

## A CONVERSATION WITH CATERINA GATTA

The first thing I thought, when I met her, was that she looks like a flower. A fragile and delicate flower that seemed to need much care, like the buds blossoming on her dresses. It is just when we took a seat in front of each other, just when I started listening to her that I understood: those kindness petals overshadow a stem of tenacity and perseverance – like a snowdrop that breaks the snow to bloom – and a lovely Roman accent that immediately breaks the ice.

L: *Let's start from the last collection, which amazed everyone and that sees the collaboration with the painter Sofia Cacciapaglia. I'm really curious to know how the two of you met and who had the very first idea.*

C: I must admit It's been a leap into the unknown, it wasn't something planned months earlier. I was feeling the need to express myself 100% with a product which was completely mine and not contaminated by those beautiful designer fabrics. I wanted to go one step further. Fate was on my side and Sofia and I became friends but, before this had happened, I discovered her work and fell in love with it. I found it was in harmony with my world, with the poetry I look for in history and that we both carry to the present. And since a friendship was born, we started to share this idea.

L: *But was it a friendship you were searching or did you really meet by chance?*

C: We met at an event in Rome but, when we've first been introduced, I didn't get she was the artist I wanted to get contact with. Then, whilst chatting, she told me she was a painter and, just when I realized she was *that* Sofia Cacciapaglia I revealed all my admiration for her and my desire to buy one of her works. Then, it's been a short step, thanks to the strong agreement between us. We wanted the collection to be out in September, but we had to postpone it, and after the fashion weeks we immediately started to work for the following season.

L: *Did you choose the prints?*

C: Yes, I did. Sofia told me: 'I trust you, do what you want!' and that made me feel very free. I immediately told her that I was going to interpret – maybe even alter – her paintings according to my aesthetic and she trusted me. Of course she was involved in every decisions I made. But I'm saying it was a leap into the unknown because, at that time, I had no producers and, as a consequence, no big budget. I didn't know how to go through the future of my collections with fabrics designed by me, which are very expensive. I was a bit scared. I had to find a producer within the end of my collection, so to deal with possible orders.

L: *And so came the business deal with Castor srl.*

C: Exactly! For two years I had been trying to reach an agreement with other producers, but everyone used to suggest to create shared companies, something I would never ever have accepted. I booked an appointment with Castor, without big expectations because they told me, in a e-mail, that they would have met me with pleasure, but that they couldn't *take* me. But I decided to turn up for the appointment anyway – I admit, I was hoping they could get me – and I explained my work, my clothes, who I wanted to become with them and which target I wanted to reach with the next collections. I knew I made a good impression, but again they told me the same things they wrote by e-mail. Two hours later, they called me saying: 'We take you!'

L: *Your brand reaches a target that was absent in Castor'S, since they produce brands like Mantù and Giles.*

C: They produced Marras too, and a part of the last collection of L'Wren Scott, but yes, I'm happy about that. But although I was happy, I immediately told them I would have never wanted a shared company (my brand would have always been mine), but a simple business deal.

L: *I understand a shared company is a very high risk.*

C: It is! You have to be very careful. But Castor is a place that brings peace. It's a factory like those in New York, it is very bright and you immediately get involved in a strong team spirit

with very strong women who make you feel comfortable. Working on your own can be as exciting as, sometimes, frustrating. As I told you, I started to feel the need of a new collection, with no designer fabrics. Now, Castor will produce two collections: the vintage one, which is more exclusive and destined to very few stores; and another entirely mine, from the fabric to the design.

L: *Two analogous collections?*

C: Yes, I don't want to drop out the concept of recycling, at least until I'll be so lucky to find these amazing fabrics. I think it's important to pass on the value of these collaborations between Italian designers and fabric makers.

L: *Now there's Castor, but you're still alone managing your brand 'Caterina Gatta'. Does it not scare you not to have someone you know working with you, by your side?*

C: As you said, now there's Castor . I've been able to pay back this collection of samples by myself (as I did with the last three) thanks to the sales. From the next season, obviously, the help from Castor will be crucial. Especially for a product like mine, which is very closed to haute couture and whose material costs are very expensive.

L: *And what about creative couples like Prada/Bertelli, Valentino/Giammetti, Armani/Galeotti etc?*

C: I'd love to find my Giammetti! I don't have one yet, but I'd love to! I would like someone to help me not only with the economic aspects, but someone very close to the creative director figure. Just like Giammetti with Valentino. I hope to find one.

