



Fashion in the mundane

Redefining standards, Nina Christen has become a force in luxury footwear

BY JESSICA IREDALE

Back in late 2018, a lifetime ago in fashion, a radical shift happened in footwear. Square-toed clunkers — sandals defined by exaggerated, spatula-like soles that jutted out from under the foot and pumps with bulbous stubbed toes — were shown in Daniel Lee's first collection for Bottega Veneta.

At first sight, the shoes were hideous. Within months, they were on the feet of nearly every celebrity, editor, influencer and luxury V.I.C. in the land. Retailers like Vince Camuto and Shein promptly issued dupes of the popular Lido sandal, a simple slide in a blown-up interpretation of Bottega's signature intrecciato woven leather. Lyst declared them the "hottest shoes in the world" in 2019.

"It's funny what you can make people wear in fashion if it's done the right way," said Nina Christen, the Swiss shoe designer responsible for the Lido.

Ms. Christen's distinctive touch has quite literally been all over some of the most influential shoe design trickling down from luxury houses for the better part of the last decade. She has worked for Phoebe Philo at Celine, Jonathan Anderson at Loewe, Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen at the Row and Mr. Lee at Bottega Veneta. Last month, Mr. Anderson hired Ms. Christen as the design director of shoes at Christian Dior. It's one of the biggest jobs in fashion right now, and she is balancing it with a moonlighting gig, too.

Last year, Ms. Christen introduced Christen, her own independent shoe brand. The first pure expression of her design identity came partly out of frustration. The shoes she designed for other brands were her taste, her take, she said, "but they were never 100 percent myself." Opportunity arose when she met Paul Dupuy, an entrepreneur and a founder of Zoi, a health-tech company in the longevity space.

Ms. Christen designed uniforms for Zoi's staff and clients, and Mr. Dupuy was so impressed that he offered to help her start her own brand. His mother was a fashion designer, and he

has friends in the industry. He got it.

"When she told me she designed shoes for Loewe and Bottega, I was like: 'OK. This is solid,'" Mr. Dupuy said.

Ms. Christen already had a complete vision for a brand beyond shoes: the perfect pair of Japanese denim jeans, the perfect leather jacket, even fine jewelry, the first piece of which is a diamond toe ring. All are prototyped and planned. She had the packaging, branding, logo and positioning in mind.

Mr. Dupuy raised \$5 million in capital and helps with business logistics, including with the planning of a store in Paris slated for 2026.

Christen shoes are produced in Italy by the same factories and specialists that work with big luxury brands. The prices — \$1,100 to \$3,650 — reflect Ms. Christen's uncompromising production standards and ambition to compete at the highest level.

On a morning in late June, the raw cement floor of the studio below Ms. Christen's apartment in Paris was set with more than 30 examples of her designs arranged in a neatly art-directed grid. Three styles from Loewe's spring 2023 runway collection stood out for their cartoonish, fantastical qualities: There were pumps embroidered with an explosion of deflated white balloons and sandals abloom with a giant, hyper-realistic anthurium. Red rubber pumps that looked fit for Minnie Mouse were particularly complicated.

"You can't wear this for more than two hours," Ms. Christen said of the pumps. "But Jonathan Anderson was very open to ideas that really crossed the line between art and fashion." By comparison, the Christen styles on display appeared compact, sexy and razor-sharp.

"I love the space of geometric shapes," Ms. Christen said, surveying the body of work at her feet. "When I think of toe shapes, for example, it's all about that. Is it a square? Is it rectangle? Is it a circle? Is it oval? What is

the degree?"

She wore a pair of Christen white sandals that left the foot nearly naked, bisecting it with a strip of leather like a strand of floss through the big and second toes. The sole was thin and slightly elongated under the toes, like an insole that was a size too big.

The proportions of the shoes varied wildly, but a common thread was a certain offness. Ms. Christen thinks a lot about redefining standards.

"It's about creating things we are not used to yet," she said. "When I make something and I don't know if I like it, that's always a good sign."

Ms. Christen, 40, grew up in Bern, Switzerland, "obsessed with fashion without an explanation," she said. "It was just in me." There she studied technical tailoring and pattern-making and practiced on the "normal" garments she prefers to wear in her personal life. Finding Switzerland to be a fashion void, she moved to Paris. While completing a master's degree at Institut Français de la Mode, a shoe design workshop liberated her. "I realized I could do all kinds of crazy things," she said.

Ms. Christen met Mr. Lee in 2017 when they were working for Phoebe Philo at Celine. Before that, Ms. Christen did the rounds consulting for less elite players, including Marimekko and H&M. Consulting for the traditional French rubber boot brand Aigle proved to be one of her most formative gigs. The platform rubber boots she designed for Ms. Philo's last collections at Celine, and subsequently the viral Bottega Veneta Puddle Boot introduced in 2020, were descended from what Ms. Christen learned at Aigle.

"Working with Nina was a special collaboration," said Mr. Lee, who has been the creative director of Burberry since 2022. "She's a designer that understands precision and refinement."

Ms. Christen is rigorous in her approach. Obsessed with objects and engineering, she operates like a furniture designer. "I design everything by





myself so that it has one identity," she said. Working in a group environment is unbearable. She draws alone in her studio with a Rotring 800+ 0.5 mechanical pencil and a Pentel eraser at the Richard Lampert Eiermann table she has had for 20 years. The table must be square.

When Ms. Christen started commuting between Switzerland and Paris, she kept two offices, one a double of the other. "The same chair, the same table, the same sofa," she said. "I'm very specific about things."

Rather than reference the work of a specific artist or architect, Ms. Christen draws from the worlds of science

and spirituality. She cited CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, as a source of inspiration, the tangible effect of which is difficult to explain.

"It's more that I like to think about things that are impossible," she said. "From drawing shoes to the reality, there is this huge gap of things that you can do, things that you cannot do. I enjoy finding a way to do new things."

The power of the mundane courses through Ms. Christen's work. "Every day I see normal people wearing extremely interesting things that have nothing really to do with fashion," she

said. Orthopedic shoes for the elderly have been good source material.

After Christen's first year in business, its most popular shoe is a grandpa-style slip-on bootie lined in goat shearling. As Ms. Christen said, "Once you wear them, you cannot wear anything else."

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DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES





Top, Nina Christen at her atelier in Paris. She has designed some of the most influential shoes of the last decade and now has her own brand, Christen. Right, a selection of Christen shoes.

