

SHAPE SHIFTER

As the designer behind some of the most viral, taste-making, headline-grabbing shoe hits of the last 10 years, you've probably walked in **NINA CHRISTEN**'s shoes. Now, she's building on her creative partnership with Jonathan Anderson as she heads up footwear design at Dior, alongside creating for her own label, Christen. **HARRIET QUICK** meets a maker and an artist.



PETAL 90MM SANDALS, LOEWE, SPRING/SUMMER 2023



AURORE SHOE, DIOR, SPRING/SUMMER 2026

Shoes are forever paradoxical — they are a thrilling form of escapism yet keep us firmly on the ground; they are diminutive in size but capture wild imaginings and declare social status; they change the very way we carry ourselves in the world. Great shoes are also a cipher for our times, guaranteed to stir admiration wherever one walks. Yet exceptional designers are as rare as hen's teeth. There are not many who can master the technical challenges and balance the aesthetics of making a beautiful shoe.

Forty-year-old Swiss-Chilean Nina Christen is one of the exceptions, yet outside of the industry, few know her name. With this year's launch of her own eponymous brand and her role designing game-changing collections for a whole slew of fashion houses, the spotlight is beginning to intensify. In the 21st century, Christen has created some of the most memorable, innovative, and desirable styles changing the story of shoe design, as well as brand fortunes.

It was Christen who was behind the delightful line-up of footwear at JW Anderson's debut at Dior, featuring a mule with a giant soft leather flower-like bloom; a pointed-toe Cinderella pump embellished in crystal; and a darling satin slingback with a little bow stamped with "Dior" in gold. "It was very intense and I went a bit into over simulation with everything that was happening and all the positive feedback," says Christen, who's recouping in her Montmartre apartment, where she lives with her partner. This is a woman who adores meditating and being in nature, and can also speak five languages. She also collects Chinese teapots. Fierce attention can feel weird.

The fact that the sales of shoes and handbags are major financial drivers for a luxury brand makes her work even more valued. "When I start at a brand, I try to tune into the energy of the house and of the creative director. It's very much about feeling what kind of attitude

I would like the customer to have and imagining that in a form. Dior is more playful, less serious, and what JW Anderson adds is a lightness to something that maybe was too formal before," says Christen. Rather than sketch or make endless prototypes, Christen dreams up her design ideas and holds them vividly in mind, endlessly improving the proportions, the details, until she arrives at the best expression. "It's a thinking process and it takes a long time, but once I start making the lasts with the atelier, I know exactly how the final will look. My mind is like an AI image creator because I can really see the final product," she laughs. "For example, the bow at Dior was very important. I knew I wanted to integrate a bow, but in a more modern way," says Christen of the tubular ribbon that suggests picante prettiness, rather than cutesy.

After being introduced by Delphine Arnault, Anderson and Christen first started working together at Loewe and they have built a close collaboration. There, Christen dreamed up surreal sculptural wonders, like the mule with a giant tropical anthurium 3D-printed flower with its wiggly phallic stamen; classic leather courts balanced on heels made to look like an egg or a lipstick; and a bizarre pump covered with deflated rubber balloons. "I find Jonathan extremely inspiring. The way he works, the way he juxtaposes things — everything is very immediate, super dynamic and very charged. My process is more introverted, whereas Jonathan is extrovert and that matches well," explains Christen behind her long sleek mane of brunette hair.

She landed the Dior position following a long, winding trajectory of consultancy roles that started with Karl Lagerfeld, progressed to Yves Saint Laurent men's shoes (a product that Hedi Slimane studied in forensic detail); to gigs at mainstream brands that broadened her reach; and onto Celine. "Phoebe Philo had this

PHOTOGRAPHY HEIKKI KASKI

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HELIX PUMP 95MM, CHRISTEN, 01/2024 COLLECTION

specific vision for shoes, which was futuristic and pointed to a new era and that inspired me so much. She would never accept something if it was not exactly to the point. That's something that I definitely want to carry on into my own brand," says Christen, who came up with a myriad of sexy-strange styles, including the Celine rubber boots and hybrid designs like the moccasin boot.

By contrast, her time working with Daniel Lee at Bottega Veneta she likens to a huge playground. Here, she conjured such viral hits as the "blown-up" Lido sandal. It was first made on a men's machine, to cope with the volume, in a tiny workshop in Florence. "There wasn't really a shoe business at Bottega back then, so there was no precedent. I could go to the factory and draw a hundred shoes and launch them. That was a dream, to realize just so many ideas. It is like being in front of a huge buffet wanting to sample everything. We had so much fun making these shoes," laughs Christen.

Fearless experimentation was embedded early on, when the young Christen was growing up in rural Switzerland, the only child of a hard-working single mother. Christen remembers obsessively making things — boxes, collages, paintings. "I was very independent from an early age and I've never been bored. I've always found things to make with my hands," she says, describing a raincoat that she crafted out of plastic bags, and a socks-and-skirt combo in fleece. Certainly not the norm in conservative Switzerland. "I didn't care what other people thought of me. I've always looked strange because I was searching for my identity in fashion," laughs Christen of her crazy get-ups and obsession with Paris.

Taking the making talent seriously, she enrolled at college in Bern to study tailoring. "I wanted to know how clothes are properly made and this was a purely technical course. I can still sew a shirt perfectly, all by hand! It's true, you have to know how to construct before you

can deconstruct," smiles Christen. Eyeing a move to Paris, she took a job waitressing to save up funds, and set about applying for all manner of grants. Eventually she won an IKEA-funded scholarship to study at Institut Français de la Mode (IFM) in Paris. Living in a tiny studio apartment in the Marais, she began to make her way and found her calling. "Shoes are so complicated; there are so many components and so much to figure out and that answered a desire for multiplicity, in a way, and it felt natural to me. I love certain periods of certain brands for shoes. I don't know who the designers were, but Prada in the 1990s, Helmut Lang, and Tom Ford for Gucci always spoke to me," she adds.

Now, Christen is building her own eponymous brand and she has just released collection number two. This is where Christen is able to refine her craft and develop her expression, which looks decidedly serene yet with a twizzle of the perverse. There's a shearling-lined buckled sandal, furry booties that look like a labradoodle's coat, and a correspondent glove-leather tabi boot in the mix.

"These shoes talk more about myself than I ever could. 'Serene' is a very good word and I like invention in the detail — elements that you don't see. Everything is worked on with care, love and put together in a grounded, balanced way," she explains. One such ingenious invention is an ergonomic insole for high heels made out of multi-layered, recycled memory foam that supports the arch. This could be a 'hallelujah' moment for our feet.

The packaging is also beyond. "The box has an inlay that contains a dust bag and an envelope with a little catalogue of the campaign images, and the shoes are embedded on recycled cashmere cushions. It's a product that is about absolute refinement in material, and exceptional in execution. I want to achieve perfection in shape. It's a sculpture to me," says Christen of her ode to the shoe. ■■





