



Photography by Peden + Munk

THE **TALENT** | *by Michael Herren*

## SUZAN FELLMAN

### WELL PROCESSED

Cue lights: Enter Suzan Fellman, a character. She's the eternal ingénue, the woman with a past, the red-carpet vixen, the studious bluestocking, the earth mama nurturer, the girl next door, the one you wait for, the one to avoid, the dreamer who talks straight, the spendthrift who saves you buckets, the elevator of sensibilities, the fixer of problems, and the lady with the knowing grin and glint in her eye. She also does windows (as in treatments), whole houses — entire lives even.

How is this possible in a wee 40-something wrapped in a worked-out Beverly Hills package and a "What me, I wake up looking like this" insouciance? It's all part of a creative process that flows like a raging whitewater river, and which defines her Who, What, When, How and Why.



Scrim up, the Prelude, in which our protagonist, little Suzan, the eldest in a family of three girls, grows up in a cauldron of creativity. Deep in the woods of New Hampshire, her parents designed and built their saltbox-style house — with their own hands. “Dad dug the foundation, felled the trees and cleared the stumps, Mom scrubbed and carried, positioned and finished. We kids were always around, carrying the spirit sticks as much as little girls can.” In the nearby town, Dad owned the haberdashery where Mom served as buyer. As with the family house, the business was a family affair in which the kids were very much present. “Houndstooth, herringbone? Check,” jokes Fellman, early on a dresser and stripper of mannequins and displays in a professional setting, but who on her own little-girl time was a maker of craft, mostly of recyclables. “I don’t know if it was Yankee New England, my family, omnipresent nature whose beauty could not be denied, but I was green from go. I’d collect gum wrappers as a kid and make something out of them; in 4-H, I wasn’t only interested in the flowers and plants but in making the pots, and in re-imagining them from found materials. The reinvention of everything was pretty much the focus of my childhood.”

Living room designed by Suzan Fellman.  
Photography by Peden + Munk



Is it any wonder, then, that Fellman's Act I began in art school, at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), where Fellman studied fashion and photography? Is it a surprise she moved to New York before age 20, and there, in once-upon-a-time very gritty SoHo, opened a shop called Sioux City, in which she sold her and other designers' Western-style clothes alongside cowboy camp (Ride 'em, Cowgirl!)? Does it also not follow naturally that Andy Warhol and his Factory posse would saddle up, make her a kind of baby designer-mascot and whisk her to that great and infamous saloon of pleasure also known as Studio 54? And is it not a given that Not-So-Little Suzan would get down on the outfits, Robert Isabell's flowers, the glitter, the glamour — all while avoiding the drugs and darker adult deeds that happened behind the scenes? "Actually," corrects Fellman, our disco diva Eloise, "it was ALL there to see in the balconies. But I was way too busy to notice. I was watching, I was processing. I was doing the damn hustle!"



Suzan Fellman draping a chair in Cecil Beaton textiles. Photography by Peden + Munk

Not even Sioux City being burgled twice broke her rhythm. Thrice, however, was too much, especially when it became clear the mafia was involved. "One night this big guy came into the shop, he really filled the doorway, and said, 'Yo, we gotta friend of yours in the trunk.' I went to the street, my knees shaking, and saw he had my big deer head. It had belonged to my grandfather and had disappeared in the last break-in. He suggested I start making 'protection' payments."

Instead, Fellman decided to take a break in the action by apportioning her dollars toward a different kind of protection: sunscreen. After closing Sioux City, she and a few friends hit the road to Palm Beach, a respite that turned into several seasons selling Charles Jourdan shoes on Worth Avenue. "Remember, I was in my very early 20s," she says. But the sojourn was more than an extended vacay. It was also a window into a new aesthetic replete with great houses and good furniture belonging to grand names. And there were the shoes. "The imagination, design and execution, their sheer theatricality!" she remembers.



