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## Claire Distenfeld: From Art Degree to Upscale Boutique Owner

The Upper East Side lifer opened the gallery-like Fivestory in 2011, and it's been a New York fashionista's mainstay ever since

August 12, 2013, [Craig Barboza](#)

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Claire Distenfeld has been fascinated with design since, well, pretty much forever. The native New Yorker cut her teeth in the art world, first interning at a gallery and then at the New Museum. After completing her bachelor's degree in fine arts from N.Y.U. in 2004, she moved to Paris for a year and soaked in the museums before returning to earn her master's degree from the Sotheby's Institute of Art. But these days the bold prints and elegantly shaped pieces Distenfeld assembles tend to be the kind you wear, not hang on a wall. It all started a few years ago when she was suffering from a familiar post-college conundrum: what to do with her life. It was then that Distenfeld and her father, Fred Distenfeld, a retired exotic skin importer, hatched the idea for an upscale lifestyle boutique, complete with ethereal lighting, ornate furnishings and Italian marble floors.

When it opened in 2011, Fivestory quickly became a shopping hot spot among the style elite. Housed in a gorgeous townhouse on the [Upper East Side](#), in the neighborhood where Distenfeld was born and raised, Fivestory showcases a wide selection of smartly curated men's and women's clothes, accessories and home goods (presented like works of art) from both star designers and indie fashion labels. The 3,456-foot space even has a "shoe garden." Last week, we spoke with Distenfeld, now 27, by phone about finding her calling, the perks of the job and bringing back the "old-world" retail experience. "At the end of the day," she says, "online shopping is my arch nemesis," although she admits to using Instagram. What follows are edited excerpts from the interview.

### COOL JOB Q&A:

**What was it like growing up in New York, one of the style capitals of the world?**

At the time you don't know you're the luckiest person in the world, but I think that I've always been extremely aware of what was going on around me, whether it was sitting at a dinner table and looking at a fork or flower arrangements or looking at artwork, clothing, windows. Kids are sponges, and I would soak up aesthetics no matter where I was or what I did. When I opened Fivestory, I don't even think I realized I had this encyclopedia of things I liked or that had made an impression on me. At the first meeting my interior designer, Ryan Korban, said "talk to me about floors you have always liked" and all of a sudden it was "O.K., here are my Top 10 Floors. These are doorknobs I've liked. These are windows I've liked." I mean, he was just, "whoa, this is crazy." And we built a store together out of this whole world I had known but never tapped into, which I think is because I grew up here.

**People today don't have to leave their apartment to go shopping. They can sit on the couch in their PJs, open their laptop and just go online to shop for clothes. Why open a store?**

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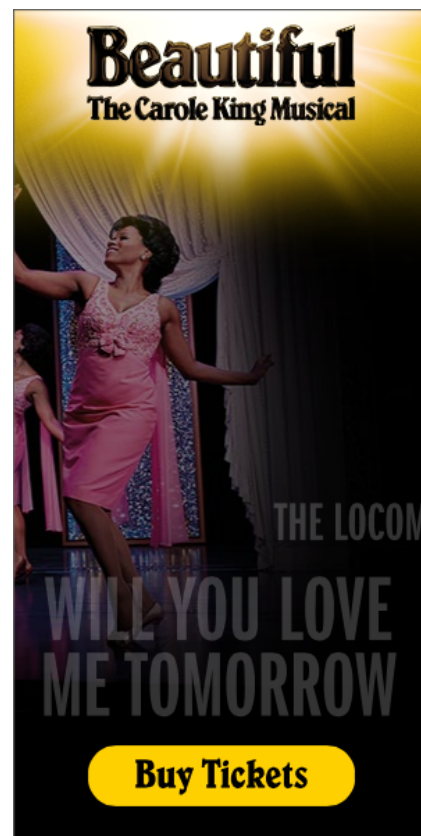
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I have a romantic side and I think there are certain things that should be delivered to you, but there are other things in life that shouldn't. There are experiences people need and I really believe — I don't want to say "shopping," because I find it to be an ugly word — but the retail experience, or the New York experience, cannot be delivered through a website. That's why with Fivestory I was almost forced to do a kind of a sensory overload. We designed the store so when you walk in there — it's a feeling you just can't translate to a website. And I'm not saying we'll never do e-commerce. I'm just saying it will never be the same. Back in the day, people dressed up to go shopping. If you needed to buy something, you had to walk the streets of New York and you wanted to look the part, which is kind of what Fivestory is invoking. We want the store to be different. We want the music to be different. We want the store to smell different, which is why we have our own scent.



