

PARIS, France — Esteban Cortázar was on the Eurostar to London when he found out Oscar-winning actress Cate Blanchett had chosen one of his designs for the premiere of *Carol*, at the London Film Festival in October. A floor-length, navy, sequined gown, with billowing sleeves, it was the same dress that had closed the Spring/Summer 2016 show in Paris a few weeks earlier.

Images of the dress spread like wildfire across the Internet, recalls Cortázar. A full-length photograph of the actress appeared on the cover of *The Daily Telegraph*. Typically, when a celebrity wears a hot-off-the-catwalk creation, fashion's conventional production schedule means it's four to six months until the item actually hits the shop floor. When Cortázar's retailers — which include Net-a-Porter, Bergdorf Goodman, Barneys and Lane Crawford — began receiving calls from customers wanting to know when the dress was going to be available, they were delighted to inform them it would arrive in eight weeks, a time frame only possible because of Cortázar's new business model, designed to tackle what the designer sees as one of fashion's fundamental problems — timing.

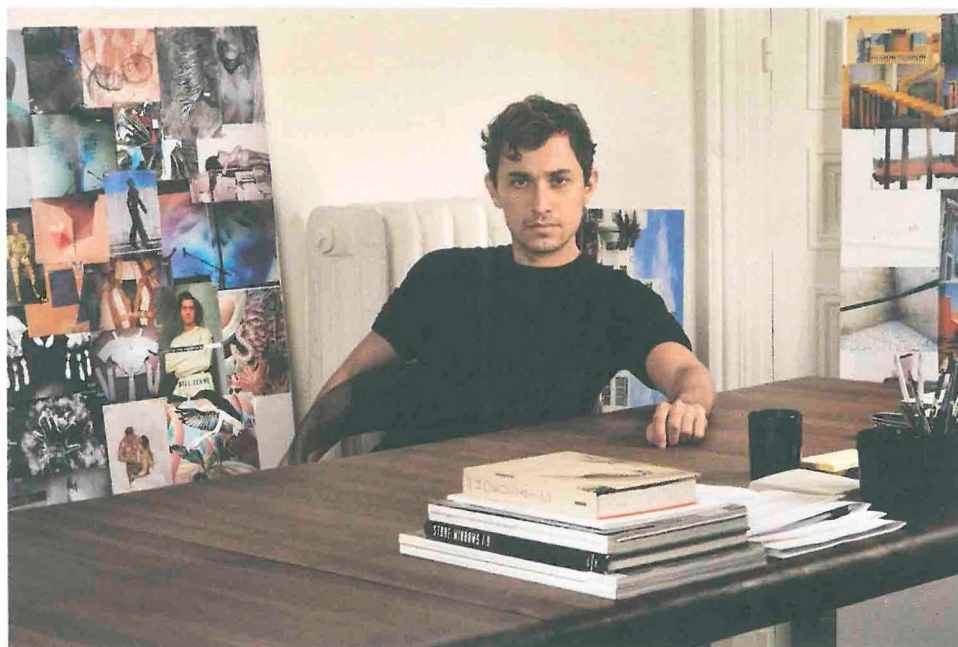
"When I first started to be interested in fashion as a kid... the first time you could really discover a collection was when Italian Vogue did the supplement with all the collections. Today it's not like that — you can see the entire collection right away."

For designers working within the established schedule, orders aren't placed until after the show. Production then takes several months, meaning pieces don't arrive in store until six months later. For Cortázar, this delay between debut and delivery is "a big disconnect for consumers."

Cortázar's new-look eponymous line, which is now in its third full season, was born out of a conversation with Natalie Massenet, founder of The Net-a-Porter Group, who asked the designer to create a trans-seasonal capsule collection exclusively for the e-commerce site in 2012. Its success saw a second collection in 2014.

"I didn't want to do a ton of collections per year," Cortázar says. Reflecting on Raf Simons' comments upon departing from Dior in October, he adds: "I don't think there is a designer that doesn't feel the way that he was feeling."

