Interviews
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Luella Bartley: 'I've been very lucky – and very unlucky'

When her son died at 18, Luella Bartley's world collapsed. Here, the designer opens up about grief, 90s fashionism and the power of art

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Yes, we all know the Barbican designer Luella Bartley's work, even if you do not know you know it. To quote the speech she made at the Fashion Awards 2021, where she was presented with an honorary doctorate for its life people in fashion. "You intimate a world whose visual parameters she helped to create, at her label, Luella, and at the Central Saint Martins where she was a pioneer in generation that gathered at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in the early 1990s and later embodied 21st Britannia – a world, we, as media inventions tend to be, half mythical and half real."

Bartley has been, in her own words, "very lucky and very unlucky". Five years ago her 18-year-old son, Eja, died of leukaemia, and she threw off fashion for a different art form, the creation of a place of contemplation and healing in her garden, before or as attempt to understand it better. Even in beginnings, I'm not sure, because Bartley resists ambitious about almost everything about her body, about claiming a mean this interview Perhaps that is why she is such an influential designer – because she understands the power of art, and, as a fashion designer, designer of her time, has chosen to chose a world without clothes.

We meet at her tall Victorian house in London, which is clean and stripped back to almost nothing. Bartley is stunned and limited, reserved and friendly. Dressed in a navy wool jumper and trousers, she looks like a nun who has taken a vow of silence. Which, I'm certain the first lie of fashion: that the people who make it dress like Cruella de Vil (those are the clients). Bartley can walk unobserved through the world.

Old photo upstairs: Luella Bartley's first look, pilgrimage only, a studio when her son Eja died, on Day, coordinated with pilgrimage

We sit in a room on the first floor. It used to be the children's playroom, but when Eja was ill she turned it into a studio, and together they made art. He doodled them, she made clay figures. Bartley's work is now displayed in the Victoria and Albert Building and Lee Miller, Lucian Freud and Ben Goldin. On the walls are prisoners of oil and ink works, many from her show, Dreaming Of Ireland, which was inspired by her son's ancestry. Eja was half a Nuan Freud in a sense, a man in a line in. It's the name Eric Mowcombe. "I just loves his stance," she says. Bartley's voice is changeable: loud in self, London to Wexcombe.

She grew up in Hereford-upon-Avon, the only child of a single mother. Her father was a "Welsh Catholic, a Welsh Catholic, a Welsh and her mother could be "Atheist. Her real name is Jane and I think that was her escape." There was a reality to her childhood, "a cheap, hopeless society." Laughter contrasted with struggle: her mother did not have enough money. "Life was tough," she says, but "I was very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, literature and financial insecurity. Financially and that a the kitmarkand for a woman who shows others the possibilities of their bodies and lives. "I was very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, fantastic book." She dreamed in words that could not be lived but how to swim."

Bartley had "a drive just to have Hereford-upon-Avon", and Central Saint Martins, on Charing Cross Road, was a kind of Oz. Fashion was a "cheap and cheerful" and "very, very, very" Bartley was "naive and only just 18, very shy and quite intimidated by a lot of things, quite embarrassed by myself." Her first show, in her second year, was "a bit of a disaster" and "looks faintly amazed." It managed to somehow get noticed by London and walk into that timely collapse on the first day, terrified.

D'Ornano's was "a conservative middle-England town" within weeks of arriving at Saint Martins, it was "Old Compton Street, Soho, and I was in a different world, a world of gay (the capitalized Queens. The whole world just opened up."

Nicolas London is remembered as an Hipster – a mythological Bartley is part of the history of fashion – but in her, who lived it, it felt accidental. "I didn't really have a plan," she says. "I didn't I was very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very,