

A woman of substance

Rebel, political activist and high priestess of fashion, **Dame Vivienne Westwood** talks to *Kate McAuley* about her new store here at DIFC, obsessive consumerism and her admiration for the Queen



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTIAN CHAMBERNOT

'I will not be dictated to,' says a defiant Vivienne Westwood. It's a statement that should come as no surprise to anybody who has ever had a passing interest in Britain's most celebrated fashion doyenne. Westwood has, after all, spent her entire career being uncompromising and anti-establishment. Today,

Westwood has agreed to talk to us to promote the opening of her store in the DIFC's Gate Village – the first of a planned five in the Middle East (including Kuwait, Qatar, Lebanon and Bahrain). It's the week after her Autumn/Winter 2009 show at Paris Fashion Week and Westwood is up to her neck in meetings with

buyers, suppliers and whoever else wants a piece of her.

Why is she so in demand? It all goes back to the '70s, when Westwood first came to public attention. While the rest of the world was enamoured with hippies and folk music, she busied herself promoting anarchy through clothing, both from the wares she sold at her central London store, and with her own designs soon after. It was the naissance of the punk and new wave movements and Westwood was at the epicentre. Her ripped-up style employed safety pins and graphic prints that 'vandalised' symbols of the establishment, such as the famed Queen Elizabeth II T-shirt that quickly became synonymous with bands such as The Sex Pistols. 'At the time,' Westwood recalls, 'the Queen was the personification of English hypocrisy.'

Since these first rebellious antics almost 40 years ago, Westwood's career has continued along the same vein. She still owns the London shop, though it only stocks her 'Anglomania' line of clothes. And, as a designer, she's always remained true to herself and firmly on the cutting edge. It's only her worldwide appeal and eminence that has evolved.

Still, rather than view our chat as a necessary evil (as so many public figures of her stature do), she uses it as an opportunity to wax lyrical – from rhetorically stabbing her fabric shears into dilettante designers ('It is a sickness of the modern age that people think that they can do what they want to without taking the time to master the discipline in the first place') to the plight of the environment ('US\$30billion [Dhs110billion] is the annual amount required to achieve total regeneration of the rainforests').

Gone are the spiky edges of Westwood's past, but age (she turned 68 last week) has done little to quell her lust for controversy. Isn't it, however, becoming more difficult to cause a hullabaloo now that opposing views are given a mainstream audience? Not so, declares the designer. 'It's becoming increasingly difficult in this age of conformity

Time Out

Dubai

+5°

**Time Out cover designed
by Vivienne Westwood**

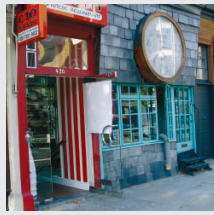
When we asked Vivienne Westwood to design a cover for us, she came back with this – a conceptual image to illustrate the political message behind her last Gold Label collection:

'Somewhere between 400 parts per million (ppm.) and 500 ppm. of CO² in the atmosphere the earth will settle down to a new equilibrium of +5° hotter than now. Our luscious comfortable world will be gone. What is left will support hopefully one-fifth of the present world population.'

To read her full text on this, see www.timeoutdubai.com.

Vivienne Westwood.

A career less ordinary



1971: Westwood opens her first shop called Let It Rock with partner Malcolm McLaren, a musician and producer, in Chelsea, central

London. The shop has gone through many incarnations – it's now called World's End.

1976: The Sex Pistols wear costumes designed by Westwood, which boosts her rise to fame.

1981-84: Westwood begins showing her clothes – first at London Fashion Week with her 'Pirates Collection' then in Paris with 'Buffalo' and 'Punkature' lines. Tokyo follows shortly after.

1989: John Fairchild, editor of the influential *Women's Wear Daily*, names Westwood one of the world's top six designers in his book *Chic Savages*.

1990-91: Named fashion designer of the year by the British Fashion Council.

1992: Awarded an OBE by the Queen.



1994: Supermodel Naomi Campbell nearly breaks her ankle when she falls in the nine inch platform shoes she's sporting in a Westwood catwalk show.

2004: A retrospective of the designer's work goes on display at London's V&A Museum.

2006: The Prince of Wales makes Westwood a Dame.



2008: Carrie Bradshaw gets jilted at the altar in a Vivienne Westwood designed wedding dress in the *Sex And The City* movie.

for people to express their opinions. To have a choice has become political. It allows people to discriminate. To choose rather than just suck up rubbish.'

Superficially, there seems to be an irony here. Westwood is against consumerism, but is also planning to conquer the Middle East, starting with Dubai, where shopping is so popular we hold two festivals in its honour every year. On this point, Westwood hikes up her infamous crinoline miniskirt and mounts her proverbial high horse. 'My manifesto is against crap and obsessive consumption, not against consumption per se.' In short, she's lobbying for us to make both an informed and creative choice in what we wear, rather than gulping down all those cheap, high-street pieces that make us look like clones and fall apart after the first wash.

It's all part of Westwood's 'Do It Yourself' manifesto, which has underpinned her last two collections (and also harks back to her earliest designs).

'I used my recent work as an opportunity to inspire people to change their behaviour – encouraging sustainability and versatility in our view of dressing, like matching an historical piece with a new item or investing in key pieces instead of throwaway purchases.' According to Westwood, us Dubai shoppers are ultra savvy and do this already, which is why she's come here.

It's her commitment to giving her clients an alternative to the mainstream that has always stood Westwood in good stead. Never one to adhere to the fashion zeitgeist, her collections are rarely compared with those of her contemporaries. Popular culture has never appealed to Westwood. She's too busy to go to the cinema, doesn't watch TV and avoids fashion magazines. Instead she seeks out her own path.

For the line that she just presented in

'To have a choice has become political. It allows people to discriminate'

Paris, for example, she was inspired by an exhibition at the Louvre of masterworks by Venetian Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna. 'Mantegna had the vision and original power to create for us a unique and timeless moment,' Westwood says of her muse. She provides detailed descriptions of how the artist inspired her, though it's not long before she skips to her works' underlying political message – demonstrated in the cover she's designed for us (see page 17). 'The collection is called +5°,' she explains. 'With somewhere between 400 parts per million (ppm) and 500 ppm. of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the earth will settle down to a new equilibrium of +5° hotter than it is now. Our comfortable world will be gone.' Only Westwood could juxtapose 14th century art with global warming and turn it into a commercial and critical success.

(And yes, opening a store abroad isn't the most environmentally friendly thing to do, yet Vivienne feels it's worth it to spread her message. 'If you have anything to say, you appreciate having the platform to say it,' she responds.)

Yet, perhaps the most refreshing element we've come across is Westwood's total acceptance of her own fickle character – the ease with which she has allowed herself to unapologetically evolve. She shocked Britain, for example, when she switched her long allegiance from the Labour Party to the Conservatives over civil rights issues in 2007. She even likes the Queen now. 'My proudest fashion moment was when the Queen gave me the OBE. I admire her now and see her as a supreme creature who inherited her position.' Still, she did meet the monarch on her own terms: with her red hair piled high, porcelain skin and knicker-less under an exquisite dress of her own design. Just as you'd expect. See *Consume*, page 48 for a review of her boutique in DIFC Gate Village

