

Karen Elson has always had an otherworldly presence about her. Whether that's through the magic she brings to fashion editorial or the haunting melodies she constructs in her music, the model, muse and musician tells us how narrative drives her and why she'll always be proud to be a weirdo.

# Chasing Storms

Photography: Emma Summerton  
Styling: Heathermary Jackson, sittings editor Jordyn Payne  
Words: Gemma Lacey



Simone Rocha dress





Miu Miu gown

## Chasing Storms

Her striking aesthetic has seen her become model and muse for top designers and photographers, but for someone who's lived such an extraordinary life, Karen Elson is ultra grounded and when I ask if she had any idea what she would experience, she replies, "I always had an instinct for what it could be, but I didn't know how wild it would become."

Her curiosity, combined with hard graft and the magic she works in front of the camera have seen her create some of the most fantastical fashion imagery ever produced. Whether it's the enchanted worlds imagined by Tim Walker or dramatic editorials with Steven Meisel. She describes a standout shoot travelling to Bhutan for British Vogue with Walker as "one of the most beautiful experiences I've ever had." This time, the location was the Himalayas where they spent two weeks creating a "witty esoteric shoot, with a Wicker Man vibe." It's clear Karen takes great pleasure as much from the setting as the experience, as she puts it, "What a joy to travel a country in that way and see so many deeply personal things. It's a Buddhist country and governed by those principles, so it's a very serene place."

Her deep understanding and respect for the artistry of those she works with is also evident, as her observations on Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel reveal. "They are tender people with an interest in humanity and what makes a person a person, and that's why they take pictures." She also shared how wonderfully gentle Richard Avedon and Irving Penn were with her, explaining, "I began modelling as a teenager and was treated as an adult, they all had this gentleness towards me. Irving Penn even asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up – it was so nice for me to be seen as a teenager for once. He had a beautiful way of seeing through things."

Her own sensitivity is what

makes her such a fascinating subject – on camera, she is alluring and magnetic, bringing her own story to each shoot. I ask if this is conscious and she tells me, "I think I've got a point of view and something to say and always have had. People can say about models that they just stand in front of the camera, but for anyone who's had any degree of success in the fashion industry there is a dialogue there, even if it's not overt. You give. I always try to give my best on a shoot and add to it, even silently. The same with my music, I could just sing and have other people write it, but I have something I want to say and I strive to do that."

One thing which is clear about Karen is that she's a pro, and this is proven when two days before the PUSS PUSS shoot she attempts to stop a feral stray cat from attacking her cat Fergus and receives a nasty bite which lands her in hospital. What followed was a three-day stay there and numerous cocktails of antibiotic and rabies shots, "I felt like I was out of my mind but it was a real adventure." She says, "At one point, the photographer even suggested doing the shoot at the hospital! I vetoed that but we shot as soon as I got out – sometimes you just have to be a pro."

When speaking of her own cats, she is clearly filled with affection. "I've always had cats my entire life. I've got four cats now, Fergus, Annie, Marmalade and Jam. Fergus and Annie were the first cats we got with the kids. We were at the shelter and looking at two other cats, but they were skittish and not ideal for kids, so we had to leave them. Then the shelter called and said they had two new rescues – tiny little bobtail kittens, and we went to see them and they were just such lovers, they loved people and we fell in love immediately. After that, my kids were browsing rescue cat websites – they love to make me feel guilty! My daughter found this very sick cat online and so we went to see if we

could help out this cat Marmalade, but then that cat had a friend called Jam so we ended up with two more cats."

Music has also always been a huge part of Karen's life, growing up in Manchester, she describes herself as "always surrounded by music." A seminal moment for her came while watching PJ Harvey and Nick Cave on TV singing *Henry Lee*. "That song got me excited. It was so beautiful and not trite and it really inspired me and connected me." So much so, she eventually named her son after the song. From that point she began spending all her pocket money on music. "I discovered *The Velvet Underground* and *Mazzy Star*, and so many bands that are so important to me and moved me."

We speak about the sense of mystique artists like Hope Sandoval had and the impact of social media for artists today. Karen is warm and candid, as she describes it, "I chronically feel the need to answer questions when they're asked and I over-explain everything. Sometimes I wish I wasn't that way, because there is an aspect of keeping your life private that is really important." With her latest record, many journalists have focused on her recent divorce and she explains, "It's really hard to not talk about that, especially with someone you don't know, even when they're trying to understand your creative process. It feels like sometimes, you don't say enough and other times too much." It also feels like it fails to give credit to Elson herself and her methods and inspirations. "There are so many things that inspire even a song, and me, as far as music is concerned. Whilst the focus for many people is my divorce, for me it's the aftermath. I had a life I was very happy in and then you have a different reality, and for me, it was coming into my skin as a woman again and what made me tick."

The album for her is more an articulation of "the things that in-









This page: Gucci blazer, stylist's own 1930s vintage slip dress  
Opposite page: Sonia Rykiel top, Gucci skirt & parasol, Chloé ballet flats





spire and haunt me. It was a grand reflection of where I was and what was going on in my mind, anything to do with divorce or what happened, I tried to keep it far out of my creative narrative. It was a reflection of where I was, I was mourning and it felt appropriate to talk about that.”

These stories are, as with all Karen’s creative endeavours, parts of a bigger narrative. Self-confessed as “more of an album person”, I ask if any songs hold a particular resonance for her? “That would be *Distant Shore*; it was the final song on the record and the emotional component of it represents peace or solace. It was me closing a door on that chapter of my life.”

She worked very collaboratively on the record with her friend

Jonathan Wilson, who she was introduced to by Pat Carney of *The Black Keys*. She describes how they became friends and then collaborators and how he was a driving force, “He gave me a kick up the arse and told me, ‘We’re going to make a record in LA!’, and we did!”

For all her candour and down-to-earth qualities, there is still an esoteric aura to Elson that is bewitching and out of the ordinary. This contrast of someone so grounded, yet so taken by magic and fantasy too. She gives good advice – she’d tell her younger self, “Keep your feet on the ground, don’t suffer fools and trust your instincts, because they’ve always been right,” but she believes in otherworldly things too, “I believe in all that nonsense, ghosts, aliens...

I’m a freak and a weirdo.” Her dream job is also surprising, “I want to be a storm chaser! I love, love, love crazy thunderstorms and living in Nashville, I get to see a ton of them. I’d love someone to give me a TV show about that or ghost hunting, I love ghosts and storms.”

I ask her if there’s anything she never gets to talk about that she’d like to share and she replies, “I think you hit on it when you asked me about the storm chasing. In these interviews, you often just scratch the surface and with me there’s a lot more going on underneath.”

Makeup: Angie Parker  
Hair: Sabrina Szinay



Sonia Rykiel top, Gucci skirt & parasol