

DESIGNER PROFILE

HIGH-MINDED STYLE

In his designs and his nonprofit, Prabal Gurung has lofty goals

STORY *Sahar Khan* PHOTOGRAPHY *Edwin Tse*

On a humid May afternoon in Manhattan's Garment District, fashion designer Prabal Gurung is seated in his hushed, book-filled atelier. Pieces from his fall 2015 collection hang alongside artworks by Richard Mosse and Casey Cook. A white and navy gown trails elegantly along the cement floor. And yet, despite the calm and beauty surrounding him, Gurung's mind is elsewhere. Two weeks ago, a massive earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale devastated his native Nepal.

"As soon as I heard, I thought, I'm going to go insane if I don't do something," the Singapore-born, Kathmandu-raised designer says. He

quickly started an online fundraising campaign and, with the help of famous friends like Diane von Furstenberg and Kim Kardashian, raised nearly \$1 million, which he distributed through the Nepal Red Cross and his own nonprofit, Shikshya Foundation.

"There's nobody more equipped to rebuild than the Nepalese people," he says. "Living in Nepal, besides for the 1 percent, is a tough thing. They're survivors. I call it spiritual resilience. There's a sense of reverence, a sense of grace. It's part of the DNA."

That DNA is evident not just in the 36-year-old designer but also in his eponymous womenswear collection. South Asia often serves as a fount

for his imagination. Long, diaphanous tunics from spring 2013 evoke the lawn *kurtas* favored during summers in India, asymmetrically wound evening gowns from fall 2014 call to mind the intricately draped traditional garments of Nepali villagers, and spring 2014's printed silk jacquard dresses are patterned with the sharp lines of the Himalayas.

While the 6-year-old line has earned rave reviews for its worldly aesthetic, Gurung cut his teeth at quintessentially American brands such as Cynthia Rowley and Bill Blass, where he served as design director for five years. "My training at Bill Blass is what my take on fashion is now," says the designer, >



IN THE DETAILS

Clockwise from above: stilettos from Gurung's fall 2015 collection; looks inspired by the Adirondack Mountains; Gurung working with his Shikshya Foundation in Nepal



DAN AND CORINA LECCA (RUNWAY)



STACKING UP

Gurung poses in front of his studio library

whose pieces are made in the U.S. and embroidered in Kathmandu or Mumbai. “It took them a week to make a simple blouse,” he adds.

Gurung designs for the thinking man’s sex symbol. His meticulously constructed separates command attention with slinky sensuality rather than skin. Many of his pieces, he says, begin with the subtle draping of a sari, harkening back to his early days as a design student in New Delhi.

For fall 2015, Gurung draws inspiration not from the Himalayas but from another famous mountain range: the Adirondacks. Featuring chunky knits and beaded sheaths that evoke Native American patterns, the collection is the midpoint between his American sportswear training and his intensely feminine silhouettes.

“I’d never been to the Adirondacks, and as I was walking around, I felt a sense of calm,” he says. “I wanted to capture that sense of ease and the sensuality that comes with it.”

“Whether it’s the wellbeing of my loved ones or making the fit of a dress just right, I’ve always deeply, sincerely cared.”

It’s an idea he also actualized in his new shoe collection. In the past, Gurung has partnered with maestros like Manolo Blahnik and Nicholas Kirkwood to shod his collections, but this season marks his second,

expanded foray into footwear of his own. “It’s a challenging business, but it’s also one of the most rewarding and fulfilling,” he says. “The most exciting thing for me as a creative person and as a designer is my desire to take even bigger risks.”

Clearly those risks are paying off. Gurung’s current shoe collection includes 40 styles (a big increase from last year’s four) that run the gamut from lace and patent leather booties to suede pumps in neon shades.

“I wanted them to be sexy, to be sensual, but I wanted them to have a level of comfort,” he says. “It was important for me to think about the heel height. So we asked ourselves, how do we do this? Because fashion is supposed to be a problem solver.”

That seems to be the plumb line through Gurung’s work. “Whether it’s the wellbeing of my loved ones or making the fit of a dress just right, I’ve always deeply, sincerely cared. And what I get in return is tenfold.”