

## INTERVIEW

# A very atypical fashion designer

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● Julie Sohn is definitely doing something right. Her new shop, which is located in the heart of the Eixample, only a few blocks away from Passeig de Gràcia and such shops as Adolfo Dominguez, Purificación García and Max Mara, is an inviting prospect, with its minimalist natural stone façade and Zen-style bridge to the glass entrance door.

I met Julie as she got off her scooter; she was dressed in a white cotton T-shirt, grey cardigan, jeans, and white Converse hi-tops. No makeup and a ponytail. I soon realised she was nothing like what you'd expect from a successful fashion designer. She's casual, down-to-earth and devoid of "attitude". Though she's Korean and spent many years studying in the USA, she opened her store in Barcelona be-

cause her career began here. "This is my home", she says. She has put down roots by marrying a Catalan, with whom she has an 11-year-old daughter. But when asked whether she thought it was a good time to open a store in Barcelona, she wasn't quite sure. "The fashion business is going through changes, with Chinese globalisation, Inditex, Mango and so

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on. But it was time to do something really different. I'm 39 now and if I didn't do it now, I wouldn't do it." But she added that the enormous effort she has made has meant many headaches and sacrifices.

I could imagine what an

enormous challenge starting such a weighty venture must be and I asked how she was dealing with this new transition. "Fortunately I've been very lucky from the beginning; I've always had work. When I started my first store at 24 it was more like a game. I had a partner, we got bigger and things were easy. But for seven years I've been torn. I couldn't dedicate all my time to my collections because I was also designing my partner's; it was a back-and-forth thing."

But about 18 months ago she changed her business strategy radically after a falling-out with her partner. They went their separate ways. The only problem was, Julie was left with nothing. But luck was on her side. One day, as she was driving her scooter on Diputació, she saw a FOR RENT sign. She liked the space, and the price, and took the plunge. Six months later, the store is up and running, though it has been a steep learning curve for her. "I'm learning to be a businesswoman and I don't like it at all!" she says. "I feel like I'm doing a Masters in Economics. I've never had to go through invoices. I'm still learning and hoping that I have enough time and calm to do my next collection. I've had no vacation. I've seen two movies in a year."

Fortunately for Julie, her business achievements have exceeded her expectations. "In the time that the store's been open, just over a month, it's been better than I expected." Even though she's comforted by her initial sales figures and customer reactions, she knows that "fashion is always a gamble". It means producing a collection every 6 months, which she compares to giving birth.

Starting a business involves investing substantial amounts of capital, and more so for something on the scale of Julie's store. I asked her whether she had received any outside investment. "No. All the money came from me and my agent. I took out a second mortgage on



Julie Sohn worked together with a partner for years before setting up on her own

my apartment and all of our savings went into this."

Julie only has two full-time and one part-time employee for the shop, while in her studio she has two pattern makers, two sample makers, one assistant and an accountant. Another company does the production. "We're very small", she says, "and I like it that way. The maximum I want is a group of 10; they're like family."

I was curious about her

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plans for the future; she was quite clear about her priorities. "My next step is to organise my production so that we deliver to customers on time. Once that's set, I'd like to expand and export to Japan and the United States. After that, I'd like to open a shop in Madrid." However, being cautious, she won't make a move until everything is perfect.

Although I was interested in the business aspects of her new undertaking, I also wanted to find out if, during her nine years of designing, she has significantly changed her style. Again she surprised me. She couldn't point to one single change. For her it was more of "a natural evolution". She gets

her ideas from everyday things, like old movies and paintings in galleries. "Sensations go into me and somehow come out", she says. "I don't know how it happens. If I did, it would be much easier. My collections change with me." She also believes in always being true to herself; she never copies anyone, just tries to do her best.

Julie ends the interview with another of her insights: "Customers don't only come to buy clothes. It's psychological therapy. They talk. You build relationships with your customers. You remember what they bought last season and suggest something that will go with what they have. I want to be here. That's why I've got a small studio upstairs, where I work with my pattern makers in the morning and come down to the shop in the afternoon to help with customers. I want to have personal contact with my clients. It's a business, but it's not only about money, it's about human relationships. I want to keep my clients happy and coming back."

It was true. I saw it myself. Before the interview, I saw Julie in her natural environment, helping customers decide on outfits and personally carrying their choices to the fitting room: not something a typical designer would do.

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The impressive entrance to Julie Sohn's shop in downtown Barcelona