

Irina Lazareanu in Rodarte spring/summer 2008.



The closest thing to ready-to-wear couture: Rodarte spring/summer 2008.

The quiet Americans

They remain at pains to avoid the limelight's glare, but success still stalks the designing sisters behind current red-carpet favourite, Rodarte.

At first, all Kate Mulleavy remembers seeing was a pair of hands. "They were looking at our clothes, and I didn't see who it was," says the woman who, with younger sister Laura, co-designs Rodarte. This was in Paris, where the Mulleavys had ventured to install their collection in the windows of Colette.

"Then Karl Lagerfeld [owner of said hands] tapped me on the shoulder, and said, 'I love these clothes and I'm going to buy one for Lady Amanda Harlech'. I couldn't believe it. I mean Chanel couture is my great love." How did she respond? "Honestly, I couldn't really talk around him. I got a little shy."

For anyone following the extraordinary rise of the Mulleavy sisters — three years ago they were unknowns working out of their parents' Pasadena, California, home and the local library — this is no surprise. The sisters appear shy at the best of times. At their New York shows they practically blush taking their bows. Their preferred mode of dress is an unobtrusive uniform of pants and jumpers. Even their speaking voices have a soft, almost lyrical quality.

And yet the clothes they design are anything but shy — actually they're the closest thing you might see to ready-to-wear couture.

"The woman who wears our clothes has an appreciation for fashion," says Laura Mulleavy, 26.

"It's not for someone who doesn't show her personality."

A Rodarte gown, usually featuring the sisters' favourites such as vintage lace, gazar, brocade, tulle and organza, may play with volume or skim the body, but the theatricality and detailing — notably pinked edges, hand-stitched rosettes, beading, pleating and "waves" (layered chiffon ruffles) — are identifiably theirs.

"The longest we took on a dress was four months," Laura says of the final gown in the spring/summer 2008 show. "We had waves on the side of the gown we stencilled and traced on organza, then hand-painted in four colours. We had [27 metres] of tulle, all hand-dyed, then the entire dress was hand-stitched and beaded."

"I do think we take the hardest road," Kate, 29, concedes. "But if we take a short cut it's not as beautiful." Adds Laura: "I think to do this job, you have to be obsessed with it, and we are. It's all we think about."

By Sharon Krum



Unique "demi-couture" pieces are the Rodarte signature.

Rodarte spring/summer 2008 has been greeted as the label's most wearable.



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-Laura Mulleavy



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Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"The client who wears Rodarte appreciates couture collections such as Lanvin and Nina Ricci," says Roopal Patel, women's fashion director at Bergdorf Goodman in New York.

Fascinatingly, the Mulleavys have done it all while subverting the rules for emerging designers, which include A: studying fashion and B: moving to New York. In fact, they still live at home in Pasadena. "You need freedom to create and take risks," says Kate. "I think the remove helps." Now with a tiny staff they live and work in their own self-contained world, prompting comparisons to everyone from the Brontë sisters to *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

"They're a kind of symbiotic team creating these unique pieces. I call it demi-couture, outside of any fashion trends," says Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at FIT, explaining the noise around the Mulleavys. "They're also obsessed with the history and techniques of fashion. I took them into the FIT collection and showed them Charles James couture and they started to cry." (The sisters confirm this.)

Yet while showered with praise, they have also been subject to pointed critiques, with some fashion writers suggesting some of Rodarte's

overtly sculptural looks overshoot the mark. "Ambitious ideas executed awkwardly," said one. The sisters, however, remain largely unfazed.

"I think fashion is about beauty and desire," says Laura. "For me there's nothing more amazing than making something that people respond to emotionally. We feel all the designers we admire." They cite Gaultier, Lacroix, Chanel couture, Vivienne Westwood, Schiaparelli, Rick Owens, Charles James and Madame Grès as designers who all "had been working for 10 or 15 years until people said, 'That's their voice'."

"We don't make things that are for everybody," agrees Kate. "You won't always get the review you want. But what's interesting is taking the risk." The Mulleavy sisters grew up in northern California and explain that the natural surroundings of tide pools, eucalyptus and redwoods still influence them heavily (their fabric waves mimic bark) as designers. Their father is a botanist, their mother an artist, and from childhood they were fixated on fashion.

"I can't remember a time I didn't draw clothes," says Kate who, like Laura, read fashion magazines ▶

"We're not interested in referencing anyone — that's the least freeing way of working."



Rodarte spring/summer 2008.



Rodarte spring/summer 2008.



Laura and Kate Mulleavy: the notoriously shy sisters behind Rodarte.



Dresses, the Rodarte signature.



Backstage at Rodarte spring/summer 2008.

compulsively and sewed. "We have always loved beautiful clothes, but we never had the experience of wanting the 'it' label. Fashion was more an art for me." For the record, Kate never wears dresses, Laura only occasionally, and yes, they do see the irony. "I like the separation," says Kate. Both studied at Berkeley; Kate majoring in art history, Laura, English literature. "We knew we wanted to design, but we also had a strong desire to learn other things," says Laura of why they didn't study fashion. But after graduating they took a year off to "read a ton of books about sewing techniques", and then went into business.

"We're not interested in referencing anyone, that's the least freeing way of working," she declares, suggesting they are predominantly inspired by

movies ("we love everything from *Star Wars* to *Gone With The Wind*"), art, nature (spring/summer 2007 echoed flowers and Gainsborough) and recently, following a trip to Japan, anime. Every season the story, sketches and fabrics are created together; only Kate completes the final sketch. "We're usually on the same page, but sometimes one of us might say, 'I'm not thinking that colour at all,'" says Kate.

The sisters began showing in New York after first attracting editors' attention in 2005 by sending them paper dolls dressed in Rodarte. "It's interesting, the first three seasons were about the signature ruffle and how they could manipulate it, different ombres, the ethereal look and watercolour palette," says Bergdorf's Roopal Patel.

"In the next seasons you saw the evolution,

lots more metallics, armour and knits emerging, peeking through the floaty chiffon. It was the girls' way of saying 'We have more, much more edge!'"

In fact spring/summer 2008, which included jackets, pleated skirts and knitted cardigans, was greeted as their most wearable.

"They're learning how to develop and evolve the brand for the marketplace," says Patel. "But it's being done their way, with their vision. They're not trying to dilute the Rodarte message."

There are plans to produce bags, shoes (they work with Louboutin for runway) and perfume, but, "only when we're ready," says Kate. "We want everything we do to have a special nature to it."

And whispers suggest that a couture house may make a play for the Mulleavy sisters eventually. Are they interested? "In all honesty the answer would be yes," says Kate. "For us the ultimate expression of design is through couture."

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