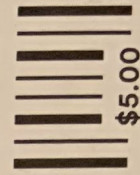


The

# Sartoria

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# Geek



By Courtney Boches

# Fire and Hope:

# Geek Couturier Adria Renee Trusts Her Instincts

**Peggy Carter Mandalorian? Check. A magical transforming Wonder Woman gown? Of course. A 1960s swing coat depicting the Battle of Crait in red feather plumes? Obviously. The mastermind behind these—and many more—innovative and beautiful designs is geek couturier Adria Renee, the 2019 winner of the Her Universe Fashion Show. A self-taught seamstress and designer with a keen eye for silhouette and meticulous detailing skills, Adria spoke with me about inspiration, community, and the powerful dialogue between fashion and fandom.**

Adria credits the Her Universe Fashion Show, founded by actor and designer Ashley Eckstein to showcase geek couture designers each year at San Diego Comic Con, with inspiring her to embark on her design journey. “I had never given too much thought to seriously pursuing fashion, design, or even sewing,” but was instantly intrigued by the community display of fandom and fashion and was determined to enter in 2015. “At my time of entry, I had only been sewing three months, but I put together a TARDIS-inspired design I was really excited about and hoped my meager portfolio would be enough to convince the selection committee, and by some miracle it was.” Being selected as the judges’ runner up was an additional push in the right

direction, imbuing her with confidence in her designs and skills and “it really clicked that ‘Hey, you can do this.’” As a self-taught designer and sewer, Adria credits trial and error, YouTube, and a strong community for ensuring her success and helping her learn new skills. “I like to approach all of my projects as an opportunity to learn and grow, so you’ll see efforts at new techniques through a lot of my work.” The rapid growth of the geek couture and fandom fashion communities is also a phenomenally welcoming and supportive group. “I’ve made incredible connections with the most open and collaborative people, and I’ve certainly learned a lot from them—both in terms of technical

skills and just generally how to be a dope ass human and navigate this little corner of the fashion world.”

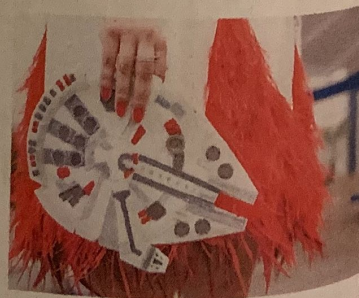
Adria’s love of fashion goes back to childhood, as well as the complex feelings and interactions with peers that accompany something as personal as dress. “Thinking back to grade school, I feel like it was constantly being dismissed as girly or frivolous, which can be really hard to navigate when you are a young and impressionable person who just

really likes pretty things!” Fashion is art, self-expression, confidence and a way to take up space in the room. Fashion choices have connotations and inferences, and Adria has seen these issues become internalized for people. “We’re left resigning ourselves to ‘not really caring’ about fashion so we don’t come off as vain or superficial ... But as I got older, I came to recognize its significance when it comes to self-expression and identity. Going into high school, fashion was always the anchor that

I used to stay true to myself in the face of social pressures and stresses of growing up, and it has continued to be the primary way I share who I am and communicate with the world.”

Adria has also “always been a huge geek,” so the marriage of fashion and fandom is natural for her. Like fashion, fandom is something that passionate individuals “tend to minimize their interest in or keep hiding in general settings, but it’s





also something that is deeply significant to many and can help us to define ourselves, find community, empowerment or inspiration. That is certainly something to be celebrated and something that I constantly find myself wanting to carry with me whenever I can. I think fandom fashion/geek couture has really changed the game when it comes to finding empowerment in celebrating your interests, connecting with others, and expressing yourself.”

