

In living colour Alémais founder Lesleigh Jermanus in her print and art-filled new Sydney studio featuring a sculpture, far right, *Bactriana Camel 6* (2018), by Peter Cooley. Opposite page: pieces from Alémais autumn/winter 2025-2026, include a collaboration with artists from Sydney's Studio A.



Good vibes

SUPERCHARGED ENERGY IS IMPORTANT TO ALÉMAIS CREATIVE DIRECTOR LESLEIGH JERMANUS IN HER BRIGHT AND CHEERFUL STUDIO, HER DESIGNS AND HER “KISMET” COLLABORATIONS WITH LOCAL ARTISTS.

By ANNIE BROWN Photography ANSON SMART

Greating visitors to Alémais's new studio in Sydney's Surry Hills is a kaleidoscopic sculpture by the Sydney artist Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. It's a demigod, explains Lesleigh Jermanus, herself clad in a riot of colourful fish prints in the form of a dress from one of her collections. The demigod's presence is intended to keep away any bad juju.

Energy is important to Jermanus. It's what drives her brand, which she launched alongside her husband Chris Buchanan (now Alémais chief executive officer), from the “bunker” of their Marrickville house in the dark days of the pandemic. It has since become one of Australia's most successful fashion labels, stocked by almost 470 retailers in 60 countries.

Jermanus, a long-time fashion creative who previously worked at the likes of Zimmermann, Mares and Tigerlily, doesn't like to dwell too much on why the brand is resonating so well.

It's partly an energy thing - where to put it, what to do with it.

“I try not to think about it too deeply and I try not to analyse it too much, I think it takes away from the intuitive approach to what we do. Brands and designers can fall into that pit of trying to feed the beast, so to speak, trying to hit targets and tick boxes,” she says.

“Whereas I think we've always approached everything we do with, I guess that, ‘Lead from the gut’. Everything is intuitive in that we've been able to create collections based on stories and there's a feeling and an energy around it and I think people have been able to feel that and connect through those stories.”

People around the world write to Jermanus and her team about the energy they've picked up from her pieces - flouncy, balloon-sleeved, bright and often with prints that include everything from tennis racquets to leopards. They tell her that they wore her prints - each collection made in collaboration with an artist - when they went to their chemo appointment because they made them happy, or on holiday when they wanted



to feel free or to feel confident when they needed it most. In fact, people often ask Jermanus about her clothes. They're the kind of pieces that almost always start a conversation.

“You'll be standing in the street and someone taps your shoulder and asks you about what you're wearing and all of a sudden you've developed this lifelong friendship with this stranger and it's just about the art work,” smiles Jermanus.

Art is essential to the designer, a lifelong collector of, well, everything. “I get called the bowerbird,” she says. Many of her treasures are now scattered about the brand's new space, designed in collaboration with Sydney design and architecture firm YSG Studio. Some pieces from her collection including works by Francesca Athas and CJ Hendry sit alongside wavy mirrors and orbs of colourful handmade lights suspended from the ceiling.

“I wanted the team to come in and feel like they're working in an inspiring space. It's really hard to sit and design when you've got nothing to feel inspired by or colours that don't feel like they are true to us,” says Jermanus of the joyful - and busy - new studio. “I wanted it to feel like it embodied the spirit of the Alémais world.”

A sense of the serendipitous, and connection, is usually behind the collaborations with artists for which the brand has become known. Jermanus likes to keep her eyes and heart open for surprise. Such as earlier in the week when she was driving her three-year-old son Bowie to daycare and was stopped, practically in her tracks, by a sculpture in Clovelly. “It took my breath away,” she says. “Then I saw this man in a truck and I was like, ‘Oh excuse me, is that your store? I'm looking for the sculpture artist’. And he said, ‘That's me.’”

The “me” turned out to be textile artist, sculptor and medical doctor, Adam Rish. He gave her a book, and she's been madly researching his work since. “I should have been focusing on some other things,” she says slyly, adding that she thinks we should pay attention to what distracts us. >



Energy is everything From top, Jermanus in the Alémais studio presided over by a Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran demigod; the space embodies the spirit on which the brand has quickly built its reputation.



“I feel like it’s those distractions that are the important things to do, because that’s the nature of curiosity.”

She likes how working with artists encourages both parties to see things from a different perspective. In previous collections Alémais has collaborated with the likes of Sydney artist Chesca Athas and French cartoonist Yvan Guillo. All of them are profiled on the Alémais website.

The best collaborations involve, says the designer, a bit of kismet.

“I always think when we meet [the artists], if there’s chemistry for both parties, it feels right. They equally are as excited about what that end product is as we are. And I think it’s that unpredictability about different mediums. That’s my favourite part,” says Jermanus.

“I love the transference of energy from one artist to another.”

Growth in the business has happened in several ways, and it continues to surprise the designer. For one, it’s no longer just Jermanus, Buchanan and a handful of staff designing around her inner Sydney kitchen table. There’s now some 45 people working in the business – in the creative studio and in another office across the road. The brand is booming globally, with approximately 80 per cent of its wholesale orders coming from international stockists. Alémais has permanent concept stores in Harvey Nichols in the UK and David Jones Queens Plaza, Melbourne Bourke Street and Claremont. Pop-ups will soon launch in Le Bon Marché in Paris, London’s Selfridges and Bloomingdales in the US. In 2023, just two years after the brand delivered stock into stores, it opened Australian Fashion Week. The show also caught the eye of the award-winning costume designer Alex Bovaird, of Mike White’s HBO Max class satire, *The White Lotus*. Bovaird’s team reached out to Alémais and pulled looks from the runway for Parkey Posey, Leslie Bibb and Michelle Monaghan’s characters in the latest series, set in a luxury resort in Thailand.

