

NEW YORK

Imagining Daphne

A fashion icon who found herself by going to clown school.

By [Vanessa Grigoriadis](#)

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Daphne Guinness, small but lithe, with a majestic hairstyle—half-white, half-black, not so much envisioned by the stylist [Yves Durif](#) at the Carlyle as reconstituted by him when she is in New York—paces around her sunlit apartment on Fifth Avenue, keeping up a steady stream of conversation. She’s just arrived from Paris, where she sliced open her foot on a screw in a hotel room, then almost missed her plane while waiting for a photographer’s assistant to return her camera to the lobby. Also, her BlackBerry was supposed to be synced with her computer by an assistant but instead both of them went on the fritz. “I just feel like bang, bang, bang, everything’s been going wrong lately,” she says, settling herself into a high-backed cream chair. “I’m so happy to be finally in New York, where I can relax. I love the city in August, when everyone’s away. I can take a deep breath.”

Guinness, an Irish brewery heiress and the ex-wife of a son of one of Greece’s richest shipping families, should by rights be vacationing in Southampton or Capri this month, not stewing on the asphalt in Manhattan. But she is bored by money—a great luxury. In her, as in few others, wealth has been transmogrified into a flowing, wild, slightly absurd freedom. “Sometimes I feel like I’m speaking Chinese when I go out to dinner, and everyone’s from hedge funds, and I want to talk about a certain color,” says Guinness, 42. “You know, a lot of people think they’re going to get to a nirvana of cooldom one day, but in fact that place doesn’t really exist. I think life is about having the mixture of the curiosity of an older person and the imagination of a child.”

That much is clear from her outfit today, which, as usual, is one part old-world heiress, swathed in diamonds and furs, and one part eccentric artist, always looking to create drama and irony with her clothes. She’s wearing a tight-fitting gray wool dress that she designed herself, with enormous strands of antique diamonds wrapped around her wrists, a blue grosgrain ribbon tied loosely on her neck, and eight-inch Mary Jane modified wedges designed by Londoner Natacha Marro—the modification, in this case, being the exclusion of the heel base that normally connects one’s foot with the ground, so that she floats in the air, en pointe. “I found it inconvenient to have heels at one point,” she explains drily. “These just made more sense.”

Guinness belongs to a tradition of thoroughly outré fashion fiends, like Isabella Blow—the auction of whose clothing at Christie’s was preempted last month by buying the entire collection—or the Italian avant-gardist Anna Piaggi, or kooky cult icon Iris Apfel, the 81-year-old New Yorker with the saucer-size glasses. She’s both a fabulous customer for designers, known to buy every piece in her size when she becomes enthusiastic about a collection, and also a creative force, an artist in her own right. “I think the world’s just gone completely mad, with everyone wearing the same things, even celebrities,” says Guinness, who, despite her wacky design sense, speaks softly and without bravado. “I mean, Elizabeth Taylor wouldn’t have been told by a stylist to wear this and say it’s from wherever.”

That she’s given herself over to the world of imagination is clear after spending an afternoon in her apartment, a series of hyper-designed suites with highlights of cream, red, and black that feels like being inside a fancy jewelry box. Everything the eye alights upon is perfect, from the Nobuyoshi Araki photographs to the elegant set of the Japanese game Go to the large Chinese teapot from which she slowly drinks her afternoon tea. But this is not a mausoleum of objects, the gallery of a good shopper. Guinness’s dining room table is heaped with swatches of fabric for suits she is designing and dozens of notepads in which she plans to draw with colored pencils, as she has been doing since she was a child. In one corner rest a few bulbous rubber forms, which she has plans for this week: She’s going to insert them in some resin, which she intends to pour right here, in her living room, for a new table.

“With the resin, I don’t mind about my floors, but I’m a little worried about the neighbors,” she says, trailing a foot over the lacquered black boards beneath her. “It could be quite fummy.”

Guinness identifies her interest in eccentric fashion as part of her upbringing in the town of Cadaqués on the Spanish coast, where she spent each summer as a child in her family’s residence, an eighteenth-century former monastery. Man Ray lived close by as did Dalí, who had lobsters swimming in his pool. “My bedroom was next to the altar, and under my bed there was supposedly the finger of Saint Sebastian, wow,” she says. It was glamorous, but in a relaxed way. “I was always scrambling around without shoes, with cuts everywhere, after getting into a hornets’ nest. Everyone wore sixties clothes. They did that thing of looking like 1967 when it was 1976, and there’s that element still.”

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From left, Guinness and Alexander McQueen in 2004; Guinness and Isabella Blow at the “When Philip Met Isabella” in 2002.

(Photo: Dave Benett/Getty Images (2))

Guinness’s mother, the French beauty Suzanne Lisney (daughter of Diana Mitford, an aristocrat who was married to a British fascist and partly to whom Evelyn Waugh dedicated *Vile Bodies*), took her back to Ireland and England for the winters, though, and she found she didn’t fit in at school. “When there were little gangs at school around the head of the lacrosse team or whatever, wanting to be cool, I found that really depressing,” she says. “I’m most comfortable being by myself.” She was studying opera with plans to become a singer when, at 17, she began dating Spyros Niarchos, who was twelve years her senior. Guinness may be a fashion nun, but she’s one

of the only women of that sort who manage to combine cartoonish attire with sex appeal. Seen around town last year with hotelier André Balazs, she's dating the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, though he remains married. "I know sometimes I can come off like a lonely spinster in a tower," she says. "That's not me at all."

