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LAP OF LUXURY: Howell in her flagship store in Tokyo.

DESIGN: INTERVIEW

Don't Shout, Seduce

BRITISH DESIGNER MARGARET HOWELL IS CELEBRATING A BIG ANNIVERSARY WITH HER TYPICAL UNDERSTATEMENT

FORTY YEARS AGO, Margaret Howell opened her first eponymous boutique on South Molton Street in London. For the millions of men and women who have since turned her men's and women's ready-to-wear lines into a thriving global business, it will come as no surprise that the event was low-key. Howell is hazy on the festivities; all she remembers is the excitement of designing the clean-lined, unadorned interior, an antidote to what she describes as the "high-end, shiny look" of the day.

Her minimalist aesthetic prevails today, but back in the showy, disco-driven '70s, such understatement was radical. The designer has always favored simplicity and contemporary refinement, as well as an unequivocal sense of Britishness, evidenced in her devotion to tailoring and heritage fabrics—pure Irish linen, natural woolens, Harris tweeds. Her clothing is the equivalent of high-end comfort food—you always know what you'll get, and you're happy to get it. In the past decade, Howell has extended her philosophy of functional simplicity to homewares (from teapots to textiles to chairs) and limited-edition collaborations with British designers like Anglepoise and Ercol, as sold at her nine stores in Britain and 21 shops across Europe. (In America, you can find her clothes at Barneys New York and the Brooklyn boutique Bird.)

And then there is Japan, where Howell has achieved the sort of fame Martha Stewart might envy. She has 102 shops across the country, as

BY
DANIELLE DEMETRIOU
@danielleinjapan

well as several Margaret Howell cafés. Sitting in her Tokyo press room (minimal and white, naturally), Howell stresses that her design philosophy has never wavered over four decades. Rather, "it has evolved without ever compromising on quality. In some cases, we use the same suppliers that we did 40 years ago."

Howell, now 70, is wearing a striped T-shirt, black trousers and Nike air trainers, her relaxed, lived-in style remarkably unchanged since her days studying fine art at Goldsmith's College in London. Not long after graduating, she stumbled upon the catalyst for her business: a men's pinstriped shirt, found at a rummage sale. The perfect mix of comfort, fine design and quality fabric inspired her to start making men's shirts on her kitchen table (sewing was a childhood passion), before founding the business with her future husband Paul Renshaw. (The couple have since divorced.)

Howell's shirts were quickly picked up by Joseph Ettedgui, the influential founder of the London-based label Joseph. He told Howell he would open a shop for her as soon as she produced a complete men's line. True to his word, in 1977, after she had expanded to suits and accessories, the South Molton Street boutique opened. Her first women's line—with its alluring androgyny—debuted in 1980.

Right from the start, Howell was clear about one thing: She had no interest in trends or seasonal themes. Each article of clothing was something she wanted to wear. Her designs, free of extraneous or fussy details, modern without being showy, have always been lifestyle-driven. The clothing is pricey (a pair of men's linen shorts can set you back $325), but it is meant to last a lifetime, the luxury implicit in the feel of the garment and its durability. "It's a style rather than fashion," she says.

Such craftsmanship is revered in Japan, and Tokyo entrepreneur Sam Segure saw crossover potential in 1982, when he began importing Howell's clothes; her first store opened in Tokyo a year later, in the upmarket Aoyama fashion district. "Sam realized quite quickly that we were a small company, a small production, and he would do better if he set up a license to manufacture here," says Howell. "So that's what happened. And as a result, the business has grown gradually to what it is today."

The designer, in turn, has been influenced by Japan. She tells me of her first visit, in the early '80s, when Segure took her to Kyoto to see the "small temples with their beautifully polished floors and near perfect proportions. The

HER CLOTHING IS THE EQUIVALENT OF HIGH-END COMFORT FOOD.

MIX MASTER: In addition to her fashion, Howell's flagshipTokyo store, this page and next, sells a selection of beauty products, furniture and homewares created or curated by the designer.

KEITH NG FOR NEWSWEEK (3)

simplicity of the Japanese use of bamboo," she adds, "all the linens and the indigos—everything is wonderful. I think it's to do with my love of things past, things that are beautifully handcrafted. This is what I have always honed in on in England, the make of things."

When she visits Japan, she prefers the quieter side of Tokyo, always staying at the old-school Hotel Okura, and traveling frequently to Kyoto, where she is collaborating with a 19th century tin tea caddy company. In England, where Howell is based, she is similarly drawn to the simpler life in rural Suffolk, where she spends weekends in a 1960s modernist holiday house on the coast; small and uncluttered, it is decorated with objects and furniture by the designers she admires—pottery by Denby and Poole, chairs by the Finnish designer Alvar Aalto, the shelving of German minimalist Dieter Rams.

Six years ago, Howell appointed an archivist to record all of her designs and memorabilia. She sees it as both a way of preserving the past and of creating a base for what comes next. For all of Howell's dedication to timeless design, she does tweak collections with subdued flourishes, reflecting her evolving taste—a skater's bobble hat, for example, or cropped, wide-legged trousers. "One can't expect it to stay the same," she says, though her overall vision remains steadfast. "You learn that your intuition is something that your customers respond to."

Howell's great success still surprises her. "I was always very nervous and shy. In the early days, there was this pressure from time to time to conform to fashion, and that didn't work for me." She pauses. "I suppose one becomes slightly more sure of oneself."