Photography by Peden + Munk



That kind of energy and appreciation, matched by sales, meant Fellman was soon transferred to the Jourdan flagship store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. In so doing, she transitioned to her Act II via the reliable career failsafe otherwise known as acting. But luck Fellman had aplenty. In about as much time as it takes to say "Lana Turner discovered at the Schwab's counter," she got a big break. "I was at a party for a brand-new champagne bar on Rodeo called, believe it or not, Nippers. I smiled for a few clicking cameras, one of the shots ended up in *W*, and a casting agent tracked me down and called me in to read for *Cocoon*." She met with Richard Zanuck, the film's principal producer, and director Ron Howard. While Fellman didn't ultimately get the part, she got a kind of golden ticket: entrée into The Loft Studio, perhaps the most powerful acting school in Los Angeles in the 1980s, where she trained alongside Sean Penn, Nic Cage, Meg Ryan, Meg Tilly and, her favorite acting partner, Eric Stoltz. "We went six days a week. We'd have breakfast there, read the newspapers, read the classics. The incredible Peggy Feury [a renowned acting teacher now, sadly, deceased] oversaw everything, and she would always say that to be able to illuminate the human condition you have to take in its full spectrum."

Vintage Pierre Cardin blue velvet suit. Courtesy Catwalk, Los Angeles. Photography by Peden + Munk





Crochet Pendant

While her classmates focused on TV and film — and even while she had roles in de rigueur ingénue training vehicles (“Oh yes, I was in the horror movie *Speak of the Devil*. I was the only one who lived! Figuratively speaking”) — Fellman was instead transfixed by experimental theater. “Smart me, right?” she laughs. But her primary interest wasn’t fame, but rather the creation of total environments: from the postcards announcing a new production to the performance itself. “That idea, that possibility, was my sugar and spice.”



Norell Scarf Ottoman



Reserved Seating (Lanvin, Givenchy, Dior).  
Photography by Stephen Busken



**I**t soon became her reality. Over the next decade, often at the Alliance theater Company, Fellman starred in, directed, produced and/or designed a roster of award winners. There was "Rage, Or I'll Be Home For Christmas," an early example of reneged theater in Los Angeles that dealt with the holidays, homosexuality and violence, for which Fellman hired an actor to picket dressed as a priest. "He stormed in during the second act and was tackled by an 'audience member,' another actor. Just terrific!" There were also "Shyness Is Nice," by Marc Spitz ("My directorial debut, it dealt with coming out, drugs, sex; very racy for the stage. A huge hit"), and "Night and Her Stars," for which Fellman was nominated for an Ovation Award for design. The play, by Richard Greenberg, was what the movie "Quiz Show" was based upon. "Because it dealt with the smoke and mirrors of television, I made the entire set out of Lucite, draped the whole theater in opalescent fabric and put the 'audience' on discreet dollies." It was total environmental theater and that's what Fellman loved. "People used to walk out and I'd hear them say, 'Where did I park my car?' Isn't that terrific!"

To finance herself and her theater work, she started making clothes out of reused fine linens — bloomers out of pillowcases, dresses out of tablecloths, jackets from old quilts.

Photography by Stephen Busken



“As a little girl, I remember saying to my grandma, who had these amazing antique embroidered pillow cases, ‘I’m gonna make something out of these.’ Her response was, ‘Over my dead body.’” While Fellman might have left granny’s pretties intact, her sideline turned into Chest and Drawers, a line of French-seamed women’s ware that she sold at popular arts festivals and music fairs (“I toured with Lilith [the music fair] for summer after summer”), and chic retailers such as Fred Segal on Melrose Avenue. Soon her sideline turned into a big operation, with Fellman scouring rag houses for vintage fabrics throughout the United States and Europe — all before the Internet. “It wasn’t unusual for me to get deliveries of five hundred pounds of tassels or three thousand pounds of homespun. Then the sorting and washing would begin, and after the design, cutting sewing. The work!” Sales merited the work. Chest and Drawers developed a cultlike following, and after only a few years Fellman had saved enough to buy a 1924 Spanish Revival house in Los Angeles’ tony Hancock Park. Typical of her, it wasn’t a turnkey. “It was in horrible shape, nobody had lived in the place for close to forty years. Even my theater friends, who were used to total disaster, were like ‘Ohhhh ...’” Slowly and meticulously, Fellman restored the house, knocking down walls, extending the garden, building a brick patio, selecting and cutting Moroccan tiles. Like her parents, she did the vast majority of the work herself.



