

Smart Alex

From "fat wog kid" to fabulously feted couturier, Alex Perry is as much his own creation as any of his show-stopping gowns. Catherine Keenan meets the outspoken fashion designer.

Straight off the plane from Greece, Alex Perry bounces into his studio, sunglasses on head, chest bursting out of his black shirt, his skin a nuclear shade of orangey brown.

"Look at your tan!" squeals his assistant.

"I know! Look at my tan!" he screams back, as he lunges for the Nescaft Blend 43, the first of 10 or 20 cups he'll consume today. He flings a rack of dresses aside, sending swirls of fuchsia, red and zebra print left and right, to get to the balcony door so he can go outside for a cigarette.

"I'll show you my stomach later!" he hollers to couture manager, Julie Tullio, who shrieks with laughter.

Fashion designer Alex Perry is 178 centimetres of tanned, gym-buffed, Botoxed (or "Kidmanned", as he calls it) fabulousness, with a wickedly politically incorrect sense of humour. He calls himself a wog, calls fat people fat - "I was fat. I can say fat. Fat. Fat. Fat" - and as a judge on Australia's Next Top Model said a contestant looked like a "wild pig". Out of context, he concedes, it might sound harsh. Even he's read things he's said as a joke and thought, "I sound like a right arsehole there." But it hasn't stopped him.

Perry is Australia's most glamorous fashion designer, the man you go to for a show-stoppingly gorgeous dress. He's clothed everyone from J-Lo to Ros Packer, Rihanna to Megan Gale, Elle Macpherson to Tara Moss. Some, including Moss, Gale, Miranda Kerr and Erika Heynatz, have become "Perry girls", those lucky few whom he regularly dresses for free because their beauty and confidence encapsulate what Perry sees as the essence of his brand. Success, for Perry, is dressing famous women, and creating dresses that make the rest of us feel as if we are.

His \$3-million-a-year frock empire is not about being cutting-edge. He doesn't do anything casual, and he'd rather stick pins in his eyes than put, say, Tara Moss in a cardigan or unstructured pants.

He tried daywear once, just after he graduated from East Sydney Technical College, but it's not for him.

"It was just so ..." He reaches for a phrase searing enough to convey his distaste.

"So. Not. Fabulous."

Alex Perry was once a fat wog

kid (his words) with Coke-bottle glasses, who spent Saturday afternoons spread over his living room floor in Sydney's working-class Maroubra, enchanted by old black-and-white films such as Roman Holiday. Then it got worse. A stigmatism meant he needed a nude-coloured eye patch, making him a fat wog kid who "looked like the cyclops".

Even his mum felt sorry for him. She bought him a black eye patch, which she thought was cute. Her son thought it was cute, too. The boys at South Sydney Boys High did not think it was cute, and the timing was particularly unfortunate. "Arnott's had just brought out these biscuits called Pirate Pete. And they had a jingle. So when I went to school the next day, everybody made a ring around the fat kid and sang the Pirate Pete jingle."

He still watched the films, but even he couldn't imagine himself turning into Gregory Peck. "You have to be realistic."

Perry will tell you that he has two strengths as a designer. The first is his ruthless realism. He will spot your flaws instantly: the pear-shaped bum, the broad shoulders. The second is he knows exactly what to do to stop anyone else noticing those flaws. He'll corset you and tuck you to within an inch of your life, and remould "problem areas" with floating layers of gorgeous fabric. "We'll do a bit of panel beating in the form of dressmaking," is how he puts it.

Perry gets his realism from his mum. He comes from a close-knit Greek immigrant family, who ran takeaway shops when he was growing up. He has two brothers: one a lawyer, the other a successful voice artist who was in Happy Feet. Their mum is the family's voice of reason. "Some mums would look at their kids' pictures and go, 'It's so beautiful!'" Perry recalls. His mum would look at his drawings and say, "Is that even?"

Perry once made her an outfit to wear to a wedding, from Giorgio Armani lace and Yves Saint Laurent fabric. They took family photos at home, but then she came out to the car in a navy suit. "I said, 'What's that?' And she said, 'Oh, I'm not wearing that other thing. It's too uncomfortable.'"

It's harder to trace his taste for fantasy to anyone in particular, but if you were a fat kid who didn't surf or play sport you'd probably develop a rich fantasy life, too. Old films are still his greatest inspiration, along with Dior and Balenciaga. What he loves about fashion is the transformation. "The Cinderella moment, when you turn yourself into somebody else. You must feel different," he says.

The person he has most successfully transformed, of course, is himself. Perry, 46, is as meticu-

lously constructed as one of his frocks. He shortened his "14-syllable" Greek surname after his first Vogue mention. He changed his body with exercise and diet, and still goes to the gym five times a week, shaves his head to hide the fact that he's thinning, gets Botox every four months, and has his eyebrows coloured. "I did what I thought would give me a good image as a fashion designer. Nobody wants to hear from the blob."

He wears contact lenses, and his signature has become the sunglasses (he owns 80 pairs) he wears on top of his head morning, noon and night. Does he ever take them off?

"I do. Look!" And the weird thing is, he does look odd without them; the way the rest of us might look without ears.

