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CHLOE TROUSERS SHOT FOR ELLE MAY 2012



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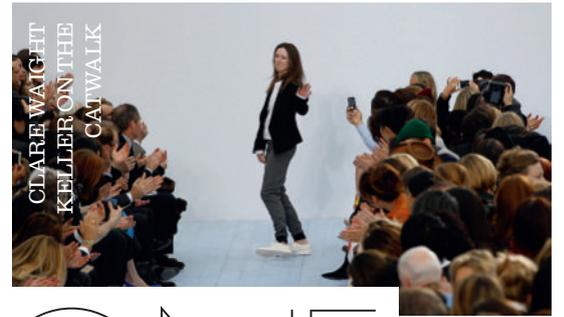


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Words by ISABEL BEST

SHE'S THE ONE

Clare Waight Keller is the woman behind the quintessentially chic Chloé. ELLE meets her



Clare Waight Keller says hello to me in such a natural, open way, that I feel like I've known her for years. She could be the friend of a friend I keep bumping into, rather than the latest tenant of one of the most high-profile, pressurised jobs in fashion: creative director of Chloé.

We are sitting in the Hotel Le Bristol on the rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, Paris. Waight Keller is dressed, of course, in Chloé – a white jacket from her summer collection that looks simple and comfortable, but whose languid ease could only be achieved with masterful tailoring, and those black leather culottes from her autumn/winter collection. The most striking thing about her outfit is that it perfectly frames her calm, relaxed demeanour. She is, as the French like to say, *bien dans sa peau* – at ease in her skin.

I guess I was expecting to meet someone a little more guarded. Or at least showing signs of stress: perhaps some tell-tale dark circles under her eyes.

Last year, she joined Chloé a week after giving birth to her third child. A week later, she went to meet her new team in Paris. That was June. She had to present her first collection in September. Given that August came in between – when Paris effectively closes for business – she had two months to pull off the most important collection of her career. And then there was the small matter of moving her family – her American architect husband Philip Keller, twin nine-year-old daughters Amelia and Charlotte, and baby Harrison – to Paris.

Waight Keller is disarmingly casual about the whole adventure. 'I felt that I should ease in gradually by just doing a day or two, so I did that before the summer holidays in August,' she says. 'I went to Paris for one or two days a week bringing my baby, and then after August we all moved to Paris and just started our lives again.' This woman has the kind of cool composure you'd want in the captain of a nuclear submarine.

Which is just as well. This year, Chloé, the French luxury brand, will celebrate its 60th anniversary with a major exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, the launch of a new flagship store, and a plush tome out in 2013. It's a big, complex job. Since 1997, when Stella McCartney joined the company, Chloé has grown from a relatively small Parisian fashion house into an international ►

luxury brand whose revenues, according to Women's Wear Daily, are estimated in the region of 300 million euros, with accessories divisions, perfumes, a diffusion line, See by Chloé and a children's range. Waight Keller has to make decisions on all these aspects of the brand and a lot of people's jobs depend on her success.

Geoffroy de la Bourdonnaye, Chloé's CEO, praises 'her legendary cool and smile under all circumstances', and her 'rare maturity in nurturing and leading strong creative talents in a smooth, open-minded and sensitive way'. I don't like to make gender generalisations, but those are decidedly female-sounding talents. It's tempting to wonder whether the steady calm of a female commando isn't better suited to the pressure of knocking out one stellar collection after another. Given that Chloé's only male designer in the post-McCartney years – Paulo Melim Andersson – lasted just three seasons, it's tempting to assume that Chloé is a brand that is happier with women at the helm, whether that's a question of management style, aesthetics or 'understanding what women want'.

Waight Keller's other great plus is her robust self-confidence that comes from having the sort of CV you can wave in the air and the head-hunters come running. When she says things like, 'I knew I could design really well', it's not boastful, just a statement of fact. The Waight Keller

package comes with the best part of 20 years' experience with the world's leading designers: Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Gucci under Tom Ford, and then, most recently, Pringle of Scotland.

Waight Keller was offered her first job before she'd even graduated, when John Miles, a professor at the Royal College of Art, took a portfolio of students' work to New York. It was the early 1990s and the recession had bitten deep. 'The whole of London had fallen off a cliff and you were considered hugely lucky to get a job,' she recalls. Let alone with Calvin Klein.

'So I graduated and four weeks later was on a plane,' she says. 'I was 21 and knew no one.' And New York was a scary place. 'I mean, there was no Mayor Giuliani – it was still raw New York.'

She spent the first few months sleeping on sofas before finding her own place. 'New York is so fast-paced, you need to adapt to it otherwise you get trampled on,' she says. It was survival training.

'Calvin was at his pinnacle,' recalls Waight Keller. 'It was 1992 and he had just signed Kate Moss and Marky Mark. He'd married Kelly Klein a couple of years before. It was his era; it was all about Calvin. Kate Moss was just sitting there in our office reading her school books. It was ultra exhilarating. It was normal to be there until 10 o'clock at night or later. You worked hard to play hard. I can remember leaving the office at midnight and then going to meet friends at a bar in the East Village till three in the morning.'

Four years later, she moved to Klein's arch rival and polar opposite, Ralph Lauren, where she worked directly with the designer to launch his top-tier Purple Label for men. 'It was completely another world,' she laughs, the astonishment still in her voice. 'Ralph lives his campaigns, that's his whole world. You walk in and you can't believe it. Everything is meticulously authentic. If it was about horse riding, we'd have saddles in the office. Whereas Calvin was all about the urban, the new and the now, Ralph was all about storytelling. It was much more historically detailed, but at the same time you had to have a contemporary point of view. It was a challenge because you had to find a balance between the two.'