In any case, she and Niarchos got married quickly, in 1987. "I fell in love," she says. "I don't know how. And then I was in Greece, in a different world, and very secluded." The couple took their private plane and super-yacht, the *Atlantis II*, to travel among their homes in New York and St. Moritz, and on Spetsopoula, their private island 50 miles off the coast of Athens. Guinness bore three children, two of whom are now in their twenties. Niarchos didn't like classical music, so she would put her headphones on to practice her singing. "I can remember the smell of the trees on the island," she says. "I was quite used to being alone for extended periods, so I could read books and I didn't see the time passing."

The two separated ten years later, in a famously acrimonious divorce. "I was leading into nothing after that, and it was very scary," she says. Her settlement from the divorce was reported at \$40 million—"People thought it was a lot more than it was, though it was a lot," she says—but instead of counting her winnings, she enrolled in clown-and-bouffon school in London, under Philippe Gaulier, who trained under Jacques Lecoq and taught Sacha Baron Cohen. "I had gone to a couple dinner parties and realized, *This is not the way that I build a new life*," she says. "I wanted to be around a different kind of person. I wanted to be around artists." Isabella Blow was one of the first fashion people to take an interest in her, hiring her as a model and stylist. They bonded at the 90th-birthday party for Guinness's great aunt, a marchioness, at which Daphne was dressed as a "funeral pony," she says. "I had lots of plumes."

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Guinness talks in long, articulate skeins, but when the topic of Blow comes up, she begins to stammer a bit. "She was absolutely obsessed with killing herself—she didn't talk about anything else," says Guinness. "You'd get into a taxi and she'd start talking to the taxi driver about it. Everybody tried to bring her around, even [Alexander McQueen](#)." She looks out the window. "She drank weed kill can you believe that? It's the most painful death. Right away, it starts eating at your stomach, and it takes about 24 to 36 hours to die. She shakes her head. "The first time she tried it, she jumped off a bridge and landed on top of a car, breaking both of her legs. I went to see her in this terrible hospital near the bridge, and she was being so funny in her gold jumpsuit, putting the other patients into stitches."

Blow left her collection, made up of 90 outfits by McQueen as well as dresses by [John Galiano](#) and Philip Treacy hats, to her sisters. She had debts, and her family had no choice but to put the lots up for auction. "They didn't want to do it, but they had to, and I thought to myself, 'Well, hang on a second,'" Guinness says. "I talked to a lot of people about whether I should do it or not, because I didn't want to look greedy or grand, but I had a sick feeling when I found out where they were headed." She was fearful of Blow's clothes becoming dispersed, or the auction turning into a circus, with every new pop star at the shows wearing her hats next season. "It just didn't feel right for people to look at something so intimate of hers," she says. When she made up her mind, she called Blow's sister Julia. "I think they thought I just wanted to pick a few things on my own," she says. "And I said, 'No, no, this is about keeping everything.'"

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Blow's clothes are still in London, in storage. "I've got a couple people doing the first round, sorting it out," Guinness says. "I'll do the second myself, figure out what's what. It's tough, a little bit. I do think, 'Where are you, you're supposed to be here. You checked out me, why?'" She looks out the window—it's been a hard couple of years, between the deaths of Blow and McQueen, another close friend. "I thought he had turned a corner, and then his mother died," she says. In some ways, she was trying to honor McQueen, Blow's discovery and fashion soulmate, by buying the collection. "I know he would have been horrified with the auction," she says. "This is Issie's art. This is her body."

Guinness is not planning to wear Blow's things. She's hoping to facilitate their trips around the world, on exhibit at museums and galleries. "I think it's too much for me to wear them," she says. "I'm me, and she was her, and that's cool. Maybe once ..." She trails off, then smiles a bit. "There is this one hat she had, of a Chinese garden, that I really love. It's such a fantastic piece."

Blow's and McQueen's deaths are part of why Guinness has been spending time in New York. "London gets me incredibly depressed these days," she says. But she's also found the city hospitable to her brand of fashion. She's starring in Nars' fall ad campaign instead of the French bulldog they used before (they've named their royal-purple eye

shadow after her), and has produced her own perfume for [Comme des Garçons](#), along with a short film, *Mnemosyne* (memory, in ancient Greek), featuring a woman in a kind of embryonic sac falling slowly toward a silver coral reef. "It took three weeks to edit the film in the special-effects studio," she says excitedly. "I even fainted in a parking lot in the middle of nowhere, because I was so obsessive about the whole thing." She's made a film herself as well, *The Phenomenology of Body*, in which women from different era



(Photo: Nick Haymes)

from Eve to Madame Mao, spin around slowly against a black background to an LCD Soundsystem song.

Guinness is also making her own clothes, though she doesn't know "if I want to get on that treadmill," she says. "I've got such a backlog of projects I want to do, and it is an undertaking." In her apartment, her closets are stuffed with Chanel evening gowns and futuristic Gareth Pugh trousers, as well as her own creations, like a neckpiece of crows' feathers and faille, which she models in her hallway, stepping back and forth on her carpet like a catwalk queen. "These feathers are so warm," she says, pulling the piece closer around her neck. "Think about a down jacket, and it feels the same way."

She carefully places the feathers back in their black mesh packaging and runs over to her shoe closet, where Louboutin platforms sit side by side with "hooker shoes made beautiful" that she's bedazzled herself, underneath stacks of white and black top hats she's found at vintage stores. On one ledge, there's even a plastic bag of eyeballs. She grabs the bag with one hand. "I don't know what I'm going to do with these," she says, laughing a little. "But I'm sure I'll figure something out."