

# IT'S COOL TO BE A TRINBAGONIAN

## INTERVIEW WITH A RISING STAR



**ANYA AYONG-CHEE**

Fashion Designer  
and Entrepreneur,  
Trinidad

**B**orn in 1981, Anya Ayong-Chee shot into the international spotlight as the winner of *Project Runway Season 9*, a US cable reality TV show centred around fashion design. A graduate of Parsons School of Design in New York and Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London, Anya spent several years working as a designer in New York City until in 2007, when she returned home after her 18-year old brother Pilar died tragically in a car accident. Soon after the move, Anya was selected to represent her country at the Miss Universe pageant. This experience propelled her into a life in front of the camera as a model and television host. She has since hosted several Caribbean television and web-based events and live shows, including movie premieres, fashion shows and her own fashion programme *Make It Yours*.

**How would you say your upbringing in Trinidad and Tobago has shaped you as a person and as an artist?**

Fundamentally; it's a huge part of who I am and what I do. My mother went to great lengths to immerse me in the cultural life of Trinidad, so I grew up going to art exhibitions and events from an early age. It didn't really matter how little I understood; it was part and parcel of my everyday upbringing and gave me a deep appreciation for the arts and culture of our country. Being Trinidadian gives me a foundation and a sense of purpose in terms of my energy and focus. It's a reminder of where I come from and it is very grounding for me.

**You were educated at St Joseph's Convent in Port of Spain. Did having such a traditional, Catholic education instill you with a sense of discipline, or did it give you a rebellious streak?**

In retrospect, I think it gave me the qualities of single-mindedness, drive and ambition – I'm an archetypal St Joseph's Convent girl in that respect

– and yet in many ways I rebelled against that kind of rigid, structured approach. For example, when it came to choosing what courses I would do for my A-levels, I had a choice between doing medicine and the arts. I was expected to do medicine because I was good at biology and chemistry, and I wanted to study oncology because my father's a surgeon. But there was something so intriguing to me about art because I didn't really 'get' it; I couldn't wrap my head around it. In the end I had to sit down and beg them to let me do Biology, Chemistry, and Art for my A-levels. I mean, beg! Nobody understood what I was doing; how could I be doing Art instead of Physics? So, in that sense, I was already starting to veer off the path of what was expected of me at school.

**How has your Chinese heritage shaped your perspective, both on your home country and yourself, as a designer?**

I've never really thought about it, to be honest, because I've always just considered myself a 'Trini'. When I'm in New York, I get asked – literally, every day – 'What ethnicity are you?' And they're never satisfied with my answer because I have to say, 'Well, my grandfather came from China and my great-grandmother came from India...' and it's a long story, and their eyes just sort of glaze over. I'm constantly made to bring up my heritage, but I think growing up in Trinidad makes us racially 'neutral', in a sense – because it's such a melting pot – which is how I get to indulge in so many different cultures and traditions. So, in a way, it's not so much being Chinese that has influenced me but rather being a 'non-race'. It's like I have a passport to everything. Because of my mixed heritage, I get the chance to go to both reggae parties and uptown parties; I'm able to penetrate different parts of society and have different cultural experiences, and I think that if I was at one end of the cultural spectrum or the other I would not be able to do this so easily.

Interview by  
**Alice Besson**  
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**What most inspires your art? What do you draw from?**

I think that's still evolving, but looking back on the five or so collections I've done so far as a fashion designer, I've always been inspired by our indigenous cultures in Trinidad and Tobago. I'm inspired by people who dress in a way that is specific and considered, but not necessarily from a fashion perspective. They consider what they're wearing generally, but they're not trying to make it into Vogue. They are very sure of their identity, which they express through their clothes, and these are identities that have developed over thousands of years. I love to draw on that.

