

STAY MOTIVATED AT WORK
CANADA'S MOST POWERFUL WOMEN: WHY THEY GET AHEAD

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“Avoir de
l'espoir et ne
jamais lâcher”



LEATHER PASSION & SILK PERSEVERANCE

ALL THE
WAY TO
THE
BEACH

By Sheila Reesor

FASHION DESIGNER DENIS GAGNON begins with one piece of fabric. Then, he begins to play, first draping it one way, then folding it another. If that doesn't work, he'll try something else. Eventually, his vision emerges. All it takes is patience and trust in his instincts. “It's like I jump into water and I have to swim,” he says. “I never know how I'm going to get to the beach.”

Not only is Gagnon getting to the beach every time, he's making waves along the way. His reviewers say his eccentric leather cuts are “brilliant,” his sophisticated tailoring “unique.” In short, they see him as a “virtuoso” with a fascination for everything unconventional.

After Toronto fashion week last March, Eva Friede wrote in *The Gazette* that Gagnon's “winter wonderland” collection of washed leathers, bloomers, tunics and bib tops was “as good as it gets.” Atkin, renowned as Canada's most influential fashion arbiter, said, “Gagnon is the country's most avant garde and intellectual designer.” She went on to compare him to New York designer Helmut Lang and Nicolas Ghesquiere for *Balenciaga*.

No doubt, Denis Gagnon has become one of today's most significant Canadian fashion designers. Born and raised in Lac Saint-Jean, Quebec, he came to Montreal 22 years ago at the age of 19, not speaking a word of English. His father passed away early on and his mother had no way to support him, so he started wherever he could; making costumes for theatre and film productions. Although this was a terrific training ground, it didn't take long for

Gagnon to discover that, rather than make the clothes, he preferred designing them.

Gagnon then met Montreal's Vietnamese designer, Yso (Siphay Southidara), who had created a collection for women. After one successful fashion show, he decided to do another, this time with Gagnon. He said it wouldn't work having them both design women's clothing, however, and suggested Gagnon create a complementary men's line. This collaboration proved to be very successful. It gave this fledgling designer the start he needed and served to pull him deeper into the industry. After studying draping, tailoring and pattern making at LaSalle College in Quebec, he joined forces with a local team of designers and started freelancing.

The turning point came in 1993, when Gagnon was asked to teach at LaSalle College in Casablanca. For two years, he was given the opportunity to immerse himself in an entirely different world. Looking back, he describes it as an “eye-opening” experience that offered him a great deal of inspiration. “It's the colour, the spice, the people,” he says. While there, he was also able to travel to Paris, London, Spain, even Thailand. Everything he saw challenged his original perspective.

Gagnon returned to Montreal in 1995 with a vision that has continued its evolution to this day. For every collection of 60 to 75 pieces, he has always done everything himself. “I cut, I sew, I drape. I do the design, I go to buy fabric,” he says. The work is constant.



"It's really never too late if you're prepared to work hard..."

It never stops. "You have to sacrifice everything. You work six or seven days a week for two to three months just to present a fashion show for your collection. Then you have to sell it and produce it."

What's been the toughest hurdle? "It's always the money," he says. There comes a point when a designer can't do it alone. More people are needed to sew and cut, and they need to be paid. It helps Gagnon to know he's not the only one facing this challenge. His network of close-knit friends and designers reinforces the idea that the typical industry struggles are always about money. "That's why you need to be patient and you need to love it," he says.

Patience, passion and determination are Gagnon's greatest qualities. He knows he has found his niche. "I love my job. I really love it. It's like a dream," he says. In spite of many grueling hours working and struggling to make ends meet, when a collection comes together at a fashion show it makes him very proud to be where he is. The clothes, the space, the models, the music – for him, it's like nothing else in the world.

Gagnon's favourite fabric is leather. "With leather, you can do everything," he says. "It's like a second skin and you can wear it in summer and winter." A close second is silk. "I love silk," he says. "I use it everywhere. It's really fresh, soft, versatile. It's warm in winter and it's fresh in summer."

Gagnon has forged a unique approach to fashion that continually pushes perceived limits of style, technique, fabric, and gender. In his

biography, he is described as a man who dares to claim his own femininity. He then expresses it in the creation of spellbinding wardrobes for both men and women, sometimes crossing over and blending the two. "I am not a man, nor a woman," he says. "I am simply human."

How does Gagnon keep up with the exponential growth he has experienced of late? Anne Van den Bossche. "She has worked with me at my boutique for two years now and she helps me a lot. She's always there."

Because of Anne, Gagnon has more time and space to tap into his imagination. "I never know where it will come from," he says. "I have to push myself. I always go shopping but I never buy anything." Searching for ideas everywhere, some days he comes up dry, other days he sees something that captures his imagination. From there, he just follows his instincts.

Gagnon is living proof that when there's a will, there is a way. He learned English at the age of 35 and designed his first collection at 38, old by industry standards. His advice to anyone starting out, at any point in life, is to be patient. "If you really want it, you can do it," he says. "It's really never too late if you're prepared to work hard... Avoir de l'espoir et ne jamais lâcher..." Always have hope and never give up.

Denis Gagnon sells his collections at *Denis Gagnon Boutique*, located at 5392A St. Laurent Blvd. in Montreal. **[E]**

Visit his website at: www.denisgagnon.ca