

Chaos And Charisma: Joe Van O Is New York City's Next Big Stylist

Writing Intensive II, Spring 2022

Anika Ljung

Red and blue lights swirl against the muddy brick walls where, four floors below, a cop car speeds across 125th street. Shouts echo from both sides of the busy road as fast-paced walkers brisk past, their heads down as if to drown out the noise. Three steep, green-carpeted staircases up, a furniture-less apartment is experiencing its own form of chaos: clothes spilling out of half-unzipped suitcases, a folding table full of makeup and hair supplies, and a frenzy of photographers, artists and designers, prepping and primping for the perfect shot.

I sit on a small wooden bench pushed against the wall next to a box of jewelry with a thick silver chain emerging from its navy lid. The hot smell of a flat iron envelopes the room, exaggerated by the sun shining in from a nearly floor-to-ceiling window that looks out to a red banner that reads "Harlem Village Academies."

It's a bright spring morning that started as the sun rose for Joe Van O, a New York City stylist whose eccentric appearance is mimicked in his innovative and avant-garde approach to fashion. "I like a little bit of chaos," he repeats throughout the shoot, an idea he clearly holds central to his vision.

The shoot, organized by Van O to build his portfolio, has brought together industry professionals at a subjectively early Sunday call-time. With his mop of curly black hair and piercing blue-green eyes, Van O zips around the studio, bouncing from photographer to hair stylist to makeup artist and back to photographer, discussing everything from lighting design to eyeshadow color. Known for his immersive approach to styling and unpredictable vocabulary, he acknowledges his place in the fashion industry in a rather outspoken manner.

"You better not call me a college dropout," Van O laughed at me over a cup of lukewarm chai at a Bushwick coffee shop. Though he technically did drop out of the Art Institute of

Chicago after three years of studying fashion design, it was with good reason: a job offer as a styling and studio assistant for Avena Gallagher, who was with luxury brand Telfar at the time. Upon his move to New York City for the position, Van O was immediately thrown into the deep end of both editorial and commercial work. “It was like getting an entire college experience in a matter of months,” he reflected. Sixteen-hour days were the norm, as everything he needed to know for the future of his career rested on that one leap that many ponder but few are daring enough to take. And leaps are something that Van O has never shied away from.

Following his stint at Telfar, Van O dabbled in freelance before accepting a full-time position at Nike, where he worked as a stylist on commercial shoots. The work was consistent and minimal, with few administrative duties and a large day rate, a necessity after he failed to find adequate money in freelance. “I did a lot of assisting in commercial work because I couldn’t really break through with all of these like 40-year old stylists in the mix,” he said. “I could never compete against their qualifications editorially.” But, as always, Van O had a vision—and it was working. As he rose up the ranks in the company, he made a name for himself in the fashion industry, one that he could take with him back out and into the world of freelance.

Now, at 26, he’s pacing around the spacious Harlem studio in a white Foo And Foo tee atop khaki green Acme split-hem bottoms. (His worn, black boots are off and tucked in the corner, so you know he means business). He gasps affectionately at the model’s hair—pinned back with silver clips and chains that mimic a helmet—and kindly requests a browner lip before helping her into sheer gray tights. The first look is created through trial and error; shorts turned into no shorts replaced only by the makeup artist’s black leather belt, a necklace turned into a headpiece, a silver chain bracelet added, then taken away, then added again. The final touch? His boyfriend’s vintage Diesel sunglasses. Van O steps back to get a full look, his thumb and index finger clutching his chin thoughtfully. He ponders his next words: “It’s giving intergalactic arranged marriage. And she’s slutty.” Perfect.

There is never a shortage of adjectives from Van O, horny and c*nty being my personal favorites. Who knew they could actually take on the same meaning as, say, “cool” or “awesome”? When I told him I took work off in order to attend today’s shoot, he responded with “Gorgeous.” When I inquired about his dream person to style, I was met with the unpredictable, “Oh my God, that’s such a fucked up question.” (His answer was FKA Twigs). Just as he embodies a certain carefree, self-assured character, he surrounds himself with those who exude similar energy.

A small-framed man confidently replaces the jewelery box as my seat partner, his black monochromatic outfit paired seamlessly with his equally bold eyebrows and flop of dark hair. I speculated his role in the shoot, my suspicion justified as he introduces himself as Jack Perkasky, Van O’s boyfriend slash assistant slash Parsons student. A quirky personality himself, he doesn’t shy away from conversation, telling me everything from how the pair met to the creation of his own brand Sever Studio, and the gritty details of their photoshoot last winter in the snowy mountains of Canada. He abruptly stands to grab his camera, pushing up the sleeves of an Old Navy sweatshirt half-zipped atop a Margiela tank, paired with Rick Owens jeans that gently graze the floor as he walks. (“It’s always good to have a balance,” he says.)

