This is how SATC stylist Patricia Field created Samantha's iconic wardrobe

With her documentary 'Happy Clothes' to show at the Melbourne International Film Festival, Patricia Field chats to BAZAAR about her storied sartorial career.

By Jane Rocca

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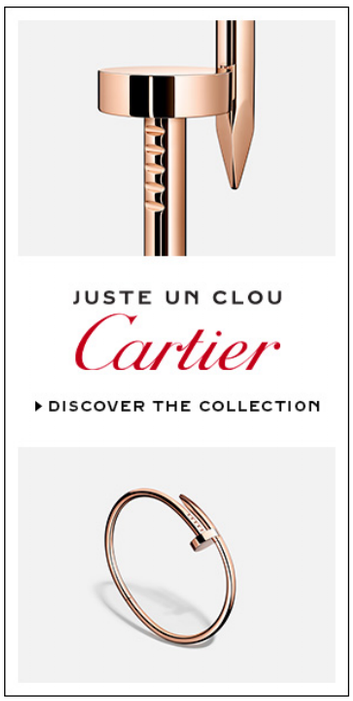

EMMY-AWARD winning American costume designer Patricia Field made clothes talk on the hugely successful HBO series *Sex and the City* — all thanks to her sartorial wizardry.

To mark the arrival of a new fly-on-the-wall documentary *Happy Clothes* (which we can marvel at during the Melbourne International Film Festival next month) the 81-year-old talks the power of mismatched patterns, the influence of 1950s pin-up Betty Page on her own style, and why friendships with actresses Sarah Jessica Parker and Kim Cattrall solidified her creative jackpot.

When filmmaker Michael Selditch approached Field to make *Happy Clothes*, the New York native initially turned him down.

“She didn’t want to be put on a pedestal, she is very humble,” says Michael Selditch who met Field for the first time in 2018 when making a fashion series called *American Style*. Field was one of 56 designers Selditch interviewed, the bond that day planted the seed for what would happen next.

“Pat didn’t want anyone to make a fuss about her. She likes to do her work and not get distracted,” Selditch said. “The thing that made her come around when I asked a second time, was I told her I wanted to see her shop, to see her work with actors and to be at those fittings. I’d be a fly on the wall to get inside her head. She liked that approach.”

The documentary opens with its own *Sex and the City* Carrie Bradshaw tutu moment — we see Field dive into a swimming pool and take the plunge — literally and metaphorically. You’re left wondering what’s the connection? But that’s the exact point, she’s dancing [swimming] to the beat of her own drum.

COURTESY

Field certainly delivered her share of risqué SATC fashion choices over the late 90s and early 2000s — many that went on to inspire trends, influence runways and saw her own namesake retail store tilt from underground club energy to mainstream curious.

“At first, I was like, what does the pool scene have to do with it,” queries Patricia Field. “I used to swim in lakes in Connecticut as a kid with my Mum and her sisters, and do swim occasionally now, it’s my form of exercise I suppose. Then it clicked, Michael is all about being unusual, it was clever and quality. I knew then it would be good documentary,” she said.

“The swimming is my tutu moment,” Selditch said.

“I wanted to make people think are you in the right movie?”.

Sarah Jessica Parker bonded with Field immediately on SATC. In fact, she’s the reason Field got the gig.

The pair met on the set of the 1995 romantic comedy *Miami Rhapsody* and it was Parker who suggested Field to producer and writer Darren Starr. She appears in *Happy Clothes* discussing those ground-breaking wardrobe moments.

Their working relationship on SATC was a melding of minds; a pre-Pinterest ideas board, pattern clashing and stereotype smashing. Field meshed high end luxury garments with vintage; she found a way for Carrie’s wardrobe to reflect the essence of Parker too. It was that blurring of the lines that left you wondering who is mimicking who?

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"I really enjoyed working with Sarah and respected her taste. It's not like fashion school with her, she gets it and knows it. She is very fashion and full of ideas and that made what we did so successful on a professional level," Field began. "But not every moment in costume design is a diamond either, it's creative and interactive and that's what I love about it."

Field was already running her namesake retail business when the opportunity to join SATC came her way.

"I wasn't expecting it. I was like boy, this is fabulous I have to do it. It opened me up to a whole other experience for me in fashion. I am grateful," Field said.