In many ways, Cortázar has always been ahead of the curve. In 2002, aged 18, he became the youngest designer to show at New York Fashion



CASE STUDY

ESTEBAN CORTÁZAR

For Paris-based, Colombian designer Esteban Cortázar, designing and pre-selling a trans-seasonal collection, delivered eight weeks after fashion week is the solution to current industry woes.

Week and in 2007, he was appointed creative director of Emanuel Ungaro. By the time Cortázar left the French house two years later, he felt "eaten up" by the system's demands.

For Cortázar, the solution was simple to conceive, but complicated to execute. He started to create only two collections a year, and both would be pre-sold, trans-seasonal and delivered in multiple drops. Cortázar decided to invite buyers to see a combination of pre-made samples and sketches three months before fashion week. Long-lead press are also invited, and all orders for the season placed then. Production begins immediately, so that by the time fashion week arrives, the process is nearly complete. If schedules run smoothly, orders can be ready for delivery about eight weeks later. Cortázar's Spring/Summer 2016 collection was sold in the first week of July, shown on the runway at Paris in October and landed in stores in early December; arriving early enough to have kept its "freshness" says Cortázar.

The strategy cuts straight to the heart of the industry's timing issue: reducing the discrepancy between the customer seeing a collection and being able to shop it. "I'm delivering and selling during pre-windows," he says, but "the collection ends up being my

main runway collection...so [it] arrives way earlier than other collections."

It also allows product to sit on the shop floor for longer, which not only suits the designer's trans-seasonal designs, but has also helped generate a healthy sell-through rate of between 50 to 65 percent across its 35 wholesale doors, more than half of which happens in the first few weeks after arrival, with a notable spike mid-way, when stores traditionally get seasonal deliveries. Some stores, depending on the depth of their buy, also arrange to have a second delivery.

"If we were starting the same way as everyone else, we would only technically have three months on the floor," says sales director Andrea Krueger. "It allows the sell-through to happen more naturally," adds Cortázar.

Cortázar also has the advantage of knowing in advance which looks are most popular with buyers — and can give them appropriate runway attention. "So, I can say: 'That needs to be on the runway,'" he says. "Buyers are going to want to see that and Instagram it right now."

Taking a punt on fabric orders is the first — and greatest — challenge Cortázar's model presents. In order to keep to his tight schedule and ensure

speedy delivery, all fabrics have to be pre-ordered if production is to start immediately after retailers' orders are placed.

"The fabric is the number one thing. You can whip out production quick if you have manpower," says Cortázar. But, "the factory cannot sew if the fabric is not there. It's riskier." The designer also negotiates wide delivery windows with stores — a contingency plan if the brand hits any road bumps during production. Many factories, he explains, still fail to grasp his alternative business model and decision to order outside the traditional schedule.

"The old-school mills that have been around forever have a system of working. When we came with this [order], they understood and were like, 'Oh yeah, that's cool.' But then they went ahead and did things the way they always do." Today, the brand has begun meeting with factories to help them fully understand the logistics of pre-selling.

Cortázar also has to take care that images of the collection don't leak before the catwalk show, and all buyers are now asked to sign confidentially agreements before they make their

orders, so collection images don't accidentally wind up on social media and steal his show's thunder.

"Convincing the old guard" has been very challenging, says Cortázar, who had to rename his collections Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter as editors and buyers were confused by his trans-seasonal approach to design.

Buyers, however, have mostly embraced the concept. "Their clients are so well-educated now; if they want something, they really want the product now," says Krueger.

Cortázar points to the dress worn by Cate Blanchett as an example of the desire digital media can drum up. "This dress, worn by this actress, was all over the world in 20 minutes," he remembers. And consumers' interest in it quickly translated to real sales. The brand itself had 35 personal requests from customers across the UK, the USA and the Middle East wanting to purchase the dress, and 50 percent of the dresses bought by retailers were pre-sold before they even arrived in stores.

His strategy is the "answer to the desire of the customer seeing an image and being able to get the piece," he says. "It doesn't have to be six months later."

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