



Boy met girl

As Alexander McQueen's partner in crime, Annabelle Neilson amassed a wardrobe that attests not only to their glitzy exploits, but also to their close friendship, says Kate Finnigan



Above, from top: Annabelle Neilson, photographed by Tim Walker, in 2012; with Alexander McQueen in 2006

When Tom Ford released his first film, in 2009, *Vanity Fair* threw a party at Harry's Bar in Mayfair, and Lee "Alexander" McQueen crashed it with Annabelle Neilson – his best friend and muse, the woman he referred to as his "wife". *A Single Man* was about a gay man and his straight female friend, and McQueen was sure it was based on his and Neilson's relationship. Neilson wasn't convinced, but Lee, as he was known to his friends, was peeved and wanted to make a point.

"I thought it was a terrible idea, but I loved a laugh," wrote Neilson after McQueen's death, in February 2010. "The idea of being denied entrance to Harry's Bar was too exciting! Lee dressed me up. I went in a pink dress covered in diamonds and a fur coat with a hoodie, and he said, 'Come on, let's give them something to talk about.'"

Eleven years later, and McQueen and Neilson, who died in 2018, may both have left this world for a far more fabulous party, but they're still giving us something to talk about. This month will see a sale at London's Kerry Taylor Auctions of Neilson's personal collection of Alexander McQueen clothes and accessories – including the pink gatecrashing dress – bringing the pair to vivid life again.

With more than a hundred lots, it is a trove of museum-worthy effervescent fashion from the 1990s and 2000s, plucked straight from the catwalk at the height of McQueen's fame:

a rare, gossamer-fine lilac top from his career-launching show, Highland Rape; elegant meadow-flower dresses from the dance-athon that was s/s 2004's *Deliverance*; McQueen's signature bumster trousers; astonishing shoes and bejewelled bags; leather rally suits made for Neilson's driving expedition in the Himalayas; diaphanous sparkling dresses worn to the starriest parties, often beside close friends Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell; and a Givenchy haute couture bias-cut green lace evening gown – the single piece kept by McQueen after he left the Parisian house where he worked from 1996 to 2001.

The clothes were McQueen's gifts to his beloved friend, who was christened a "wild child" by the tabloids and later became known for the US reality TV show *Ladies of London* and as the author of a series of children's books called *The Me Me Me's*. But she also modelled for McQueen, worked with him, partied with him, slept in his bed with him, watched telly with him and did the washing-up for him, because "you liked doing the cooking, because that was the creative bit," as she wrote in unpublished letters and memoirs, shared with *Vogue* by Annabelle's sister, Millie Neilson, who approached Kerry Taylor with the proposition of auctioning the collection.

"The fact that Annabelle was so loved by Lee is important," says Taylor, who has sold the wardrobes of, among many others, Diana, Princess of Wales, and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. "That she was his muse for so many years is

Left, from top: at Vanity Fair's 2008 Cannes party; in 2011. Below: with Tom Ford and McQueen in Harry's Bar, 2010



Left: with Naomi Campbell at Kate Moss's 30th birthday party. Right: in her "wedding dress" at the Met Gala in 2011. Below, from left: on stage with Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell at Fashion for Relief Haiti in 2010; comforting Moss as a McQueen dress is auctioned for the charity later that day



important. He called her Tinkerbell and he used to play with her like a doll and dress her up, but she was also part of the thought process."

One of McQueen's later shows, Plato's Atlantis (s/s 2010), came about during a holiday the friends took to Thailand, where they went scuba diving. Lying on the beach afterwards, they invented the underwater world that was the basis for the collection. "She was actually instrumental in coming up with some of those ideas," says Taylor. "She had a huge influence on Plato's Atlantis." Seven pieces from that collection will go to auction, including a rare pair of Shipwreck boots and an organza and cut-suede Moth dress seen on the runway, estimated at £8,000 to £12,000.

Another piece expected to raise a high price is a dégradé pink-to-purple silk kimono from the s/s 2008 show, La Dame Bleue, a tribute to the late Isabella Blow, who "discovered" McQueen.

It comes with the cutwork belt and patent-leather shoes that made up the full catwalk look. Neilson was photographed wearing it to the 2008 *Vanity Fair* party in Cannes.

It was Blow who introduced Neilson to McQueen at some point in the mid-'90s. Neilson, the daughter of Max Neilson and Elizabeth, Marquesa Campus di Santinelli, was in her mid-twenties and part of a flamboyant fashion set that included John Galliano and Kate Moss. Talkative, strong-minded and funny, with a tiny frame, she became instant friends with McQueen. "She said she just looked into his eyes and they knew," recalls her sister. She was soon to marry the financier Nathaniel Rothschild, and Millie remembers McQueen "sewing Annabelle into her dress" at Claridge's before the wedding reception. The East End designer became one of the family, spending every Christmas with them and rechristening the marquesa as "Mrs Chintz".

An It-girl who had overcome a horrible physical attack while in Australia at age 16, subsequent facial surgery and a heroin addiction that helped her deal with the pain, Neilson still possessed a cracking sense of fun. She was a brilliant equestrian and a great shot (the McQueen hacking jacket she wore for shooting is in the auction), and she introduced



her friend to skiing, wakeboarding and kitesurfing. When he was longing to escape the slog of collection after collection, they would make dreamy plans. "Our last great idea was a small island in the Caribbean," she wrote. "But neither of us thought the Gucci Group would be on board for this."

The sale also features more than 20 pieces, including beautiful gowns, designed by Sarah Burton after McQueen's death and handbags that were sent from her to Neilson as Christmas presents. Neilson greatly admired Burton and wrote of the appointment of his "right-hand woman" as "the best decision at the worst of times". Burton in turn says, "Annabelle's friendship was very precious to Lee, a friendship based on profound trust. They loved each other unconditionally."

At one point, later on in their friendship, McQueen asked Neilson to marry him, and she regretted not going through with it. An ivory satin gown with beadwork feathers from Angels & Demons, his last collection, is also in the auction. The dress did not appear in the show because McQueen had given it to Neilson. She called it her "wedding dress" and wore it in 2011 to the Met Gala for the opening of the Alexander McQueen retrospective, *Savage Beauty*.

"It's not just an auction," says Taylor. "It's a tribute – to Annabelle and to Lee and to their friendship." Worn through the emotions that filled Neilson's life – from despair and grief to mischievousness, excitement, wonder and joy – this is a collection of clothing that, above all, celebrates love. ■



Below: with Edward Spencer-Churchill at a 2008 fundraiser