“We had an amazing response, *The White Lotus* effect was real,” says Jermanus, still marvelling at the experience.

“The Parker Posey dress sold out immediately. We had loads of people sign up for it. All of the styles, people were like, ‘When can we get this?’. So we did a pre-release just before the finale of the final episode. We had a wild, wild response.”

While a proposal to transform historic The Village Inn in Sydney’s Paddington into a retail space and office was knocked back in court in 2023 after public protest, Jermanus says plans for a concept store are still bubbling along.

“There’s nothing like going into a store and having that experience of touching garments and being in their world,” she says. “I think that’s important for us because everything we do is tactile. You want that customer to understand the mood and feeling of the brand, which you can’t always portray digitally. So we do have hopes and dreams there. We will work on a concept store soon. It’s definitely on the cards. It’s probably not on the top of the list for now.”

In May the brand staged its first international show, in Marrakesh, a place that has long been a source of inspiration to Jermanus, especially Yves Saint Laurent’s time there in the ‘70s and ‘80s. The show was a collaboration with artist Laurence Leenaert, founder of Morocco-based lifestyle brand LRNCE, which works with local artisans. Jermanus had long admired Leenaert’s work and the show represented not only a major moment for Alémais but also an example of the kind of alchemy she hopes to create in collaboration. “Marrakesh is a beautiful melting pot for heritage and modernity and being able to celebrate the two brands in that space, it felt right,” she says.

The US is the brand’s biggest market. Is it because it’s simply a bigger audience or there’s more appetite there for her specific take on maximalism?

Possibly, she muses, it’s both. In any case, Jermanus was always drawn to colour: when she was watching her mum, a nurse, whip up outfits for Jermanus and her three siblings on the family sewing machine; at fashion school; in her travels.

“When I was studying fine art [it was] abstract expressionism and the things that I was really attracted to. I can look at minimalism and I have this great appreciation



Printed perfection Clockwise from above left, Jermanus says the new YSG Studio-designed Sydney space had to reflect the ethos of the brand and simultaneously inspire the team: A piece by US artist Cameron Dill in the designer’s office; collaborations, such as this mosaic wall created with YSG Studio, always stem from a moment of connection, says the Alémais co-founder.



and respect and I love it, and the same way a printed dress or a dress in colour feels calm to me is the same way a black or white or grey garment might feel calm to someone else,” she says.

Creating Alémais collections in the same special way they’ve always made them – everybody sitting on the floor and pitching in their ideas – is important to Jermanus. But she knows that, sometimes unfortunately, as a business grows, new processes have to come in.

“Truthfully, I find it very challenging. I feel like it’s 50 per cent of what I do and I wish it were less. But I think also when you’re in that growth stage of building a business, you’re still got your hand in all of the pots. You’re still spinning all of the plates, but less so now,” she says of balancing the needs of the business.

“I guess you want to ensure that your teams are happy, that everyone’s thriving, everyone’s working together harmoniously. At the same time you’ve got wholesale accounts, there’s growth in one pocket. I think you’ve got to decide on what you give your energy to. Another learning for both Chris and I is learning when to say no.”

Being both business and life partners, by the way, is mostly smooth sailing. Mostly.

“Chris and I laugh about it often. He laughs at me all the time. He’s like, ‘God, we’re so different’, and we really are, and he’s like, ‘But that’s why it works’. I think it’s our differences that really challenge and inspire us,” she says.

Both are trying to be less of the workaholics they used to be and to strike a balance between work and not bringing too much of the business home. “We’ve had to really try and train our brains that we’ve got to try and check out. Being able to recharge is



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Alémais’s Lesleigh Jermanus

so important for everyone: for your mental health, your physical health. And we are learning that a little bit more and more. So when we leave work, we try to switch off. There are deadlines that we can’t switch off. We are not afforded the luxury to do that. But then there are times when we have to, because we don’t serve each other well. We don’t serve the business well, the people we work for, our family,” she says.

Differences of opinion tend to be sorted out, too. “We’re both respectful of each other’s opinions and points of view. Sometimes it’s just about taking a step back so that we can look at the reasons why each of us are sort of staying strong in what we want. But I think it’s important ... I think that it challenges me to think differently and it challenges Chris to think differently. And I think that’s how we reach healthy outcomes,” she says.

One thing that has stayed true to the brand as it grows is the commitment to sustainability. The brand just released its first Impact report, with independent reporting into its materials and supply chains. It showed 75 per cent of its raw materials are low impact, 78 per cent of its synthetic materials are made from recycled fibres, and 600,000 trees have been planted so far as part of its reforestation efforts.

“Sustainability was one of the key factors [in not wanting] to start a brand,” says Jermanus. “It was daunting. It’s scary. Sustainability is complex. So I guess we did set out with, if we’re taking things from the earth, what can we give back? I feel like all of those values that we set out in the beginning that we’ve instilled in the business, they’re all still there. The kitchen table’s changed, but they’re the things that we’ve held onto. That is something I feel really proud of,” she says. ■