

FASHIONNEXT

Studio 109 interviews Dieter Kirkwood

Dieter: Okay, it's rolling.

Studio 109: [chuckles] So, how does your knowledge of sculpture affect your fashion designs?

Dieter: Hm, good question. I think what it allows me is the vision to understand how something that I see in two dimensions - or like patterns for instance - how that is going to relate to the body. And sculpture is all about three dimension; how do you work with the material in three dimensional space rather than drawing in just two dimensions. So I think my schooling has helped me to make that visual transition from two dimensions to three dimensions easier, and understand how cloth and shapes and proportions will relate to the body.

Studio 109: Why did you switch from sculpture to fashion design?

Dieter: I switched—*oh man*—because fashion is this beautiful mix of not only great craft and art, but also commerce and business, and so I like this idea that I create something and I put it out there for people, and then people get to wear it or engage with it. With sculpture you still get that, like I can still sculpt something and put in a gallery and people will view it there, but I like the idea that fashion is more democratic where more people can experience it. Whereas sculpture you have to go visit it but fashion can be sold anywhere and people can enjoy it. So I guess that would be one of the reasons.

Studio 109: Fun question: what do your pajamas look like? Do you design your own pajamas?

Dieter: I don't but my pajamas are very, um— I wear vintage pajamas actually [chuckles] so they look like *Leave It to Beaver*, with like the button-down and the matching set with old prints.

Studio 109: That's what I pictured.

Dieter: Yeah? That's great! [chuckles] I'm glad I'm giving that aura.

Studio 109: You teach at Columbia College. What do you like most about your job?

Dieter: I love *this*. I love the opportunity to interact with students and learn from them as much as they learn from me. Often times the way that I teach is much more like a mentorship collaboration rather than a lecture style. So the way that I roll is you come to me and you want to do something, and then we work together to figure out how we can achieve that goal. So, I like to learn from my students just as much as teach them because often times they'll come to me with an idea for a garment, or an idea for a way

to make a pattern that I might not have thought of. Then that way we both sort of get something out of the relationship.

Studio 109: Is this your dream job, what you're doing now? Or would you rather do something else?

Dieter: I would say, yeah um – that's a loaded question [laughs] – I am certainly enjoying it right now, at the stage of my life.

Studio 109: How long have you been teaching?

Dieter: I was teaching part time for about five years, so just like once at night. And then I had the collection. And now I've been full-time for about two years, going on three years, and unbeknownst to me it kind of is a dream job in the sense that, not only do I get to engage with other designers and artists in the classroom, but also colleagues, so teaching has allowed me the opportunity to interact with furniture designers, with product designers, with technology designers, and work on projects that I find really interesting and that I wouldn't have access to. So academia allows that kind of cross-flow of ideas to happen really easily.

Studio 109: Alright.

Dieter: Alright, alright. I'm on fire, someone shoot. [laughs]

Studio 109: Alright: chocolate or vanilla?

Dieter: Vanilla! [chuckles] It's got to be good vanilla, but yeah.

Studio 109: Awesome! Now a serious question. In terms of if you want to pursue a fashion career, as in go to college for it, would you recommend going to get your bachelors and a graduate, or just get a bachelors and then go into the fashion industry?

Dieter: I was just talking with a student of mine about this exact question. That's a hard one. I think if you're interested in theory, so you're interested in fashion from a theoretical stand point, or a research standpoint – I think getting the grad is a good move. But, if you're more interested in the practice of it and possibly working for a designer as a junior designer or assistant designer and then work your way up, the grad can help, but I personally believe actually interning and being on the ground with them in the industry will get you a little farther quicker because you learn the industry from the inside-out. Whereas in grad school, you're sometimes just going to be learning about theory and you're not necessarily learning about the industry proper, so you would have to learn all of that. So, it's kind of dicey. That's the way I kind of think about it, but both of them are great options, it just depends on how you see yourself within the market.

Studio 109: Were your parents supportive of you going to art school?

Dieter: Yeah, very supportive. The one thing in my family is I had very liberal parents. So when I was fifteen I was playing in bands, traveling around the country, all the way through high school. So I had very liberal parents. Not all the time, of course, like I still

went to high school, but like during spring break I would drive up the East Coast and play some gigs and stuff. But the one thing they did require was that I be in school and do well in school. So that was the one thing that was always harped on, like always asking me about my grades and making sure I was enjoying what I was learning and applying myself. So, as long as I was pursuing a higher education they were fine with it.