KIM *and I went* SHOPPING *together to* CREATE *her* LOOK *for* AJLT

Her friendship with Kim Cattrall is still solid. In fact, Field turned down *And Just Like That* to work on Cattrall's Netflix *Glamorous* series. Cattrall also returned to *AJLT* on one cameo condition — that Field would organise her outfit look, which we are yet to see on the HBO series, streamable for us on Binge.

"Kim and I went shopping together to create her look for AJLT," Field said.

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“We went with the first outfit I found. I spoke to Kim and she liked the idea. We didn’t know one another before SATC, but we built a very strong relationship. She had confidence in me and it grew and went on through the years. I am still happy to say that it’s still that way. It’s why we had so much success with the costumes for her character Samantha. It’s the friendships you build with the actors that are reflected in the work you do,” Field said.

With more than 50 years in retail, and three locations over that time, it was Field’s Bowery store in NoHo that became the curious pitstop for *Sex and the City* devotees. She owned the property, and turned a run-down precinct into a tourist must-visit.

There was an underground club energy within; having visited many times in the years I lived in New York in the early 2000s. The store was a bombastic mesh of flamboyance, drag amped stage presence with a hairdresser ready to blow wave when you needed an upper. It was across the road from the now defunct music venue CBGB’s which suited Fields and the clientele she attracted — a medley of punks, misfits, rock’n’roll riff-raff, artists and dancers.

“The store was an everyday experience for me,” Field began. “In the 80s, we socialised with Keith Haring — he was a dream, so sweet and generous and Jean-Michel Basquiat was there too. I was not consciously aware that I was in the middle of a happening situation but it’s where the kids gravitated to. We wanted to surround ourselves with other like-minded creatives and that’s what inspired all of us. We weren’t interested in trends.”

So, what’s it like watching a documentary about your life?

Patricia Field outside her store on Eighth Street, New York, in 1987 | TINA PAUL

"Watching it and being in the documentary was a very different experience to writing my book," Field said. "I am glad I did it thought, I think it was time we told these stories."

These days Field runs a gallery *Patricia Field Art Fashion* — a bouquet of one-off independent designer pieces that promotes emerging and established brands.

"When I came back from Paris after doing two seasons of costume design of *Emily in Paris*, I decided to open a gallery showcasing different designers to keep that momentum going," she said.

> I STUDY *you and* WANT *to combine the* ACTOR *with the* SCRIPT *and the* COSTUME, *it's a* THREE*-point* PYRAMID

It was the bondage photograph of the 1950s of Betty Page and Bunny Yeager, two pin-up queens of the era, that inspired Field's own short bangs [and one she still clips in today] and her exotic style. In fact, when it came time to choosing a pair of glasses for Betty in *Ugly Betty* — she chose a pair that riff on her own and Betty Page's style.

"I first saw Betty Page in a book and don't think the 1950s were as restrictive as people thought," she said. "I don't see any original expression like that today. Our experience of the now times is much flatter than the past. The biggest thing today is Barbie. I don't see anything like Betty Page breaking the rules."

In the 1960s, Field would go shopping at Bloomingdales with her mum — who ran a dry-cleaning business in Manhattan and hang with her single aunties. It involved stopping on Madison Avenue to purchase a new trench and stock up on quality knits.

“Mum wasn’t fashion or high end, but she took care of me and made sure I had cashmere sweaters because they lasted and were quality,” Field said.

Now in her eighth decade of life, Field doesn’t like to think too much about what’s next. “In the past, I wondered how long my career would last, and I’m still going,” she said. “I don’t really want to make a plan for my future. I like life to unfold and to make a decision as it’s happening. That’s the way I deal with life.”

It was while working with actress Lily Collins on *Emily in Paris* that gave her faith in the next generation of Hollywood actors.

“Lily Collins stopped in New York to visit me at my gallery on her way to Paris. I did some initial shopping for her sight unseen, but when she showed up and met me, I respected that effort,” Field said.

“I have never met her dad Phil Collins or her mother, but she’s involved in the decisions with us together when it comes to Lily’s outfits. I am not a dictator. I am a researcher into your personality. I study you and want to combine the actor with the script and the costume, it’s a three-point pyramid,” she said.

“It’s not rocket science.”

Happy Clothes: A Film About Patricia Field will show at the Melbourne International Film Festival on August 5, 7 and 19. For more information and tickets, click here.

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