

# the conversation

## Alexandra Ni Owner / Designer Alexandra Ni

*Interviewed by Carol Grimes  
Photograph by Tiffany Manning*

Alexandra Ni was born in 1984 in the south of Soviet Kazakhstan to a Siberian-Korean family. She was raised in a creative environment by her mother and aunt, who were dressmakers, from whom she learned sharp precision in cutting and sewing, and the art of delicate care for fabrics.

The label Alexandra Ni was launched in Berlin in 2012, emphasizing the art couture approach. Alexandra Ni is a limited edition hand-made line of women's clothing, worn internationally in Paris, Zurich, Moscow, Oslo, London, and now in Northern Florida.

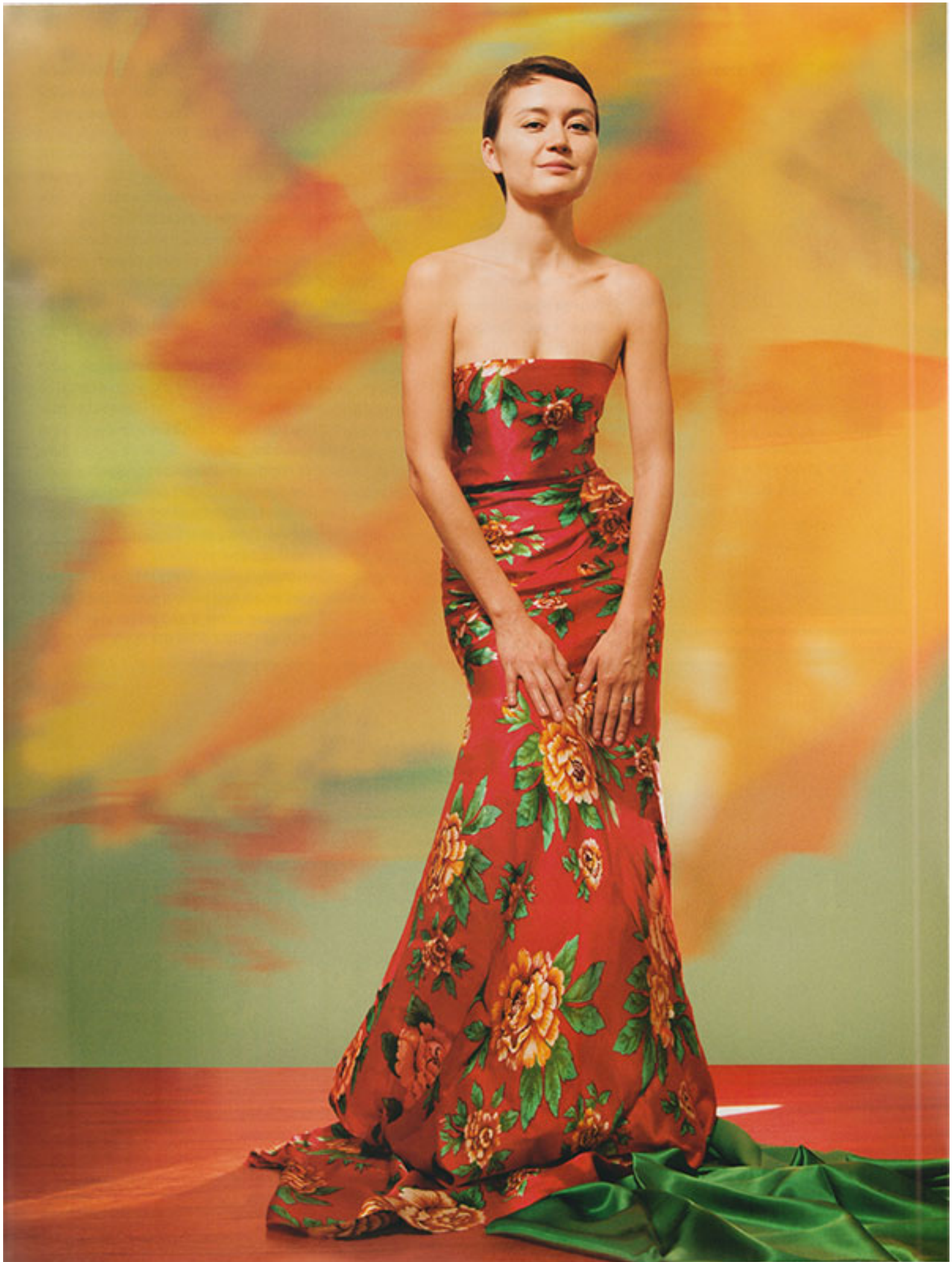
She was interviewed in October at her home studio in Riverside.

### **You have traveled and lived all over the world, so what brought you to Jacksonville?**

I was born in Djambul, Kazakhstan, then part of the Soviet Union, so I am a long way from my birthplace! I met my husband, Bill Cook, in Berlin, and Bill brought me to Jacksonville. I had lived and traveled in twenty-nine countries by then, but never in the U.S. We came to Jacksonville in 2013 to help with his mother's business and escape the cold winter of Berlin. We decided to get married and stay here.

