

Close-knit family has a true flair for design

FASHION is a fast-paced, commercial medium that takes no prisoners. The older one gets, the fewer the thrills, as one sees repetition after repetition.

But then there are moments of magic that sneak up on you and are forever indelibly marked on your consciousness, making you cherish that you work in this business.

Visiting a fashion degree course's graduate year on the eve of their graduation show is one such example. To see the students' satisfaction with work done, so much hope for the future, the awareness that the hard slog is finally over — it is a humbling and inspiring experience.

Doing a shoot in the Wicklow Mountains with maestro photographer Mike Bunn is another.

My third example of the beauty of this business is witnessing the genius of those who came before us and broke new ground that we now take for granted.

The Grafton Academy's retrospective show of two years ago, celebrating 70 years of teaching and feeding our industry, was inspiring. It is especially wonderful to celebrate our talent when they are still with us.

The genius of Neilli Mulcahy for instance, a pioneer of Irish fashion in the Fifties and Sixties, who is to this day offering her skills as a teacher to all

A show to celebrate 50 years of Cyril Cullen's genius sees daughter Margot's fashion debut, says **Constance Harris**



who ask it of her, makes her one such person to be admired and appreciated.

Cyril Cullen is another. A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Fermoy-born Cyril at a '50 years in the business celebratory show' organised by his daughter Margot, whom I met in an extraordinary and serendipitous way at the Vintage Fashion Fair in Dun Laoghaire a few weeks before.

The Cullen show, a collaboration of Cyril and Margot's individual work, was special because it was living, breathing, history. The sumptuous environs of the Adam room in the Shelbourne Hotel was the setting for Cyril's loyal fans to see what he was up to, to meet his gorgeous wife Margie Lee and his equally gorgeous grown-up daughters, Emily, Benita, Tara and Margot, who were known around Ireland in the Eighties as the Cullen Harpers.

Cyril Cullen's fashion history began in 1960 as a result of a ten-shilling bet on a golf course that he could teach himself to knit. This seemingly audacious claim for an Irish male was to be the birth of an undreamt of destiny, done in

the typically whimsical manner of this unusual character.

Eight years later, in 1968, Cyril held his first fashion show in the Adam room. He had a tremendous appreciation of Irish culture and craft, was especially aware of our disappearing skills, and could be said to be one of the first people to see the potential in marketing it.

His talent as a knitwear designer cannot be underestimated. As you can see from the photographs on our pages today, he used natural yarns such as wool and silk.

Watching his creations from past and present move on the catwalk, I was all admiration for his knit pants that hung beautifully, the stunning drama of his floor-length capes and knee-length coats, the beauty of his occasion-wear dresses, one of which could be worn as blouson for day, then, with a tug of the wrist, it could be turned into a full-length gown for evening.

He even used his fashion to poke some political fun, creating a Nama dress, modelled by Martha Christie in our pictures, with little harps falling off representing falling investments.

Through the Seventies, Cyril went on to create a strong export business to the USA, following in the footsteps of Sybil Connolly and Neilli Mulcahy.

So successful was the label, that 1,200 Irish people were employed in 'outsourcing', the production of his collections off the premises. In Cyril's case, this was a mainly female workforce of knitters working from home.

Margot, who wrote a book on her father, *Knot Sure — The Life and Work of Irish Fashion Designer Cyril Cullen*, published by Blackwater Press, told me that to this day they still get letters from knitters, telling them how they had managed to put their children through college with their money from knitting for Cyril.

In the Eighties, in typical questing fashion, Cyril, who long had a love of porcelain, especially Belleek, decided to teach himself how to make it.

Thus began the next successful business venture. The porcelain remains a big love of Cyril and Margot — who of all his children shares his love of design.

Margot is an architect, but dreamt of being a fashion designer. When she approached her father about doing the 50-year celebratory show in the Shelbourne, Cyril said he would do it on condition she finally produced her own collection!

The thought thrilled and

terrified Margot. But she did it. Some of her work is also featured on our pages today.

Like her father, Margot shares a profound love of natural fabrics, traditional craft and skills. But her design stamp is very different. Her architectural background is evident in her love of graphic shapes, lines and planes, which really worked in her gowns and fitted day dresses.

As Margot says herself, this first collection, which like Cyril's is available to see and order through their evocative castle home and showrooms in Farny Castle, Co Tipperary, was a steep learning curve. But producing it made her realise she really does want to be a clothes designer. Possibly launching at either Showcase, or Dublin Fashion Week (if it happens) next year, Margot hopes to have her first collection in our shops for autumn/winter 2011.

So, in yet another moment of living history, 50 years on, a second Cullen launched their fashion label in the Adam room. But talent aside, it was the genuine affection, freedom of expression and generosity of heart that the Cullen family exhibited at their show, that moved even the most dry and cynical of fashion hearts.

If Cyril Cullen has left an impressive legacy, it was that.

They'd genuinely love to see you.

Fashion

FASHION EDITOR: CONSTANCE HARRIS



◆ CYRIL CULLEN

Photography: Gerry Mooney; show production: Eddie Shanahan; models: Morgan The Agency.

Margot Cullen's silk day and evening gowns, €400-1,200. Cyril Cullen's ready-to-wear knitwear pieces start from €30. Collection dresses from €300-600 for silk and cashmere. Jacob swing coats, organically farmed, undyed, €250-€300 and upwards.

Both collections are available to view, and to order, in Farny Castle, Holycross, Co Tipperary. Tel: (0504) 43281. Open Monday-Saturday, 10am-6pm. Tours of the castle, or harp recitals, must be booked in advance. Email: farnycastle@eircom.net



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◆ CYRIL CULLEN: The 'Nama' dress



◆ CYRIL CULLEN



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