L: *Something that intrigued me was reading that you have no press office. And in less than five years, your fame is so clamorous. How is it possible?*

C: It's true, everything I've done, I've done it by myself. I worked as an assistant for a fashion journalist during fashion weeks in Milan and Paris, so I got to know some other journalist and, when I launched my collection, I decided to contact them and a few buyers.

L: *Through the journalist you worked for?*

C: No, not at all! By guessing the right e-mail address. Trying name dot surname at gmail/yahoo/libero etc.

L: *Yes, I read it! The same way you got in contact with Franca Sozzani.*

C: I still have a notebook, at home, with all the failed attempts and the right ones of every Italian fashion editor. But no one answered me! The only person I didn't dare to contact (it took me one year!) was Franca Sozzani. She was my idol and I didn't feel ready. I was saying to myself: 'What do I write her for? What do I show her? Four little silk dresses?' even if, deep inside of me, I knew she was going to like my work with these old fabrics from famous Italian designers. But I just couldn't make that breakthrough. In that occasion I could have asked for help to that journalist I used to work for, but I didn't want to. If I would ever have decided to write to Franca, she had to answer just because she wanted to. But that wasn't the right moment. In the meantime, while in Italy nobody was caring about me, I launched my very first collection at the Soho House in NYC.

L: *I'm sorry to interrupt you, but how did you get the chance to present your first collection there? Luck?*

C: I was doing an internship as an associate-new business in an American agency based in New York and Los Angeles, where I worked for the whole summer. I used to select and promote European brands for the American market, working as a talent scout and, occasionally, as a stylist. I remember a shooting with Janet Jackson for which I did the preliminary styling with vintage clothes. In the U.S.A. it is different from here, you get the chance to make career quicker than in Italy. I had just arrived to LA, but the agency noticed my ability in locating the best vintage Sstores and clothes so they gave me this chance. Then, they knew I was creating a

collection with fabrics from more than fifteen different Italian designers. When they saw it, they asked me to join the presentation which would have taken place in NYC. I obviously accepted and it was great! Meredith Melling-Burke from Vogue was very enthusiastic and asked me where she could buy the collection. When I told her I wasn't selling it yet, she looked surprised and she told me to inform her when all things would have become purchasable.

I was moved by all that immediate and important acknowledgment which I also found in people of department stores like Bergdorf Goodman; and who I got in contact with, obviously, by guessing the right e-mail address (I'm a hacker now!). Linda Fargo answered me and I had an interview in front of eight people who, for one hour, were listening to me and looking at my creations. Something I wasn't used to in Italy. Do you remember the thousands e-mails with no answer?

L: *You were the best press office you could ever hire!*

C: I was! At least till the arrival of Italian Vogue, whose help has been crucial. Everyone, after Vogue, started caring about me, saying that I was a genius.

L: *What about Spiga2/Piave 37?*

C: Andrea Nacre helped me a lot and I owe him a lot. He was the first that believed in me commercially. And what's very important is that Spiga 2 buys the clothes, they're not on consignment.

L: *And that's a good thing!*

C: Indeed! That does credit to them.

L: *I'm inquiring: did any of those designers you 'stole' the fabrics from express their opinion?*

C: Yes and it's always been positive. I even did a capsule collection for Lancetti. The only one complaining was Gianni Versace S.p.A., but I kept using their fabrics because it's legal. I've just chosen not to use the Medusa, to avoid any misunderstanding. I guess the 'problem' is that Gianni Versace S.p.A. is starting to rediscover and rework on its own archive, because this thing came out last September. But all the others were very enthusiastic. Even because my product is a niche, if you think that of any model can be done just a maximum of eight pieces and, as a consequence, the stores selling them can be four. And everything is very transparent because every cloth is sold with the piece of selvage signed by the designer. If you are smart you understand that my work is A homage to the designer. That's why I told you I wanted to create something that was just mine. Even because the profit wasn't high. I have the same costs and expenses of the big fashion houses, with expensive shooting, campaign, fairs and travels. And all the profit was entirely spent on the next collection with no extra budget for me.

L: *Who helped you? Your parents?*

C: At the beginning yes, my parents helped me for the first three collections. In the meantime, I was also working at the Elio Ferraro Gallery/Store, a luxury vintage shop in Rome. That's where I found out what real vintage is, rummaging in the wardrobes of the richest ladies of Rome, looking for the most prestigious sartorial pieces. I've learned how to transform the passion of browsing around vintage markets in an educated and ponderous action, recognising the value and the beauty of things, being able to sell them to private clients. Skills that helped me to develop my fashion line and my collections.