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**Did you say you have your own scent?**

Yeah. We work with a brand called Le Labo. They already have a Santal line, and I've been wearing one of their perfumes for years. Everyone just kind of knew that was my smell, and I never told anyone what it was. I would just get stopped on the street, by doormen or people at the bodega, who were all, like, "I love your smell." So one day I approached Le Labo about making a version of the scent in candle form. So now I joke that you can take me home every night.



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**Did you have any prior retail experience before starting Fivestory?**

None. Zero. I mean it's borderline ridiculous anyone let me do this! My dad is my partner and he really believes in me, which, looking back now you think, How did you do that? But in this job you really have to, as I said, be a sponge. You have to soak up everything, especially the mistakes because you have to learn from them right away.



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**Tell us about some of the early lessons for you.**

There were so many. [Laughs] One, I learned not to be so stubborn. I learned not to be a control freak. I learned that I don't know very much. And, most important, I learned to surround myself with people who are brilliant and smart and proficient in everything I'm not because, let's face it, I can't be the biggest, baddest wolf in every subject. So I found my niche and built this team of people who are amazing at so many different things that I will never be good at.



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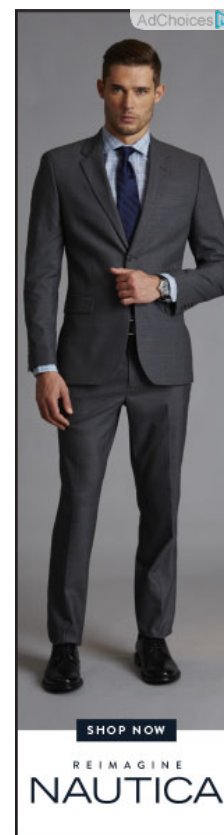


Interior shots of Fivestory (Photos: Courtesy of Fivestory)

**You must have been doing something right. According to *Harper's Bazaar*, Fivestory opened two years ago to "nearly instant cult status." Was that a big boost for you?**

I try not to internalize little one-liners the press gives me. All I know is, from the day I came up with the idea for the store to now, I've never really stepped back to look at what I've done. And I like that because building the company took about two years. It was the biggest struggle of my life. The only way I got through it was to never look too far down the road. I'd wake up and just try to get through the day. Then I'd go to sleep thinking that was the worst day of my life. I'd wake up again and the next day I went to bed like, "Oh, no, no. *That* was the worst day of my life." I kind of survived. Obviously, it's not bad days anymore. Now the days are much more enjoyable. But it's still a lot of work and [our success] just fuels the fire. I've always had an intense drive to be successful, to work hard, to feel like I deserve something. I don't know if I'll ever be satisfied.

**There are some ridiculously cool clothes at Fivestory. But throughout the store you also have all**



**these quirky, unexpected goods. What was your inspiration?**

Before opening the store, I worked in the art world so that's my mentality. I use the word "curation." A lot of fashion people don't use that word. I also hold space to a high degree because when you put together an art show it's all about where you hang things and the way the artwork interacts with each other. It's not just what's in the store; it's what each piece is next to. Presentation is key. I like the idea of finding little gems and things around the corner when you're in a store. I always want people to leave thinking they didn't see everything.