Combining these two deeply personal methods of self-expression and connection can be daunting, but Adria stays true to her interests when deciding which properties warrant a collection or specific piece. She designs mostly for her own personal favorite fandoms—“the passion and understanding are already there”—but will take on a challenge as well, with lots of research and a true desire to succeed at “capturing the essence of that property” as a whole rather than designing based on a specific character’s look. Although no stranger to cosplay and costume recreations, Adria loves

how “couture gives me a fair bit of freedom to interpret my favorite fandoms in ways that I find beautiful and empowering, and I enjoy the challenge of translating various properties to something new and fun.” With geek couture, she enjoys the “freedom, versatility, and opportunity to create new dialogue.” She is “constantly drawn to strong visuals and color, feminist themes, or strong role models” and stories that have an inherent sense of “awe or magic.”

“What are the overarching themes?” She asks herself during the design process. “What is the overall aesthetic? Major color stories?” Despite working within different fandoms and franchises with different color palettes, aesthetics, or settings, Adria is true to herself as a designer. “I am definitely drawing inspiration from the material at hand for colors, fabrics, embellishments, images, etc., but I am very much working within certain silhouettes that I know can translate on their own and coordinate across a collection well... I want my garments

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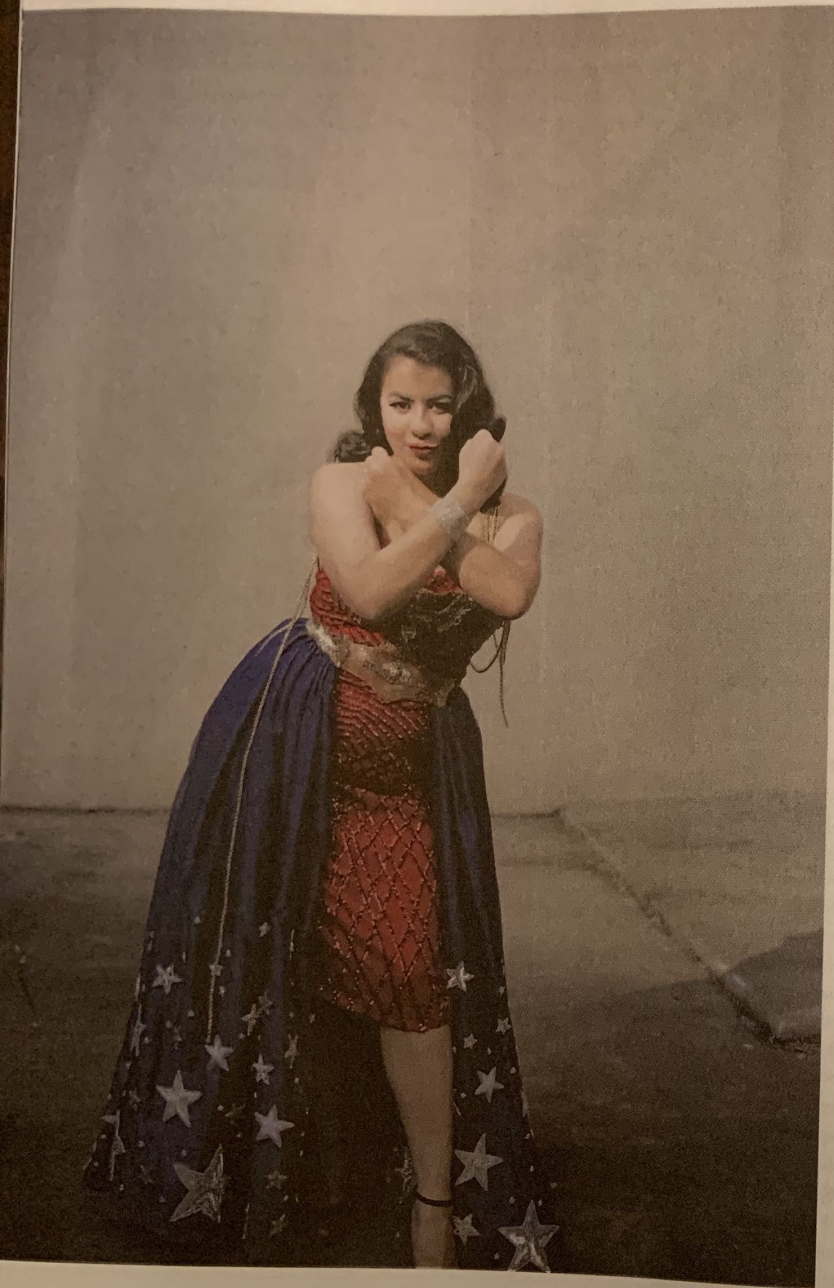