I’m just beginning to feel settled in my surroundings when a sultry voice cuts the silence: “So tell me about yourself.” It’s the model, Annika Dalland, her pale brown hair now being pulled into braids and her lids dusted with a smokey brown. Knowing she’s born and raised Lower East Side, I hesitantly tell her I’m a transplant. She laughs assuredly, her arms crossed over her 6’2” frame, and I let out an internal sigh of relief knowing I’m not about to be berated by a native New Yorker. In my defense, I’m not the only one from out-of-state: Van O is from Austin, Texas, something I was reminded of when he pulled out his phone to show us pictures of the engraved knife he received as a gift from his grandfather at age 10.

His camera roll is dominated by a slew of less controversial photos: screenshots from Instagram, mood boards that he creates before every shoot, and a picture of Pekarsky, time-stamped for that morning at 2:46 a.m., in a head-to-toe rendition of the third and final look for today's photoshoot. "He's like my muse," said Van O. Building out a string of looks before entering a shoot is important, as it arms him with ideas to bring the team instead of them seeing the clothing hanging on the rack without context.

Inspired by the likes of Alexander McQueen, John Galliano and Rick Owens, Van O approaches fashion as a sculptural creation, conceptualizing looks from top to bottom, with no detail being too small. "I can approach Joe with a loose thesis statement on what I'm trying to say with a particular collection, and he can fill in the blanks and add to the story in unique ways that elevate the work beyond anecdotal storytelling," said Elena Velez, a designer and close friend of Van O's who employed him as a stylist for her two most recent New York Fashion Week shows. "I think in some ways he sees [my] brand and the story better than I can."

For someone so confident in their vision, Van O practices collaboration willingly. He walks amongst the other creatives, gathering opinions on colors, poses and lighting, ensuring everyone is part of the process. His personal approach is tangible: Dalland does not dress herself, as he guides her legs through grey distressed tights, her arms through an oversized braided leather jacket, and her feet into a variety of delicate heels and buckled platform boots. In contrast to larger, more high-profile shoots, this is one where he can directly insert himself in all aspects of creation, a role he feels comfortable assuming. "I'm trying to engage as a creative director as well by really taking the helm of sculpting the image," Van O said. "That kind of dynamic varies shoot to shoot as there is one who takes vision control. I just can't help but be that person for most projects I'm on."

Back in the coffee shop, we swooned over Bella Hadid's Instagram story from the previous night, where Van O made a surprise appearance. He was styling internet

personality Hal Baddie for a PAPER Magazine shoot that went viral. “We were pulling clothes like crazy left and right,” he said of his styling approach to the editorial. “We had no idea what the talent would be into.”

Finding a successful bridge between model and stylist is something that Van O pays close attention to, as getting their vision across is just as important as putting them in something chic that will resonate with the intended audience. For one of Hal Baddie’s outfits, Van O settled on a black monochromatic look complete with a Wiederhoeft two-piece dress, Elena Velez headpiece, Fluevog platforms and Balenciaga sunglasses. “She was speaking her creative voice visually, so we wanted to have a lot of options ready for her while still trying to push forward our fashion agenda with what would look the chicest,” Van O recalled.

Inside the Harlem studio and fueled by a combination of chocolate brownie Clif bars and a cool mint vape (I was sent to the deli across the street to retrieve both items, his credit card in hand), Van O brings a palpable, contagious energy to the set. Soft futuristic music thumps in the background as Dalland moves effortlessly through a multitude of poses, her eyes intense with a stance that exudes authority. She takes control of the camera, complemented—not outshined—by layers of clothing so diligently chosen. Three different looks embody three different aesthetics, expressed through a combination of materiality, silhouette, and colorway. Though each new style contrasts the last, Van O is dedicated to adding a signature unconventional flair all of his works while understanding the complexities of the industry. “Fashion is part of the cultural conversation that is this timeline. It’s about what’s happening in the world, how people are thinking, how people are trying to change the world,” Van O said. “Choosing to be fluid with that and open to new ideas constantly is how you stay part of that conversation. No one great thing is permanent.”

At 1:30 the photoshoot comes to an abrupt end, its culmination met with relieved applause and cheek kisses from departing collaborators. Just as quickly as makeup was strewn across a foldout table, hot tools were placed amongst any open surface,

and accessories were thrown across the wood floor, the chaos was contained, any evidence of it imperceivable. With garments placed neatly back into their bag, zipped into their suitcase, and stuffed into their backpack, Van O, Perkasky and I hauled the load down the narrow stairs, emerging back onto the busy street and into a world that Van O has every intention to conquer.