**Fivestory, which as of now is only two floors of the five-floor building, is a hop, skip and a stiletto step from your childhood home on the Upper East Side. How has the neighborhood changed?**

When I grew up, there was no downtown. There was just up here. My whole life was the Upper East Side and for me it was just very comfortable, very secure. I felt like I knew everything. When you get older, though, you start to explore more and I find that I'm always discovering new things up here. I'll walk down a different side street. Not that long ago, I stumbled on this amazing store two blocks away from us called Creel & Gow. It's kind of a taxidermy, weird evolution store, also in a townhouse, that I'd never seen before and it's so cool. There are things like that. But what's funny is when I first started looking at the Upper East Side to build something, Madison Avenue was a wasteland. Everything was closed. There was almost nothing interesting. And since we opened, the Céline store opened, a Ladorée opened, two Lanvin stores opened. There's life again.

**Many boutique owners view their shops as an extension of their closet. Is that true with you as well?**

Yes! I think everything in this store I would wear and wear it proudly. I own half [the things in here]. But having a year under my belt, I now also buy for clients or specific people. I can't be as selfish with the store as I want to be. But the store is still an extension of my soul and my guts. I can put my stamp on that.

**In addition to brand name designers you also stock exclusive collaborations with New York-based companies.**

We try to work with designers people know and trust and love, but I also search for new and exciting designers, and we'll partner on exclusives. In fall we're launching a collection with New York-based jewelry designer Lizzie Fortunato, who's pretty well known. We've been selling her jewelry now for four or five seasons and we do really well with it. When we found her, Lizzie was pretty obscure but now she's actually in, like, a hundred stores. I never wanted to drop her, because we made a really nice relationship, but she kind of outgrew us. So I approached Lizzie and I said, "Why don't we sit down for a month, maybe four or five times, and work on a clutch together." So we designed a full seven-piece collection for the store.

**And I heard you're selling items through Instagram. When did you realize you could get people to buy clothes through social media?**

I don't really know when it happened. I started using Instagram as a personal tool and my entire life became the store. [Laughs] Slowly I started realizing that when I'd post clothing or jewelry I would get a lot more attention than if I put, like, dinner at my grandma's house. So I posted more clothing and fashion because everyone likes more "Likes." And, all of a sudden, I started getting inquiries: "Can I buy this?" I was like, "Yeah, you can. Email this person." Next thing I knew there was one sale, then three sales, then we had waiting lists and pre-orders, and I've been going from there ever since.

**You recently posted a photo of a gorgeous piece and wrote, "After seeing this skirt Jay Z's next ode to song should be BALMAIN." And you tagged Beyoncé, adding "this ones for you." Has Jay rolled by the store yet to pick it up?**

[Laughs] He has not. I have a witty sense of humor, and it can only go so far when my Instagram is being looked at by 18,000 people. But I try to throw in stuff like that sometimes.

**Do you have any celebrity clients?**

We do, but we don't really talk about it.

**C'mon, you can give us one.**

Valentino [Garavani] is a regular shopper.

**So you get to hobnob with fashion legends, collaborate with designers and perfume companies. What's the best part of your job?**

Waking up every morning and having no idea what the day is going to bring. As a boutique owner, you just get to do so many different things. I think *WWD* gave me some crazy quote about calling [celebrity chef] Mario Batalli, which I've never actually done. But the idea behind that is because Fivestory is so multifaceted and has so many categories, it gives you the excuse to call, get in touch with or bring in anyone you want. If I wanted someone to curate the music or if I wanted a new scent,



and I wanted it to smell like pizza [laughs], yeah, I could go to Mario Batalli or someone like that. I think that's what makes the job interesting. There's no ceiling.

**Any special events planned for New York Fashion Week in September?**

We're doing our first art show, actually. It's a major event with this artist I found. Her name is Sydney Albertini. She's coming out with a ready-to-wear line for spring — that's very loosely defined ready-to-wear. So we're quietly launching that. But, really, we're going to have an art exhibition in the store.

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