"I used to lose them all the time, so I always wore them on my head. Then it just became a thing, and the more people started telling me to take them off, the more I thought, 'F...k right off. I'll do what I want.' There are complete blogs about it. Like, whatever."

Perry's business is evenly divided between ready-to-wear (dresses \$400 to \$2500) and custom-made (dresses from \$6000, averaging about \$10,000). Half of the latter is bridalwear, but he doesn't emphasise that side of the business. It puts you in an inferior league, he says, where rip-offs are rife and girls of every shape are shoehorned into strapless taffeta.

So. Not. Fabulous.

Every Alex Perry custom-made dress is fitted by him because not even Tullio, his couture manager for 15 years, has his eye. "It sounds minor, but I'll make it half an inch tighter. I'll make it half an inch lower. I can make you look that extra size smaller." That is why women love him.

The boy who used to watch the Logies and think, "How f...king glamorous is that?" is now used to dressing famous women, but it still gives him a kick. "The first time I dressed Elle Macpherson, I thought I was going to die. Then I was like a crack addict and I thought, 'Right! Who can I dress next?' I had one tear sheet in Vogue and I thought, 'You know what? Kill me now. I am so fabulous!'"

His best-ever hit was his first Vogue cover, with Alyssa Sutherland and Lisa Seiffert.

Actually, he corrects himself, technically that was his second Vogue cover. In the first, the dress was strapless and they cropped it out. "On the inside I got 'Dress on the cover by Alex Perry', but you couldn't see it. I wanted to get that tear sheet and frame it. Then I thought, 'That's so f...ked. You can't do that.'"

He's kept every tear sheet since. They hang on the walls of his shop and studio in the swanky Strand Arcade in Sydney's CBD,



Alex Perry with his wife Mary in 2007.

a cascade of tributes to the transformative power of beauty. And of Alex Perry's dresses.

Just how much of being Alex Perry is a performance? Perry jokes that his lawyer brother says he's "too stupid to vote", but he's canny. Before he started designing, he ran June Dally-Watkins's department school, and for six years he was a booker at modelling agencies Chic Management and Chadwicks. He learnt about marketing, public relations and dealing with people.

When he opened his first dress shop in 1992, he paid tiny rent on an Anzac Parade shop, but figured the clientele he wanted would traipse past on their way to homewares institution Peter's of Kensington. He made sure they noticed him.

"I did this big whiz-bang window with these outrageous ball gowns that were enormous. There was a chicken shop next door and people used to walk past and go, 'What the f...k is that?'"

Perry's high-camp fabulousness makes him a sought-after fashion commentator and got him the judging gig on Australia's Next Top Model. More importantly, perhaps, the high camp is like a costume - a loud, sequined, glittery costume - that gives him an easily recognisable place in the monied, fashionable, eastern-suburbs world that usually tramples wog boys from Maroubra. When I ask if he ever feels insecure, his reply is telling: "I've made sure that I've turned myself into the sort of person that can actually deal with those insecurities."

In the words of his close friend, hairdresser Joh Bailey, Perry is really "a good Greek boy". He dresses high-society women, but at the end of each day he gets in his black Mercedes CLK 240 and drives home to suburban Kingsgrove, where he lives above his parents-in-law, with Mary, his wife of 21 years (and their cavoodle, Gigi). He doesn't drink, works punishing hours and when he gets together with Bailey, they go "somewhere really daggy and have spaghetti bolognese", Bailey says. Sure, Perry is often photographed in the social pages, but "I guarantee you, 45 minutes later I'll be at home, eating scotch finger biscuits and watch-

ing TV," he says.

Being the Alex Perry people love or loathe is not exactly a performance, says Bailey. "I suppose to a degree it is a bit of a performance but not like an act, if that makes sense. It's not put on. He loves it. But it's like a job he does, then he goes back to his life."

And there, waiting for him, is Mary. People regularly assume Perry is gay, but he's been married to Mary, also Greek, since he was 24. They met at a wedding. "It was around the time that Madonna was doing Holiday and all the Greek girls had scrunch-dried fringes. And Mary had a bob, blow-dried straight, and wore this strapless silver dress. She walked in and I was like, 'Who the f...k is that?' She was so expensive looking!"

In many ways, they are opposites. "I'm the shy one," says Mary. "I'm the lacking-in-confidence one. So he tries to bring me out of myself. And I try to calm him down, because sometimes he does walk on clouds." She encourages him to lie around in his tracksuit pants on Sundays and relax. "Or when I serve him dinner, it's as if he's eating at work, which means he'll eat really fast. At home, he'll do the same thing, and I'll go, 'No, no, chew. No-one's rushing you here.'"

They speak of each other in glowing terms, and she swears he has not changed since they first met. "He just works longer hours." They've never had a fight.

If there is a formula for remaining happy in the public eye, it's probably this: having a successful career that you love, and a small group of close family and friends who know you away from the limelight. This is what Perry has, with Mary "at the apex". So he will no doubt keep saying what he thinks, and people will keep saying what they think of him, too. Perry has been called names all his life.

"You're gay, you're fat, you're thin, you're an arsehole, you're not talented, you rip off Valentino. I'll give you a list if you like. I don't know those people and I don't care. I know what I do and I know who I am and what people say really doesn't affect me."

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