

My life My style

Glamour is resistance, according to Paris-based Australian stylist CATHERINE BABA, whose career has traversed costume design, French films and fashion runways

Words by GLYNIS TRAILL-NASH Photographed by OLIVER BEGG Styled by TEANNE VICKERS

Catherine Baba wears her own vintage Alaïa dress and vintage Saint Laurent belt. She also wears her own vintage Saint Laurent bangles (on both arms, worn throughout), Cartier rings, bracelet, earrings and necklaces, and her own Dinosaur Designs bangle (on left arm, worn throughout). Behind her is a screenprint from Andy Warhol's *Ladies and Gentleman* series, 1975. Previous page: her own 1920s kimono, Yasmine Eslami swim briefs (worn throughout), Gerbe tights (worn throughout) and vintage Emanuel Ungaro belt. She also wears her own mirror ring designed in collaboration with Gripoix, Tiffany & Co. cuffs and vintage bangles (all worn throughout), and a Bulgari necklace.

Catherine Baba is draped over a velvet couch, warmly backlit by the skyscape of Sydney at sundown. In a pink turban-style headband and vintage '20s kimono over black satin trousers and platform heels, she could be equally cast as a silent film star or Studio 54 fortune teller.

Back in Sydney for the first time in six years, the Paris-based stylist and creative consultant is trying to extend her stay by even a few more days. "It's divine coming back to Sydney, I love coming back, *j'adore*," she says, her conversation peppered with French for emphasis and joy.

She returned to style Alemais' Australian Fashion Week runway in May, a collection that combined a freewheeling bohemian-meets-Bowie aesthetic that was born for Baba's magic touch.

She is a true creative, intellectually and creatively inspired by artists and writers, history and the future, politics and people. Our conversation dances from French President Emmanuel Macron and the changing face of Paris to art movements and exhibitions, such as the recent Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters, an exhibition of Australian Indigenous artists at the Musée du quai Branly that she describes as "beyond brilliant".

That Baba moved to Paris almost 30 years ago was no whim. Her family had moved there briefly during her earliest years, and then returned to Sydney, where she grew up in "deep in suburbia" in Southwest Sydney. "I felt like Paris was a part of my life always," she says. "And when I did arrive in Paris, I felt like [I was] returning home. But it's the same thing when I come back here. There's no place like home."

Growing up, Baba's mother, a couturier, taught her to sew. She also developed a love for vintage clothing as a teenager. "I was making some pocket money and I would spend it on [Sydney's] Crown Street, and it was always thrift," she says. "I loved finding treasures. But at the same time in Australia, vintage was so limited, it only went back so far, mainly the '60s, '50s and '80s, even though the '80s was yesterday."

When she returned to Paris to study fashion design straight after high school — she wasn't accepted into East Sydney TAFE — her hunting ground widened exponentially. "In Paris we had the flea markets, and I still had that same hunter's eye," she says, "but it was so much more elevated and it was going back, back, back [in time], and it was more couture. Finding that treasure that no-one else has was always such an ultimate turn on, no matter what it was, no matter what period it was."

Her deliciously eclectic personal style may stem from her love of vintage fashion, but it is a melting pot of many other influences: "Marlene Dietrich, I love art deco and disco and everything else in between, and mythology. I've always loved the Chinoiserie and mixing a lot of things. There are so many layers to what I love and *j'adore*. I don't think it's schizophrenic; I think it's rich."

When people ask her for style tips, Baba always asks, "What gets you excited?" From there she says it's about making it your own. "I love mixing different periods, different aesthetics. But then, whatever works on me doesn't work on everyone else. But at the same time, wearing pyjamas, wearing kimonos, that lounge wear for outerwear [idea] has exploded," she notes.

Another of her greatest influences and passions has seeped into both her personal style and professional life. "I've always had this love affair with cinema, black-and-white and technicolor," she says. "This is something that is a part of one's travels, when you are young it's your trip, it's your voyage, where you can astral fly into different dimensions in different periods."

It was almost inevitable that Baba should move into costume design for film. Her first foray, for 2011's *My Little*

Princess, starring Isabelle Huppert, brought a nomination for Best Costume Design at the Césars, France's Oscars. "I would love to do a film in Australia," Baba says. "I love George Miller. *Mad Max* for me was like Shakespeare, Fellini — it was biblical, it was mythology."

Perhaps less inevitable but unsurprising is the fact that she has even made what she calls "mini appearances" in a handful of French arthouse films, including two directed by her friend Arielle Dombasle. Baba's personal style has informed the characters, such as in the film *Opium*, about the poet and artist Jean Cocteau, in which she played the proprietress of an opium den.