Driveway gates to Fellman's home, inspired by the gates of the Saint Laurent residence in Marrakesh. Photography by Peden + Munk





Act III began the way these career shifts often do. Friends and colleagues came to the house, liked it, and started to ask her if she could consult about a room, then the floor, then the whole house, then the yard too. Fellman was happy to oblige. "I was flattered, of course, but it was important for me that I prepare properly, especially because I had no formal education in interior design." What she did was two-fold. First she treated the spaces as she would a raw theater stage. "I liked nothing more than ripping apart a whole set at the beginning of a production. Then sitting alone, all night long, I'd think about the play and its characters." So that's what she did with her clients, either figuratively or, if the clients were away days or nights and game, literally.

Likewise, she treated each project as though it were a play to study, and each client a character to be understood. "It's really a very similar process. I listen to who they are, examine what they like and dislike, then imagine them in the space." In addition to interviews and discussion, Fellman devised a series of questions — none of which have "right" answers — to help her understand client preferences and personalities. Questions are tailored to clients, but some of Fellman's favorites include: microscope or telescope; Beatles or Rolling Stones; HBO or Netflix; martini or margarita; Hemingway or Crichton; Ella or Carly; J. Crew or Armani; Cohen Brothers or Coppola; Santa Barbara or Las Vegas; Prius or Porsche.

Additionally, Fellman began a rigorous self-education process, involving the usual (copious reading of design books, magazines, and biographies of designers past and present), as well as the usual-and-then-some. Not only did she become a regular in antiques stores, showrooms and the major flea markets, she visited industrial welding shops, car-repair garages, anywhere that might yield an interesting craftsman with an off-beat, potentially useful but definitely inspirational skill that might be applied to something down the road.

Feather horse Bust by Catherine Greenup



After canvassing Southern California, she ventured further afield, to fairs such as Maison & Objet in Paris and the gigantic, rough-and-tumble Round Top Antiques Fair in Texas, where she also started exhibiting.

There's also her jewel-box-of-a-showroom near the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). "I rented the space as an office but immediately started 'producing' thematic decorative arts exhibitions that rotate every three or four months, and which are totally different and complete transformations. People have walked in after a previous visit, and they think a new design business has opened up." Shows — and that's exactly what they are—have included Pairs (as in pairs of objects, such as chairs or consoles); Hand Made; Yippie (from the 1960s counterculture Youth International Party); Celia Birtwell, A British Re-invasion, a showstopper in which the David Hockney muse flew from London for the launch of her eponymous textile and wallpaper collection, for which Fellman has the U.S. exclusive ("I courted her like a lover, letter after letter after letter. I wanted her beauty so badly!"); and this past October, Beaton, centering on the Cecil Beaton collection of textiles and wallpaper and celebrating the US release of Beaton's Sketchbook line, which includes "Garbo's Eyes" and "Beaton Sailors" (Fellman has the U.S. exclusive for this collection as well, and to give an idea of how she rolls, for the launch party she rented the Annenberg Community Beach House, the former palatial oceanfront escape of Marion Davies and William Randolph Hearst, dressed mannequins in Beaton fabric a la *My Fair Lady*, and booked London-based Beaton biographer Hugo Vickers to lecture).



Like any interesting character, Fellman is a complex, genuine composite, and as such her work attracts a heavy-hitting client list of those who appreciate the real deal (among them Bette Midler, Rashida Jones, Toni Basil, Mary Ellen Zemeckis, Janet Sheen and Ron Eldard). Like any true creative, she trusts herself, hones her skills and cuts no corners, and understand rules thoroughly enough to selectively break them. Who can say what her Act X (with her background in experimental theater and appreciation for Dada, Fellman understands unconventional act structures) will be? What's certain, however, is residential design will be a big component, because it's now central to her process, and it fascinates her. As she says, "If all the world's a stage, why not have yours reflect and support your own narrative? Really, isn't that the way it should be? And I get to think of all those stories and see all those parts!"

Curtain.