**How would you characterise your different labels? What gives your clothes their 'edge'?**

At the moment I have three lines: *Anya*, which is my high-end line, *Pilar by Anya*, which is my fusion line, and *Anya de Rogue*, which is my lingerie project – I consider it my couture project but it doesn't necessarily have to be haute couture, it's just a bit more experimental. *Pilar by Anya* is a line made for women who are a bit more edgy, and want to display themselves in a way that is sexy but which draws on their personality. It's who I am, it's what I'd want to wear, whether I'm in New York or Port of Spain. It's transporting that modern Caribbean girl throughout your life, whatever situation you're in. Whereas *Anya* is my resort line, designed for a slightly more sophisticated woman, one who travels and can afford the kind of lifestyle that takes them from one destination to the next throughout the year.

**Would you say you are a good businesswoman?**

Yes, but I've had to work at it over the last few years, it didn't come naturally. Post-Project Runway I found I had people who wanted to buy my clothes on a much larger scale than I experienced before the show, so it was a case of either learning to fulfil that demand or being completely overwhelmed by it. It forced me to

become more business-savvy and to make choices that are right for my business. The experience has been a crash-course in Fashion Management. It's good though, because I'm more dedicated and in-tune with running a business.

**You are also very involved in charity work with the TallMan Foundation. How does that fit into your life and work?**

The TallMan Foundation fits perfectly into my work because it is a transformative art programme, and because it's situated in Trinidad and Tobago, so on many levels it speaks directly to my attachment to my home country. Because it's a small organisation, I tend to have many roles; I consult, I'm sometimes the Creative Director. It's great because it fits into the model of the business that I want to have – one which is directly connected to a non-profit – but it also got me thinking from the outset how I can give back to society and how I can contribute through my work.

When I applied to be Miss Trinidad and Tobago it was in large part because I wanted to have a public role in society, to have a voice as a Caribbean woman. But it didn't quite work out

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Anya at work in her studio in Port of Spain



All photographs: Wyatt Gallery

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that way. Instead I felt somewhat silenced, like I'd lost my own identity. I was very honoured to represent my country, but as a role it was missing something for me. I only found this out when I decided to do something that was really for me, which was Project Runway. I had no intention of that being something that was representing Trinidad and Tobago – I was doing it for myself, as something that was calling me as an individual, and then what happened turned out to be exactly what I always wanted.

**And from a personal perspective, what are some of the hurdles you have had to overcome in order to create?**

Since winning *Project Runway*, I sometimes find myself feeling a bit overwhelmed. My natural tendency is to be very outgoing, but in the last couple of months I've really made an effort to return to my inner voice and listen to myself. I learned through meditation, through a more regularised schedule; those are things that I thought my nature was to reject – discipline, structure, regularity. But all those things actually

create much more clarity for me. So I think it's really an exercise in maturity and growth, and it has given me is more control over my creative process and over 'Anya' – because that's the only thing I can offer that's of real value.

**Where do you think your relationship with Trinidad and Tobago is heading, from both a business point of view and as an artist? Is there scope for development here for you?**

I absolutely believe that my focus, from a developmental standpoint, will continue to be here. I don't want to say only in Trinidad, but as far as I'm capable of developing my work here, be it production-wise, from a talent perspective, or from an educational perspective.

I'm exploring a lot of avenues that I can have an influence on that I'm very passionate about. I don't mean that in an arrogant way, I just mean that I see the potential of this country and its people and I want to have a positive influence.

My goal for Trinidad and Tobago is really to see us, as a people, come into who we are. We are still a young country and need to appreciate our identity. Trinidad and Tobago is just such an amazing place. To me, it is the future but it will never make its rightful claim on the world unless we recognise our true worth. I would like to see that happen across the board, from a fashion perspective and otherwise; more awareness of how truly special we are and how much we have to offer the world. It's cool to be Trinidadian or Tobagonian! It really is! I know this because I've lived outside of Trinidad. Everybody loves it; everybody thinks it's sexy and cool and we just have to believe that ourselves. I get very annoyed when people ask, 'well, how come we're not here? How come we're not there?' But 50 years is a very short time when you consider the larger world and how long it takes other cultures to flourish. It's a journey and that's the journey that we're on so let's be conscious of it; that's the benefit of being a young country. ■



Anya on Yara Beach, Blanchisseuse, Trinidad wearing a dress from ANYA Resort Collection 2012