Studio 109: Do you have any siblings?

Dieter: I do, I have one brother and one sister who are both younger.

Studio 109: Are they both fashion designers?

Dieter: They are the furthest that you can think of from that. All of us are totally different. My brother is in real estate now, but he started up in law and business, so he had his own law company down in Florida. My sister is the quintessential kind of jock. She was a soccer player in college and now she has a couple kids, so she is kind of like a stay-at-home mom.

Studio 109: Do they wear your clothes?

Dieter: No, because it's not their aesthetic. They're not my market. My sister is very much a jeans and T-shirt kind of girl, and I don't do a lot of that work.

Studio 109: Where do you like to hang out in your free time?

Dieter: So, I am a hermit. [chuckles] I love staying in my studio or staying at home. But if I do hang out, I'm very much an outdoors person, so I hang out at a park with like a book or something.

Studio 109: Do you live near your studio?

Dieter: I do, I live above it actually.

Studio 109: Wow, that's so cool! What's your favorite color?

Dieter: My favorite color? Hm, green.

Studio 109: What kind of green?

Dieter: Ooh, forest green.

Studio 109: Would you ever consider offering public pattern making classes to people who are not at Columbia?

Dieter: Like workshops? I have never thought about it, but maybe I should.

Studio 109: You definitely should, because there aren't many in Chicago. We would all go.

Dieter: [laughs] Hm, maybe I'll think about it.

Studio 109: This one is another fun question: if you could have any car, what would it be?

Dieter: If I could have any car, what car would it be? Hm, it'd be a Tesla. It's amazing! The engineering behind the car is so phenomenal.

Studio 109: And it is a very environmentally friendly car.

Dieter: Yeah, exactly!

Studio 109: Do you drive an environmentally friendly car now?

Dieter: Well I drive a Honda Accord. So it's not a gas guzzler but it's not an electric car. [chuckles]

Studio 109: Cool. So, where do you get most of your fabric?

Dieter: Vogue up in Evanston is a great resource, off of Main Street. Fishman's, off of Roosevelt, is a good resource. Then there's that great place, 2121 or Textile Outlet, that has a lot.

Studio 109: Yeah!

Dieter: You just have to do a lot of searching there, right?

Studio 109: [chuckles] Yeah, hours and hours.

Dieter: Yeah. And then a lot of the fabrics we used for the collection Proper come from mills in Japan and Italy, so we go to fabric shows and trade shows, like the one in New York called Premiere Vision. Once or twice a year they come to New York and they show you all of the different fabrics they have.

Studio 109: Would you rather work in New York?

Dieter: No.

Studio 109: Why?

Dieter: Because I love the quality of life in Chicago. Chicago is a little bit more slower pace, and I'm not so interested in the rat race as I am with just enjoying what I do and then also that allowing me to interact with other designers and communities.

Studio 109: Are there a lot of other designers in Chicago?

Dieter: Yeah, there are a few. And it's great because there's not a lot of competition. We all have our market that we design for, and so we can just meet up and just talk and not worry about that someone is going to steal your client or your idea. In Chicago, that's a really good place for community where New York is kind of cut-throat and you have to always be looking over your shoulder, in a way. And I love the lake.

Studio 109: Did you grow up in Chicago?

Dieter: No, I grew up in Florida.

Studio 109: Oh, so you went from hot weather to like, freezing weather?

Dieter: [chuckles] I did, I did. But I was in a small town outside of Orlando, so there isn't a lot of that cultural scene; there isn't a lot of fashion happening.

Studio 109: Yeah. And Chicago gets some nice, warm weather.

Dieter: Yeah, we do! But I would argue – I'm a big fan of the seasons changing. Florida is always the same and never changing, so I don't like that especially.

Studio 109: Okay, well I think that is about all of our questions.

Dieter: Oh okay. Well, make sure to keep me posted on the progress and if you have any more questions, just shoot them over to me and hopefully we can get this project *buttoned up*.

Studio 109: [laughs]

Dieter: Did you get that? Yeah, I was a comedian.

Studio 109: [chuckles] Well, thank you for coming in!

Dieter: Yeah, no problem! Happy to do it! It was great working with you guys.



Mentor Dieter Kirkwood helps a student take measurements.