoes, P.O.A.



**Left:** Jordan Dalah shirt, \$950, and skirt, \$1,900. Chanel earrings, \$2,380, bracelet, \$1,670, and shoes, \$1,730, from the Chanel boutiques.  
**Right:** Jordan Dalah dress, \$2,400. Chanel earrings, \$2,230, and cuffs, \$3,120 each, from the Chanel boutiques.

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