

# THE VISIONARY

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Karen Walker the designer. Karen Walker the label. Intrinsicly linked in popular culture for three decades, the celebrated New Zealand fashion designer has paved her own way to global respect and recognition.

**“You’ve got to have the vision,” says Karen Walker matter-of-factly as she sits in her Grey Lynn workroom, surrounded by racks of her latest collection and with pieces from the new ‘Disney x Karen Walker’ collaboration arranged artfully in front of her. “If you don’t have that, you might as well just go home.”**

She would know. Walker’s vision turned 30 this year – it was in 1988 that she launched her eponymous brand; two years after finishing Sixth Form at Auckland’s Epsom Girls Grammar. In an early sign of her business savvy (and before even dial-up internet) the 18-year-old could see the potential beyond New Zealand’s fashion market, which contained just a handful of local designers.

“I’ve always been very outward looking,” she says. “I think that was why I had the vision, because it was so parochial and closed [in New Zealand]. There were no brands or labels that inspired me to want to work for them and I couldn’t get the sorts of things that I wanted so I had to do it myself.”

Her grandmother and mother had taught her how to sew (she still has her mother’s pistachio green Bernina) and the first piece she made under her new label was a Liberty print shirt for a male friend. The juxtaposition of the feminine print with a masculine cut set the tone of her now distinctive style.

Three decades later there are five Karen Walker stores in New Zealand, her brand retails in 42 countries (including Barneys New York, Nordstrom and Harvey Nichols) and encompasses clothing, eyewear, jewellery, bags and fragrance, as well as ongoing collaborations. Walker herself has ranked in the fashion industry's highly respected 'Business of Fashion 500' list since its inception six years ago, her inclusion (among just 113 designers this year) marking her as a global industry figure.

In person, she is professional and precise. She sips a takeaway coffee as we talk in the showroom of Karen Walker HQ, a nondescript brick building a short walk from Ponsonby Road. When the photographer starts to shoot, she knows exactly where the best light is and her best angles. She is, after all, the face of the brand as well as Head Designer and Managing Director.

Not one to follow trends, the designer describes her brand's aesthetic as "chic meets eccentric" – a phrase first used by a fashion writer – but which Walker says sums it up perfectly. "Our work is always based around contrasts and that was in that first Liberty shirt. There's a sense of whimsy, sense of fun, sense of adventure, but always that chicness and sense of eccentricity colliding."

This style has kept Walker's fans with her over the past 30 years, and drawn new followers, some famous faces among them. A who's who of celebrity cool fills the official Karen Walker Instagram feed, from Lady Gaga to LeBron James and even the Duchess of Sussex, who wore several pieces during the recent royal Pacific tour.

Key to the continued innovation is her creative partnership with husband and Creative Director of the brand, Mikhail Gherman, whom she has previously described as being "ahead of the Zeitgeist."

"That [partnership] is the core of the brand and the business. He lives only in the creative space and is given tasks and deadlines and projects, but requires a lot of time to be free within that space. That might mean business strategy, marketing, imagery or product. Anywhere there's a creative decision required."

For her, it's the work itself that inspires. "When it's gone from a mark on a white sheet of paper to a finished product... you get that little frisson of creative energy that comes out of it, that feeds you. The inspiration isn't like, 'I was in the market in Marrakech' – I'm not that person."





**Far left** Karen's consistent inclusion in the fashion industry's highly respected 'Business of Fashion 500' list marks her out as a true global industry figure.

**Lower Left** Upon release, certain items of the Disney x Karen Walker Collection sold out almost instantly.

**Left** Karen's often unconventional approach to showcasing her designs has become as much a celebrated attribute of the brand as her continually evolving range itself.







Collaborations have become a big part of the business and while much consideration is given to each approach, there was no hesitation when Disney came knocking in late 2017. They wanted Karen Walker to create a limited-edition collection celebrating Mickey and Minnie's 90th birthdays, as their exclusive designer partner in Australasia.

"It was an immediate 'Yes' without even asking any questions," says Walker, "because it's Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse. How could you not? The amount of fun that you can have with that as a designer is limitless."

She picks up a pair of oversized white spotted rose-pink sunglasses shaped like Minnie's distinctive bow. "These glasses are so intrinsically us... but it needs that Mickey and Minnie element to go that far into that fun space. That's taking it to another level that we wouldn't have done otherwise." The collection launched globally in early November and these glasses, along with several other pieces, sold out online less than a week later.

When the pressure of collections and collaborations ebbs, there are carefully scheduled holidays with Mikhail and their 10-year-old daughter Valentina, but it's always New Zealand the family comes back to. "This is home," says Walker emphatically. "I did feel that pressure to be based elsewhere, but it was just never enough. You still have to get on a plane every other week, but this is home."

She agrees that her innate "New Zealand-ness" informs her design and the business itself. "There's a casualness here... that's why you see streetwear mixed with more elegant elements; that's very much part of our work. And in business it's the expectation around honesty and straightforwardness that comes with living here."

Reflecting on the past 30 years, Walker notes her pride in building a successful business that is more than just a label. "You know you've got a brand when you can cover the name and know who it is: whether it's on product, in store, on social. That's what separates a brand from just a label, or a trademark."

And while she acknowledges that celebrity sightings "move the needle" business-wise, she says she gets as much of a buzz seeing someone in the street in Karen Walker. "If I can see they're wearing our product or they say, 'I bought this for my daughter' or whatever the story is, I love that.

"There's an ongoing thrill of having that community around me, who appreciate what we do. They've probably got a million other brands they appreciate too, but if I'm a little bit of that, then I'm happy.

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**Left** "It's Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse. The amount of fun that you can have with that as a designer is limitless."

**Below** Karen with official Karen Walker studio assistant, Laika the Labradoodle.