L: *What defines your collections?*

C: A total squandering of fabric! An insanity! Every piece is stuffed with four beds of pure silk and my seamstresses yell at me every time: 'You know this would be four dresses, don't you?'. Unfortunately, because of the manufacture and the high material costs, the final price is very expensive; but I could never use synthetic fabrics, otherwise the wearability wouldn't be so perfect.

L: *Today there's a very strong group of so-called young designers. You and Flavia La Rocca, who*

*are here today, Ballestrazzi and Bruziches, who you have worked with, Alessia Xoccatto, Barbara Casasola and many others. Which kind of relationship does exist between all of you? Are you competitive and hate each other or are you able to team with each other?*

C: Well, friendship does exist, but it's very rare. If you want to know the truth, there's so much competition, but also so much viciousness. Teaming together would be great, but it's very hard.

L: *That's such a pity, because if you team together, you will certainly rock!*

C: I know and that's what I tried to do in the past, but I had some regrettable experience. With Sofia IT was different, we immediately felt in harmony.

L: *Yes, but Sofia Cacciapaglia is not a competitor of yours.*

C: Right. Well, if I get the occasion, I'll grab it! But I want to be sure it's going to end well, unlike it happened in the past.

L: *When it comes to money...*

C: Exactly (she laughs)!

L: *But do you follow your colleagues work? Except the ones you work with, who design accessories, what about your real competitors as Alessia Xoccatto or Flavia La Rocca can be?*

C: Yes, sure! Flavia, Alessia and I are friends. But I think everyone is very alert and knows what the others do. Then, comparing yourself to others is useful, it helps you to improve your work and, as you said, if you team together you can ask for advices, like which fair is worthy or how to develop you fashion line etc.

L: *Do you think you will all succeed and will be successful in a few years?*

C: Yes, I do! Well, not all of us maybe.

L: *I'm talking about those tens, more or less, who everyone is talking about right now.*

C: You know, the good thing is that everyone is specialised in something different and everyone can find a different target. Alessia, Flavia and I do very different products with very different tastes. But a woman who buys a *\_flavialarocca\_* or an *Alessia\_Xoccatto* can still buy a *Caterina Gatta* for a different occasion. So I think about Massimo Giorgetti who is a genius and whose experience is so formative: he's been able to reach a target which didn't exist in Italy before. And I can only admire someone who has such a sales volume!

L: *What's more important, hard work or stroke of luck?*

C: Both. As Woody Allen said in *Match Point*: 'It's important to be lucky in anything'. I think I met *Italian Vogue* in the right moment. *Franca Sozzani* who answered to my e-mail was such a luck cause it could get lost in thousands of other e-mails. But luck is not enough. You need diligence, perseverance, patience, humility and sacrifice. In the first years I humbled just for my job, forgetting about friends and anything else. Nothing existed beyond my brand.

L: *Do you now feel the effects of that behaviour?*

C: I do. I was much more friendly, now I'm sociable like a bear! I got worse and I became anxious and hypochondriac. I hope to get better otherwise, the more I get old, the more I get worse (laughs).

L: *A clue on where to find those beautiful fabrics you use?*

C: In every fabric store of every city. I was in *Treviso* a few weeks ago and I found gorgeous ones. I'm talking about the historic shops, obviously, the most important shops in every city like *Rome* or *Florence*, *Naples* or *Milan* that always hide some designers fabric that even the owner forgot to have. In *Turin* I found a great extraordinary *Versace's* collection, a very big one. Then your eye gets used to it and you immediately recognise a designer fabric.

L: *Last question: any anticipation about the new collection?*

C: For SS 15 I'm working on some prints I bought in an eighteen-century archive: magnificent drawings – from 178● to 186● – that I'm modifying and re-elaborating, appraising that historic value which distinguishes every collection of mines. The owner of the archive, a lady from Como, was sitting next to me at an Ikea restaurant. Was it a stroke of luck?

Professional bias (of both, I guess) made us end the conversation talking about Italian fashion archives and, after that, a shy goodbye. One hour later, in front of thousands of dazed students, a less shy Carolina Gatta reveals her desires: A part in a Woody Allen's movie, an academy award and the immortality of her name. We are not sure about the first two but, as far as the third is concerned, well, she is on the right track.

Luca Casarotto Romer – Graduated in Fashion Cultures and Techniques.