

MAD CORTES

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"A heightened state of mind. You know you are going to take off and for a while, you will be detached from the ground. It's a feeling of freedom. That's Mad Cortes."

Corto Maltese was born in La Valetta, Malta to an Andalusian gypsy/prostitute in the summer of 1887. He made his first trip to China at 13, destroyed a cannon during the Boxer Rebellion, and befriended Jack London in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War. Maltese, a character in existentialist author Hugo Pratt's popular graphic novels, traveled the globe rescuing castaways, smuggling arms for the Irish army, napping at Stonehenge, and skinny dipping in Normandy. Maltese's unshakeable courage and chiseled features made him a hero, loved especially by Pratt's sultry femmes fatale.

Mira Vukovic, a teenager in Sarajevo who passed the time watching MTV and singing along with Madonna, also fell in love with Maltese. She often escaped into Pratt's picare-sque watercolor world, admiring the author's minimalist style and devoted attention to his character's clothing. As Vukovic began studying fine art and design, her infatuation with Pratt's

work resurfaced and now serves as the inspiration for Vukovic's label, Mad Cortes, one of the most innovative and intrinsically beautiful collections to hit runways in recent years.

Since its debut in 2000, Mad Cortes, headed by Vukovic and her husband, Ameli Tanchitsa, has exploded. London's Liberty boutique proudly boasts the line, as well as L.A.'s American Rag and Australia's Capital L, Husk, Elle, Orson & Blake, and Alice Euphemia. And, in addition to recognition in Australian *Vogue*, *Harper's* and *Oyster Magazine*, last year, Mad Cortes became part of the permanent contemporary clothing collection at the National Gallery of Victoria.

However, this seemingly overnight success was once only a daydream for Vukovic, who moved to Australia in 1996 to attend the fiercely competitive Sydney Institute of Technology. There, she learned the basics of garment construction while perfecting her





English. In 2000, Mad Cortes made its debut at the school's graduation show. Vukovic's six looks of tweed pants, jersey dresses and tops strutted down the runway before industry professionals, the designs carefully detailed and asymmetrical. ("I did the styling with a sporty twist," she says. "It was delicious.") Post-graduation, Tanchitsa got the phone number of a girl about to open a shop in Darlinghurst (a hip Sydney neighborhood), who agreed to show Vukovic's pieces on a consignment basis. "In a few days they called asking if we had more," Vukovic says. "They'd sold everything to the last piece."

Soon Mad Cortes held its first individual runway show at the Mercedes Australian Fashion Week and Vukovic was awarded the Tiffany's New Designer Award and Best Emerging Designer Award for her spring/summer '05/'06 collection the following year. "When we got the Tiffany's New Designer, it was affirmation of everything we believe in," Vukovic says. "You have to remember that the judges were big cats from the industry we look up to.

Having your work recognized like that is truly great. I remember that feeling. It is like walking on clouds." The awards raised the label's profile, gaining Mad Cortes credibility and opening doors.

"People love awards, especially the Tiffany's New Designer. It is easier now for us to talk to bank managers," Vukovic says with a laugh. "I am not sure if we would be at the same place if we had not won it. It would take us longer to affirm what we are doing."

Mad Cortes' winter/autumn '06 collection, "Promise You A Miracle?", is dedicated to their new twin daughters, expressing the emotional rollercoaster of parenthood. The designs are a mix of patterns and solids with lace and texture detail. Fabric tumbles from the waist of ankle-length frocks, and gathered ruffles pipe the edges of sleeveless V-neck blouses, the straps falling over the shoulders of their runway's