to be wearable without ever feeling dated, and I want them to be practical and versatile across many situations.” Character and story as well as cinematography and production design all translate to fashion and wearable homage, and *The Last Jedi* in particular resonated with Adria. The film “opened a floodgate that I don’t think I’ve actually managed to close since 2017. I’m just constantly inspired by the precise command and balance of color in every single shot!” This influence was seen most profoundly in her 2018 Her Universe Fashion Show entry “Rebellion Reborn”—a beautiful blue starry shift dress paired with a 1960s-inspired white swing coat featuring embroidered speeders hurtling across the salt plains of Crait, leaving red-feathered plumes in their wake. Initial inspiration came from the quote “We are the spark that will light the fire.” This became her mantra throughout the process as she attempted to capture the film’s essence of “fire and hope” and the emotional resonance inherent in these themes. “It was the first time I really felt like I had found my true voice as a designer,” Adria says, “and the reactions to that coat were

just so visceral ... It was the first time I made something I felt was really wearable, that was really me, and that I really understood what I had to offer.”

But like all good artists, she is also motivated by opposites. For her 2019 HUFFS winning design, “Destination: Isla Nublar,” Adria was inspired by *Jurassic Park* to create a romantic dress with a Latin-vacation-resort feel, a conscious

choice based on the filming location, and she relished the chance to go into uncharted territory. “Giving a roughed, adventurous property like *Jurassic Park* a really romantic treatment ... was maybe one of the more risky design choices I’ve made. I was worried that it wasn’t going to land, that people wouldn’t understand what I was going for, but in the end it ended up paying off in the best way. It was a lesson in trusting my instincts, and I’m glad I learned it.”



As a five-year participant in the Her Universe Fashion Show, winning in 2019 with “Destination: Isla Nublar” was “the most amazing surprise,” but winning was never really the priority. “I’m not exaggerating when I say that this show changed the trajectory of my life. It was what empowered me to pursue fashion seriously and what led me to graduate school... Over the years I’ve also learned new techniques for developing strong, thought-out designs and how to keep ‘pushing’ concepts to the next level... the more you push, the more likely you are to really stand out! That kind of pushing is what got me to “Destination: Isla Nublar” and continues to propel me forward.”

Always looking forward, Adria is currently in graduate school pursuing a program in Textiles, Merchandising, and Fashion Design. She hopes to find opportunities to design for retailers while also focusing on personal designs and hopes to be able to teach in the future. “I’m generally really drawn to guiding and helping others, but finding a way to balance that with a healthy sprinkling of custom design work would be the dream.” This year’s HUFWS win included the opportunity to design an upcoming Hot Topic collection based on *Wonder Woman 1984*. She couldn’t share many details yet, except that it was an exciting but fast process filled with incredible fashion industry moments. But more information will be available soon!

Fashion and fandom are two deeply personal topics that passionate individuals are using to connect to others and to their truest selves. As powerful fandom fashion/geek couture brands (most female-led!) continue to emerge, the movement toward community, acceptance, and pride grows. With talented and open-hearted designers such as Adria at the forefront, fans and fashionistas are poised for a take-over. “More than anything, I want to be in a position where I can continue to share my passion and voice and empower others to do the same and find community through that.”

Check out Adria’s beautiful work on her website [adriarenee.com](http://adriarenee.com)! ☐

