

Just BREATHLESS

JASON WU IS SPURRING A LADYLIKE REVIVAL

STORY: EVA MEDOFF / PHOTOGRAPHY: IOULEX

It's a Thursday night at Ilori, the fittingly flashy eyewear purveyor in Soho, and fashion's boy wonder is dressed as such. Sporting a black V-neck sweater with a plaid collar peeking out, distressed jeans and bright white sneakers, Jason Wu looks as if he's barely old enough to sip the flute of champagne he's holding. Regardless, he flits expertly throughout the room full of high profile editors and socialites, who are here to celebrate the launch of his first eyewear line. And judging by the awe-like reception, it's clear that Wu has firmly penetrated the fashion zeitgeist.

Wu's upward ascent is something of Parsons graduate dreams. A Taiwanese-born, Canadian-raised prep school boy attends the New York design school, starts an eponymous line and lands the First Lady Michelle Obama's inaugural gown three years later, at the age of 26. Now that white chiffon one-shoulder gown is in a Smithsonian, and Wu is a household name in fashion circles.

That's not to say Wu's gotten tired of the media circus surrounding his sudden leap of success. At Ilori, cameras flashing and sunglasses glittering like a million fashionable

eyes from the mirrored walls, I ask him if he ever gets tired of these events. "No!" he says, in disbelief. "Especially not when they're my own."

That's right. How could I forget? Wu is the champion of the feminine frock, the go-to designer for upscale socials, and the obsession of the pattern-crazy, mini-dress loving red carpet crowd. The clothes he designs, "polished and effortless," are not for merely any woman. Wu started off designing doll clothing, and like his miniature muses, the models who walk his runways are paragons of beauty (Karlie Kloss, the graceful ballerina-turned-supermodel, has closed all his major fashion shows for the last two years). Ask Wu who his favorite clients are, and he will reel off a list of beautiful, elegant screen sirens: Diane Kruger, Reese Witherspoon and Natalie Portman.

With his love of the ultra-feminine, it's not surprising that Wu's references are largely midcentury, and largely American and French. "I am most influenced by the silhouettes of the 40s and 50s. I love the structure," says Wu. He also counts Irving Penn and Jean Seberg as major influences, citing the French New Wave classic *Breathless* as a

favorite film. This crops up in demure collars, wide striped sweaters and feathered off the shoulder shift dresses, while the 40s and 50s can be seen in blush-colored mermaid gowns and full-skirted Cinderella affairs. And man, does Wu love a polka dot. On top of his silhouettes, one of the most notable and refreshing things about Wu's sensibility is his use of color. In a sea of muted homeless-chic grunge-wear, Wu has shot a dose of colorful, ladylike energy that seems to have spurred (or at least participated in) an all-out feminine revival. "I've always been the kid who used every color in the crayon box," he shrugs. "I love color!"

This womanly, throwback aesthetic doesn't stop with the clothes. Wu's new eyewear line is both a sign of his expanding empire and an extension of this sophisticated taste. He describes the woman who would wear his glasses as "the kind of woman who is fearlessly chic and confident." Oversized and slightly cat-eyed, they're named after their inspiration (like The Seberg, after Jean, of course), and pair naturally with his feminine fantasy clothes.

When he's not up to his eyeballs in the business of fashion, the Manhattan-based designer keeps it simple. For one thing, his adopted hometown influences his work, letting him draw ideas even on his days off. "New York is always new, always changing, and always inspiring," he says. The designer lists cooking as a hobby and likes to kick back with a drink at the Topsy Parson in Chelsea or a meal at the West Village's Minetta Tavern. But overall, Wu seems to find downtime uninteresting. He admits, "I cannot imagine spending my life doing anything else but fashion."