But Baba could never have anticipated how her sense of style would steel and swaddle her for one of her biggest challenges. "I was diagnosed with acute leukemia in 2019," she says. "Who knew that [fashion] would become my ultimate lifesaving drag, really? I don't want to say sadly, but I was prepared and wearing what I wore when I was going through this — it was like ammunition for me. I also do believe glamour is resistance. And it doesn't need to be, oh, *glamour* glamour. But keeping it together for yourself, I found for me, helped get me to the next [stage]. It's baby steps. But even the lipstick, when I could, was really important. It was a sign of, *Yes, I'm doing this*."

Baba calls coming out of treatment her "personal rebirth", and celebrated early last year by setting up Devotion, a collaborative organisation that is "a celebration of life, to create anything that can also help". Her first projects under the Devotion banner are a nod to the idea of accoutrements as armour, and to raise money for the Necker Hospital in Paris, where she underwent treatment.

With designer Rick Owens and New York-based artist and Thierry Mugler muse Connie Fleming, Baba has created a limited-edition turban and T-shirt, from which 100 per cent of revenue will go to the hospital. And to celebrate the 190th anniversary of French leather goods brand Chapal, a leather helmet and blouson pairing in pink, silver and gold, with a small percentage of profits going to the cause.

A gala and auction at the storied Parisian institution Maxim's de Paris in December added further glamour and grit to the cause, bringing together celebrities and cross-cultural creatives including Christian Louboutin, Marisa Berenson and Farida Khelfa.

"Working on something like this is so much more important than a lot of other things, you know? But at the same time, the creative juices, for me anyway, need to be juiced," Baba says. "When you go through something like this, things are clearer and priorities change." But Baba's style, mercifully, remains as fabulous as ever. *J'adore*.

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Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello top, earrings and sunglasses, and her own Boucheron Quatre ring (worn throughout).



Alemas dress and Louboutin shoes with all her own jewellery, including an Alemas x Ryan Storer necklace, Loulou de la Falaise pearl necklace (worn throughout), vintage Saint Laurent earrings, and the Catherine Baba x Gripox mirror ring.

Devotion x Rick Owens and Connie Fleming T-shirt with her own vintage dress, Devotion x Chapal helmet, vintage Saint Laurent belt with a tassel accessory, and Brian Atwood shoes. She also wears vintage Givenchy earrings and necklace from constantinavintage.com.



Clockwise from top left: Alemais dress with vintage Emanuel Ungaro earrings (and opposite); Louboutin shoes and an Alemais dress; Greg Natale box, \$420; vintage Saint Laurent bangles and Tiffany & Co. cuffs; the Devotion x Chapal leather helmet.

Take five

Catherine Baba shares her favourite people, passions and inspirations

MY FAVOURITE PERFUME used to be Opium [by YSL], but since my rebirth I'm wearing less perfume and more oils.

MY FAVOURITE HOLIDAY DESTINATION IS anywhere I can swim and not get attacked by anything.

THE FILMS THAT HAVE IMPACTED ME THE MOST are anything with Marlene Dietrich, *Mad Max*, those from *La Nouvelle Vague* [French New Wave] — Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Jacques Demy, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Louis Malle — and Italian Cinecittà — Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Luchino Visconti. And *Cabaret* by Bob Fosse — one of the most perfect films ever!

AS A CHILD, MY FAVOURITE BOOKS WERE — I don't know how perverse this is: those by Anaïs Nin. Also Anne Rice, the vampire books.

MY FAVOURITE BOOK IS anything by Truman Capote. And I love reading biographies.

MY FAVOURITE ARTISTS include Pablo Picasso, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Otto Dix, Claude Monet, Édouard Manet, Man Ray, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring. And I can't forget the ladies, Sonia Delaunay, Tamara de Lempicka, Lee Miller and Claude Cahun.

MY GREATEST INSPIRATION IS my mother — she is like a warrior woman — and life. I know that's an easy answer, but it's true.

MY GREATEST PASSION IS creation.

ONE RECIPE I AM FAMOUS FOR IS *un diner de dingue dinde*, which means a crazy turkey dinner — a Thanksgiving feast that I once made for my American friends in Paris for about 40 people.

I CAN'T START THE DAY WITHOUT music, immediately.

ONE PIECE OF ADVICE I WOULD GIVE TO MY 20-YEAR-OLD SELF IS to keep on going, don't stop.

IF I COULD GO BACK IN TIME TO REVISIT A PARTICULAR ERA, it would be the '20s or the '70s



Alemais dress with her own Brian Atwood shoes. Hair by Rory Rice at M.A.P; makeup by Claire Thomson at Saunders & Co. Produced by Annie Croke.

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