She then joined Gucci. 'I met with Tom [Ford] and got called the next day and offered the job,' she says. 'Three weeks later, I was in London.' Waight Keller was now a key member of Ford's design team, working alongside Francisco Costa and Christopher Bailey. Picture that for a moment: the future creative directors of Calvin Klein, Burberry and Chloé sharing an office and helping Tom Ford turn out one impossibly glamorous, mega-watt collection after another. 'We all knew we were there because we were good at what we did and I think we probably all had our own ambitions, but at the time, you were just working with your colleagues. 'He [Ford] was very involved; he never stepped back, and he was very detail-oriented as you can imagine.'

Surely these fashion titans were hell to work for? All she reveals is that Klein had 'a phenomenal amount of energy, constantly needed new input', while Lauren and Ford were 'incredibly charming'. Memo to MI5: consider also for diplomatic role?

Then there was Pringle, 'Which was a *tiny* company,' she laughs. Waight Keller became its first creative director in 2005.

Over the next six years, she turned the Queen's supplier of cashmere twinsets into a brand with an international fashion presence, whose contemporary designs nonetheless felt like a coherent and respectful evolution of the brand. She brought Pringle into the modern world and into many a grateful woman's wardrobe.

Which brings us to her departure from Pringle in February 2011 – citing 'personal reasons' – and arrival at Chloé a few months later. Was it like dumping a boyfriend because you've already found

the new one? Waight Keller's appointment came so soon after her departure from Pringle, there was a feeling that she must have known about it when she'd handed in her notice.

In fact, Waight Keller was pregnant with her third child, and quite simply wanted a break, deciding she would leave Pringle after the autumn/winter 2011 collection. 'Over the past 15 to 20 years, I'd done four- or five-year stints at every company. And I thought, actually, I wouldn't mind taking six months off, instead of jumping from one job to another,' she says. 'I'd had two daughters while I was at Gucci, and I went straight back in and I just felt like I had never allowed myself to take a rest.' She presented her final show in February, and 'was really looking forward to having two or three months before my boy was born, which was in May. Just chilling out and organising my life, and



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then taking the summer off.' Her intention was to start looking for work again in September. Instead, Chloé called, which led to the sort of job offer you don't turn down.

'My husband said, "Well, you needed this adventure to spur you into something." And it's true,' she says. 'I like family life and I need that to feel complete, but had I not had something to look forward to, I probably would have been thinking, "Oh no, what do I do next?"'

So what does the challenge of taking on Chloé mean to her?

'Chloé is one of those brands where it feels like someone you would like to know is behind it. That's exactly what you want, it's like a sister designing your wardrobe, and I think that's something that is very attractive for me,' she says. 'Most of my career, I have worked for men, and it's interesting to have the opportunity to work with such a feminine brand, to be a woman designer.'

If ever there were a 'women's' label, then it must be Chloé. Founded in 1952 by Gaby Aghion, it was the first fashion house to offer luxury prêt-à-porter. Her ambition was to create soft, feminine, unrestrictive clothes for independent, free-spirited women. The brand has had several male designers, but it's Stella McCartney, Phoebe Philo and Hannah MacGibbon who have shaped the company, as much with their iconic designs as their personalities. They have all embodied the Chloé girl, bringing liberated London attitude to Parisian chic and turning the fashion house into a phenomenal brand in the process.

Waight Keller's background is very different to her predecessors' – not only did she grow up in Birmingham, but she studied at Ravensbourne College and Royal College of Art, two institutions with quite distinct teaching philosophies to Central Saint Martins, the Alma Mater of the others. She also arrives at the company with almost 20 years' experience, while the others joined so soon after graduating that it was effectively where they grew up.

But there are some common points with the Chloé girls. Beyond being female and British – it would seem like this now comes with the Chloé job description – Waight Keller, McCartney and Philo all have children. Not particularly ground-breaking news, you might argue. But is Waight Keller part of a new generation that is more confident about having it all?

It's hard to know. She makes it clear that having the right support is essential to doing what she does, and she's not just referring to childcare. Her husband, despite having his own career, has been willing to accompany her first to the UK (a Chicago native, he met Waight Keller while she was working in New York) and now to France. As an architect he can work pretty much anywhere and luckily he also has 'a sense of adventure and likes moving around'. 'There aren't many men out there that would do what he has done, giving selfless support while balancing his own career,' says Waight Keller.

She describes herself as naturally organised, 'but I think I'm becoming even more so after having a family because when you get home, you've got a whole other set of work.' She has clearly been influenced by her mother, who not only made clothes for her children and taught Waight Keller to knit, but also 'juggled a lot with three children under five and not a huge amount to live on,' she says. 'My mother had to be very resourceful and was also incredibly organised.'

I'm coming to the conclusion that Waight Keller not only has it all, but that she does it all. How does she decompress? By cooking for her husband. 'I think it's a nice thing,' she says defensively, after I almost choke on my coffee. 'I find it quite therapeutic. He sits there with a glass of wine, and I'm walking around the kitchen doing stuff, and we use that time to talk.' She lives in the 16th arrondissement because it's near the Bois de Boulogne, one of the city's green lungs. She can also jump in her car and get out of the city to discover new corners of France. She credits her parents with her taste for adventure – despite limited budgets, they explored the world with their children, 'even to places we shouldn't have gone, like touring Egypt at the start of the Gulf War, on local transport!' she says. Waight Keller has inherited that taste for 'extreme travel' – she once took her family trekking through the Egyptian desert simply to look at some bizarre rock formations.

I'm starting to feel exhausted. Is there nothing that unsettles her? 'Maybe the few minutes before a show,' she offers. 'You have been able to control it all the way but at that stage, you can't go back. You have to send it out and the show goes on. It's the final point when you lose all control over the project and you are out there.' ■

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KEY LOOKS

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