### **What was your career path? How did you get your training?**

Like many people in the creative fields, it was in a roundabout way. After graduation from St. Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts, majoring in History of World Cultures, I attended the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, studying Social Anthropology of Contemporary Society. I lived in Zurich, doing wealth management for Deutsche Bank for several years, but I soon found the work unfulfilling and decided to go in a different direction. I took some time off after severing with the bank to travel a bit and study photography. Then I applied to ESMOD (*Ecole Supérieure des Arts et Techniques de la Mode*) in Berlin. My portfolio mainly consisted of photos of some







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designs my mother had made for me, but I did get in. I decided after finishing the first year to take independent courses and workshops in practical skills like drawing, draping, and design and construction. I also attended classes in London at Central St. Martins, whose graduates include designers like Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, and others.

#### **Your designs are just stunning.**

#### **What is your design philosophy?**

Thank you! I do get very enthusiastic response from my clients and from people who see my fashion shows. I want to create pieces that are one-of-a-kind, that are pieces of art. It's more profitable maybe to follow the trends; in a sense, that is what fashion is today, but that's not what I am interested in. My pieces are original and unique, without the mark of time; they are lifetime possessions, not just of the moment. They age along with the wearer. In that way, they are the opposite of fashion, you could say.

I design for the woman who is independent, brave. She doesn't need external approval. She does not need to be up with the latest trends, because her look is timeless, classic. I use natural fabrics, and every part of the ensemble is handmade. However, I would not call it haute couture. My friend Richard Ceriello suggested I call it "art couture," which sounds just right to me.

#### **What designers inspire you?**

To name a few of the contemporary designers that I think are doing classic and timeless, yet innovative work, there are Hussein Chalayan, Azzedine Alaia, Stella McCartney, Haider Ackermann, Yohji Yamamoto, and of course, the late Alexander McQueen. When you look at the core of their collections, it's always timeless lines, classic design.

Also, I am hugely inspired by nature. I like to interpret natural shapes, textures, color, movement, to have my artistic message fit into the natural world.

I also like to keep up with established and new designers through publications like *New York Times Style Magazine* and *W*. They offer great articles and visual material.

#### **How do you find your clients?**

#### **Do you sell from local stores?**

Actually, my clients themselves are my best advertisements. Their friends ask where they get their garments, and then their friends become clients, and so on. Since I am doing very few formal fashion shows, I like to think that my clients and myself are my fashion shows, just wearing pieces to events, letting people see what is available in my collections, the kind of pieces I can make for others.

Right now, I am also trying what I call the "golden middle" between the retail business model and the couture studio model. I just started in September making a few sample pieces available in the Avondale store J. Ashley. The pieces are sampled in size 6, so if someone wants it and wears size 6, they can buy it from the store. If they want another size, or maybe just a similar style or different color, I can make it for them. That gives me a little more exposure on the retail side.

I don't like to work under a lot of stress, with deadlines and other obligations that keep me from the creative part of my work. I can see having a small percentage of retail with some simplified designs, but the core of my collection needs to be super-creative, high-end, unique, artisanal.

I also get good exposure through my website, [alexandrani.com](http://alexandrani.com), where photos of my collections are always available. Clients can contact me there.

Everything I do now is couture. Several times a year, I make a collection of samples, from which people can choose pieces for me to customize. This requires taking initial measurements, arranging fittings throughout the process, and making sure the garment is perfectly suited to the client.



**What do you plan for the future of your business?**

**What is your next step?**

I plan to focus on the custom couture business model by doing fewer large fashion shows and moving instead to private salons along the lines of the 1950s Paris salons. Azzedine Alaia got his start through a patron's salons. I think the big fashion shows are a little outdated, and they show the capsules six months before the looks are even available in stores. Private salons are more personal; they allow the designer to establish a relationship with her clients and serve their personal needs and preferences. This is more satisfying to designer and client both, and certainly the way I like to deal with my clientele.

**What do you see for the future in fashion?**

Worldwide, there is a strong trend for local, personalized, artisan, organic, natural products and design. It's the trend in cuisine and wines right now, and I see it in fashion, as well. I hope more people discover this model and use it for the way they buy things, for furniture, glassware, and all the things that make our lives comfortable and colorful and aesthetically pleasing. It is certainly the trend I am responding to with my way of doing business. I find that people are willing to pay a little more for something organic, unique, one of a kind. Also, consumers are now more conscious of using their buying power to support local artists and their

local economy. I hope this trend strengthens and persists, because it is a healthy way of living.

**What do you love about Jacksonville?**

I had a hard time adjusting at first. Now, whenever I travel, I can't wait to get back home, to the city that I now claim as my own. We are surrounded by nature here. The oceans, the skies, exotic plants that just bloom all year round, and the sunsets! We have the most amazing sunsets here that I've ever seen. The buildings reflecting in the river as you walk or drive across a bridge, it moves me. I love bridges. Architecturally, bridges are my most inspiring type of building.

Another thing I have never found anywhere else is the pride people have in their city. It's not a great city yet, but that makes it more interesting, because there is still a lot to do, and people know it. In New York, in Berlin, in Paris, sure, people are proud to live there, but those cities are done. It's all done for them; they don't have to work to bring those cities to their greatness. Here, it's just really sweet and inspiring ... everyone I know is willing to do the hard work to make their city be what they want it to be.

I love it now. It's my home.

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