

Photograph by JAMES KING

Patricia Field, the designer and stylist responsible for giving Carrie Bradshaw and her friends their fashion savvy, is in town, and not just for the *Sex and the City* tornado that blew through London recently but for a launch of her own.

Following in the footsteps of Julien Macdonald and Matthew Williamson, Field has been asked to design a series of limited-edition Diet Coke bottles, which are to be sold exclusively at Selfridges in the UK. You can buy the four different designs (in yellow, red, pink and blue, symbolising the female Diet Coke drinker's main interests of career, passion, love and fashion) for £7.95, but they are already selling on eBay for \$100 to transatlantic fans desperate to acquire a bit of Field's style at whatever cost. 'Wild!' says Field in her sarcastic, cigarette New York drawl.

We have met in the boardroom at Selfridges, where Field is holding court, surrounded by Coke bottles, PR girls, a Coke executive in a scarlet minidress who looks unnervingly like Sarah Jessica Parker, and four mannequins in sparkly outfits that Field has created to embody Diet Coke Woman's incarnations. Even Samantha would be hard put to carry off the glittery blue 'fashion' outfit, which has a tiny miniskirt and is slit from neck to navel. But that's the point about Patricia Field. In an increasingly bland fashion environment, dominated by the likes of stylist Rachel Zoe and her skinny blonde clones, she is a beacon of irreverent eccentricity, like the late Izzy Blow (who was, of course, a friend).

Field is 66 years old and has no intention of growing old gracefully: her hair is dyed pillar-box red, she is wearing gold Christian Louboutin shoes and a one-shouldered pink, red, gold and black striped minidress that was made for her by her friend and collaborator David Dalrymple (one of Britney Spears's favourite designers). Her eyebrows are a thin line of fuchsia pink, and her lips a deep scarlet to match her hairdo. The effect should be grotesque, but somehow seems stylish instead – like Carrie Bradshaw tripping the streets of New York in her petal-pink tutu.

One would expect no less from the woman who's launched a thousand looks, from the gilt 'name' necklace to the oversized floral corsage, both originally sported by Carrie and subsequently by anybody with fashion pretensions.

Now the big corporations are queuing up, along with the punters, to buy a touch of Field. Aside from Coke, she's just signed up to design a one-off range for M&S in October; she's

collaborated with the toy company Mattel to produce a Barbie line of accessories; and recently turned down a lucrative commission from Audi who wanted her to design an oversized corsage for one of their cars. 'I declined it, because it made no sense to me,' she says. She has tried to offer her services to Hillary Clinton, though. 'Hillary needs major help,' she declares. 'She looks dour and dowdy. I approached her through her office but I never heard anything.'

Fashion is in Field's DNA. Her father, an Armenian tailor, met her Greek mother in the laundry in which she worked, and when they married they set up their own dry-cleaning business in Manhattan. 'So I was around clothing all the time. I understood fabrics and so on,' she says. She also had a defined sense of personal style from an early age. 'I didn't like fluffy things or feminine clothes,' she says. 'I remember really wanting a Burberry raincoat, although I wasn't interested in labels.'

Field doesn't remember much about her father, who died when she was seven, leaving her mother to support her and her younger sister Joan, who's now a retired school principal. 'Different from me in every way,' she throws in.

'My mother was not doting, she was busy doing what she wanted to do, so I was real free,' she says without self-pity. 'It taught me independence at a young age. Of course, once in a while I'd be jealous of my friend who'd have a brown bag with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in it. My mother would give me a dollar and say go eat lunch in the ice-cream parlour.' She laughs throatily.

Her mother's five sisters helped to bring her and Joan up, but it doesn't sound like an easy job. Field's closest playmate was one of her cousins. 'We used to be around each other all the time; we'd get the same presents. We'd get dolls, and after three days, the head would have come off mine, while hers would still be in its wrapper,' she says. 'I was like, "Give me a gun."'

Still, she remains close to her two surviving octogenarian aunts. 'Although they don't even know what styling is,' she says.

I suspect her mother's detachment was something of a boon to Field, who was never going to fit into the traditional Greek family structure, being not only eccentric and independent but gay into the bargain. 'It wasn't a problem because they never really acknowledged it,' she says. 'It wasn't really important to them and they didn't really see it. There was one incident perpetrated by my sister out of some kind of resentment, when she kind of put my mother on the spot. But it passed.'

Field attended New York University, where she studied liberal arts, and only went into fashion because she thought it was a good way for her to have her own business. 'It wasn't a passion, it was a vehicle to a career. I wasn't breathing fashion every minute.' She went to work at Alexander's, a discount department store, and by the time she was 24 had opened her first shop, on the NYU campus, mystifyingly called Pants Pub. 'At the time, the name seemed trendy, but it quickly went out of style,' she admits. Five years later, in the early Seventies, she moved the business to Eighth Street and changed the shop's name to her own.

They were, she says, heady times. 'The people who came into my shop were the nighthawks,' she says. 'The musicians and artists and drug addicts...' Always on trend, Field was a regular at Studio 54. She was there on →



Carrie in vintage floral sundress and Dior gladiator stilettos in SATC

Patricia Field with the outfits she created to embody Diet Coke Woman's preoccupations: career, passion, love and fashion

Rex Features

istress

she put a corsage on Carrie, we all popped one on, too. Now the piece of the action. Lydia Slater meets a self-styled genius