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Pagan princesses on Ann Demeulemeester's Autumn/Winter catwalk

were some beautiful images in it that stayed in my head." Patrick and Ann are desperate to find out if I felt the energy of this collection. It was raw, strong, feminine; made me think of women tilling the earth, creating things, weaving baskets. It was about the mother figure, the nature figure, strong women before they became shackled. OK, I went totally OTT, but Ann squeals "Exactly", so I get dix points in the Demeulemeester camp and am feeling a bit smug. Breathing easy, I think of the phone conversation I had with Demeulemeester a few months back, when she said: "When you can feel the soul of a designer in their work it's interesting, it's a work with a vision."

So what is her vision? Her PR, Michele Montagne, says: "Ann is not just a designer behind a collection; she involves herself so much in her work. Wearing her clothes teaches you about her as a woman." Who is this woman? Judging from her work she's dark, sexy, pagan, confident and thankfully uncluttered with designers' current preoccupation - the Millennium. "When I was working on this collection, journalists were always posing questions about the year 2000 and (here her voice becomes forceful) *what* will it change and *what* will you design for 2000, *ner-ner-ner*, and I thought it was so ridiculous. The more they asked me this thing, the more I wanted to retreat inside... I was really pushed into the essence of things instead of trying to be *Star Trek*. That's why I was attracted to beige flannel because you cannot be more far away from the silver of *Star Trek* with beige flannel. It was taking away all the artificial and going back to zero to construct something new. Can 2000 not mean that?" As Patrick adds: "We never make collections inspired by Indians or cowboys." Ann joins in: "Our theme is our life. Our cultural background is a big mix in our head of what we like and we don't like." Patrick takes over again, never butting in, just picking up the thread quietly and naturally. (They must practice this routine over breakfast.) "From a very early age you start creating like a treasure box that you fill over the years with images (Ann: "music, impressions") and you can use that treasure while you work."

One early treasure was punk. The music informed Demeulemeester's college work and gave her strength to fight the system at the Antwerp school where she spent four years in the class everyone remembers. "There were seven students (Martin Margiela, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Bikkembergs, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene and the now-theatre designer, Marina Yee). We were all very ambitious, very driven and competitive. We had an energy and were really fighting against our teacher because she was a big fan of Chanel - everything that was elegant and not Chanel-like was not good. It was such a fight, a fight for four years, that it stimulated us to go on. If I made an outfit where there was black and white, she'd say: 'Ann, this is awful, you can not combine black and white. You have to put black with e-cru. E-cru is chic.' If I came in with my hair like this, she'd complain: 'Ann, how can you come in the class with your hair like this, do it in a chignon.' I had to prove myself to her and at the end she said, 'Yes Ann, you have convinced me.'"

It shouldn't take much convincing now. Ann Demeulemeester has built her company up in a way that from the outside looks like a seamless, natural progression. She has never needed to shoot her own advertising campaign, her clothes seem to speak for themselves. She has never owned her own shop, until now. "I waited so long

because I wanted to ensure the name was strong enough on its own that it wouldn't affect Louis (the shop a friend started to give an outlet to the work of the Antwerp Six). I couldn't stop wanting it any more. I wanted something of myself." The shop-to-be stands on the corner of a new square south of the centre of Antwerp, next to a club with blacked out windows called the Mayfair. "It's in the red light district," says Ann, her eyes sparkling with mischief. The Place Leopold de Vael was, until a year ago, a desolate place. Now it hums with activity as trams trundle back and forth, and young people in Demeulemeester black sip cool drinks outside the many new cafés. It is definitely on the up. The museum opposite is holding a huge exhibition of Van Dyck and people to and fro across the square that has been re-designed by the architect who also happens to be working on Ann and Patrick's shop.

The shop is, when I see it, in construction. The 100-year-old building has had its roof painted black. The brick walls are structured with wood frames ready to take thick bolts of cream canvas from Patrick's family's factory. "It's the best canvas in the world for artists," whispers Ann, supportively. "They used to do this in 18th Century ateliers." Large changing rooms at the back of the shop have windows that open onto a wild garden. "I don't want a changing room like one square meter, I want a real room," says Demeulemeester, tip-toeing through the rubble. "It's going to be very wild and romantic," murmurs Patrick, in his soft Flemish lilt. Inside each room there'll be a table with a drink on it and shoppers will be encouraged to take time, no matter what their budget. "I want people who don't have money not to feel pressure," says Patrick. "Lots of shops are like art galleries, but to me an art gallery is a place where creativity is no longer alive - we wanted the place to feel a bit like an artist's studio. Not sleek, not finished, our place."

Ann wanted to open her first store in Antwerp so she could visit it all the time, talk to customers, introduce new personal things, ensure the shop was being run 'her way'. "It's a step further to create the shop in a way that people understand me better. You are a journalist, you can see the show, you have much more information than a client who comes into a shop and sees only a hanger with a piece of clothing. People in the street only see pictures in a magazine and a translation from stylists. It's not only about clothing, it's a way of living, it's a way of thinking. If we design a piece of clothing we can easily create a table or a lighter with the same mind. If you ask me to design a calculator, I will design an Ann Demeulemeester calculator. If I make a shop, I want to make it an Ann Demeulemeester shop." Upstairs there will be a large cage full of pigeons. "They're magician's pigeons, they've been bred in a cage. We don't want them to be unhappy, I want to be sure the pigeons are at ease." They need to be, what with the intended big concert speakers booming out Demeulemeester and Robyn's favourite music - the reggae, classical, friends Patti Smith and Nick Cave, nothing too try-hard, too desperately hip. The interiors will be soft, sensuous and minimally Flemish; everything from the muslin to the pigeons has been tried out at home before being brought to the shop. "It's grown naturally. We have thought how we want a shop. We don't think how other people are doing it to be commercial or trendy. I don't care, I just want to make my shop. And so it is with every little detail," she says, adding gleefully, the Flemish cat who got the cream: "We