

DEER DANA

Text by Molly Simms

Images courtesy of Deer Dana

DEER DANA'S LINE OF PORTRAIT TEES HAVE THE FASHION WORLD BUZZING

Have you ever wanted to get a bit closer to Prince, David Lynch, Olivier Theyskens, Basquiat, or Alfred Hitchcock? Though you may never have the opportunity to pow-wow with these luminaries (and your chance with the latter two has most assuredly passed), you can still hold these artists and auteurs close to your heart, thanks to Deer Dana. The brainchild of Dana Veraldi and Kevin Tekinel, this T-shirt brand has made it into the pages of *Vogue*, *Elle* and *The New York Times*, among others, with nothing but some cotton and a clever concept. Deer Dana places the duo's simple-yet-compelling portraits on the front of its tees, creating wearables with personality to spare.

Veraldi studied photography in Baltimore before moving to NYC in 2007. Though Deer Dana technically existed back then, the company wasn't yet a part of her vision. "I had the website DeerDana.Com in college, and it was a way to share photos with friends—this was before Facebook was popular," says Veraldi. "I drew portraits of friends from photos I'd taken of them, and made shirts in a screen-printing class. The first shirt I did was a portrait of my friend Jackson, and I made about 20 of them. My friends threw a party called Misshapes, and I gave them to everyone to wear there as a surprise. So when he came, we were all wearing his face on our shirts."

At the time, Veraldi paid her bills as a stylist assistant and graphic designer and created her hand-drawn shirts in her spare time, printing them in her apartment. The label's big break came in 2008, when Veraldi's aforementioned friend Jackson was DJing with model Agyness Deyn. "I thought it'd be cute to do a shirt of Agyness," says Veraldi, "Then Agyness was being shot for *Time* magazine's 'Style and Design' issue, and she wore the shirt to the shoot. That was the first huge press we got—I think we had sold about 20 shirts before that. But when that magazine came out, we suddenly got about 100 orders. It was so strange and somewhat overwhelming." Her friend Kevin Tekinel stepped in to add some structure. "He saw potential in the little company I'd started, and helped me develop more of a business plan. We re-designed the website, made linesheets, and got the shirts into stores. As our ambitions and business grew, Kevin also started drawing portraits, so we both are very involved in the design process. It went from a hobby, a class project really, to a company." The first retailer to carry the company's wares was Patricia Field, but plenty more boutiques followed suit. Now the tees are available across the globe—you can pick up a Deer Dana T-shirt at Harvey Nichols in Hong Kong, Colette in Paris, or Opening Ceremony in New York.

Deer Dana portraits have an unstudied but evocative style—though many of the shirts are artistically spare, they capture the essence of the celebrity they profile. But not every subject

is easy to capture on paper. "We've done ones we just had to throw away," says Veraldi. "I kept drawing Cindy Crawford, but she was so hard to draw. She's so pretty, and somewhat plain looking. So then I thought, 'Why don't we just draw her mole?' Because that's what defines Cindy Crawford. So we ended up doing just her lips and the mole. I also tried to draw Vanity from *Vanity 6*, but she came out looking like a tranny. I think the more naturally beautiful people are, the harder they are to draw. And I also can't draw teeth at all. We have to do a closed mouth, always." So far, there've been no complaints from her subjects, especially not from Kanye West, who Deer Dana depicted in a pharaoh's headdress. "When we made the Kanye shirts and sent some to him, he sent us a big thing of flowers and was so nice about it. We had been worried, like, 'Maybe he'll sue us...'"

The portraits that are closest to Veraldi's heart aren't necessarily the ones she thinks are the most artistically accomplished. "My favorites are all about the emotion behind them. The Steve Jobs tee I really love, because I love him and I made it before he passed away. I really love the Frida Kahlo shirt, because I love drawing flowers, and texture, and hair. But also, I dress as Frida Kahlo every Halloween, so it was like drawing a weird identity of mine." The brand's biggest seller? Definitely Basquiat, which is likely due to the fact that Jay-Z was wearing that portrait T-shirt in the 2012 video of him riding the NYC subway, a clip which speedily went viral. The worst seller? "I think Nicki Minaj," says Veraldi. "I like that shirt, but we made it when she was still cool. And then she suddenly got super commercial and kind of cheesy. I still like the drawing, and I still like her, but that didn't sell well at all. I recently shipped our inventory of them to my cousin in Michigan, for her and her friends."

When she's not sketching eerily perfect portraits, Veraldi works as the social media director for Theyskens' Theory, the line designed by Olivier Theyskens (who's also been the subject of a Deer Dana shirt, of course). And as far as her own line, the future of Deer Dana is wide open. Veraldi says she'd love to collaborate on a line of kids' tees with a clothing line like Crew Cuts, and on some beach towels for summer. She also mentioned the possibility of "an art show with all the drawings on paper, and maybe a book with them, too." Veraldi recently completed an Aaliyah/Alaïa shirt, and a portrait of Damien Echols, of the West Memphis Three. One portrait you won't be seeing on a Deer Dana tee any time soon? "Taylor Swift is someone people have suggested a few times, but I wouldn't draw her. Not because I have beef with her—I just find her boring. I remember thinking that all the portraits I draw are of people who are ideal dinner guests. I like to imagine them all sitting around a table together."



Serge



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