As might be expected, the 40th anniversary of her first shop is passing without much fanfare. "In terms of my lifestyle," she says with a small smile, "nothing has really changed much." N

+ **SHADOW PLAY:** Bannon at the White House.

BOOKS: REVIEW

The Art of the Smear

JOSHUA GREEN'S BOOK, *DEVIL'S BARGAIN*, TAKES AIM AT STEVE BANNON BUT FAILS TO LAND A SOLID BLOW

TWO THINGS must be said about *Devil's Bargain*, Joshua Green's new book about chief White House political strategist Stephen K. Bannon: (1) It is not very good. (2) You won't be able to put it down.

Devil's Bargain is based on a story Green wrote for *Bloomberg Businessweek* in 2015: "This Man Is the Most Dangerous Political Operative in America: Steve Bannon runs the new vast right-wing conspiracy—and he wants to take down both Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush." The title must have seemed ridiculous back then, when many were wondering what we'd be calling Bill Clinton a few months later. First dude?

At the time, Bannon was the chairman of Breitbart News, the alt-right site that would in

BY **ALEXANDER NAZARYAN** @alexnazaryan

due time help clear away Trump's 16 Republican competitors like so much dry brush. Green interviewed Bannon and his associates for what he says was 20 hours of tape. He talked to Trump too: "a wide-ranging 90-minute interview in his Trump Tower office."

This is the stuff book deals are made of, especially at a time when, for so many, consumption of political news is the intellectual version of stress eating. *Devil's Bargain*, written in obvious haste (the afterward is dated June 5, 2017), is more synthesis than analysis, and the outline of Bannon's strange career is neither illuminating nor useful; it can be summed up in about a dozen words: Virginia, Catholicism, Catholic school, Virginia Tech, the Navy, Harvard, Wall Street, Hollywood, Breitbart, Trump.

Green's biggest mistake is that he succumbs to a reductively deterministic version of history. His thesis: that Bannon was always fated to become Trump's third and most effective campaign manager, the one who shaped the addled candidate's grievances in a furious—if delusive—nationalism. Writing of Bannon's education at a conservative Catholic military academy, he approvingly quotes a friend from that time: "There's really no jump at all from Steve Bannon at Benedictine in 1972 to 2016 and Donald Trump."

Green is most insightful about Bannon at the helm of Breitbart News, a role he assumed after the site's founder, Andrew Breitbart, died in 2012. He credits Bannon with hiring Milo Yiannopoulos, the British provocateur who connected an online army of angry young men—an army recently seen waging a "meme war" against CNN. But more substantive was Bannon's founding of the Government Accountability Institute, a think tank essentially intended to fund the research of conservative writer Peter Schweizer. The fruit of that research was *Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich*, published in 2015. Bannon's genius was to pitch Schweizer's disputed but troubling revelations to the mainstream media, not to the right-wing outlets still hot on the trail of Whitewater. "We've got the 15 best investigative reporters at the 15 best newspapers in the country all chasing after Hillary Clinton," Bannon boasted.

There are some curious omissions, most notably about Bannon's personal life, as well as his well-reported racism and misogyny. In 1996, his second wife called the Santa Monica police because, she charged, "he pulled at her neck and wrist during an altercation over their finances," according to a 2016 Politico report. In 2007, in documents relating to custody of their two daughters, she also accused Bannon of anti-Semitism. "He said he doesn't like Jews and that he doesn't like the way they raise their kids to be whiney brats." He once threatened to ram the comments of a female employee "down her fucking throat." And in a recent radio interview, Bannon referred to women educated at elite Northeastern colleges as "a bunch of dykes." He has also criticized the preponderance of Asian executives in Silicon Valley.

This all deserves mention, especially in a book devoted to a master hitman.

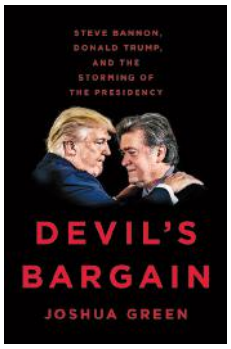
Bannon became Trump's campaign manager in August 2016, largely at the behest of the powerful Mercer family, which funds right-wing causes (including Breitbart). Some conservatives thought the hiring was a coup de grâce for Trump's chances in November. Green quotes the conservative commentator Rick Wilson: "If you were looking for a tone or pivot, Bannon will pivot you in a dark, racist, divisive direction.... Republicans should run away."

> "DARKNESS IS GOOD," HE TOLD THE MAN WHO WOULD BE PRESIDENT. "DON'T LET UP."

But it worked, and Green makes the case, persuasively, that this is largely due to Bannon using Trump as the vessel for *his* nationalist ideas. He recounts an episode from late in the election, when some accused Trump's campaign of running a TV ad rife with anti-Semitic insinuation. Many were disgusted. Bannon was unfazed. "Darkness is good," he told the man who would be president. "Don't let up."

In due time, the Age of Trump will find its Hunter S. Thompson, but it might be years before anyone has the necessary distance to capture the competing currents that daily buffet the political landscape like furious storms over the face of Mars. Think of *Devil's Bargain*, then, as an addictive but not especially healthful handful of deep-fried morsels. You could do much worse, and if you're on social media, you almost certainly have. Snack away. N

Devil's Bargain
By Joshua Green
Penguin Press, out now ($27)



FROM LEFT: KEITH NG FOR NEWSWEEK; ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG/GETTY; PENGUIN PRESS