



two's company



Sara Berman's fresh witty knits, kooky considered tailoring and innovative separates have become must-haves within the fashion world. Sara's sister Aimee Berman has now joined the company as an equal partner and they are currently working to expand the business. Their current collection continues their ongoing fascination with traditional British heroines; sensible yet sensual. Victoria Diana Tyas catches up with them in their Camden studio and observes their discussions about fashion, styles, trends, arguments and who is bossier!

Sara: Aimee bosses me around!

Aimee: I always say, "no, actually, it's all pretty much the same" but no, I do boss her around. I am a Sagittarius so I like to boss people around.

Sara: As long as I get my own way in the end I don't mind. There is a difference between getting your own way and being the bossy one, I think.

Aimee: I just get a lot more stressed.

Sara: There are definitely roles, depending on what stage we are at and what project we are working on. Even though I am four years older, Aimee does act like the older sister most of time. Probably because I'm in my own world and have a tendency to switch off, apart from what I am looking at. She is used to looking after me and protecting me. I love any concept driven work and Aimee hates it. She loves the input of information. She says to me, "you haven't put the orders on the system have you?" I say, "no" and she says, "I'm desperate to do it".

Aimee: I love to see it adding up.

Sara: I hate it, it's my worst [task].

Aimee: It's all in my head, it grows in my head organically and stays there whereas Sara likes to.....

Sara: I like to visualise it, I need to see it, I need to join the dots to the next stage, it's just different ways of working, I guess.

Arguing

Aimee: We argue all the time, about nothing. That would be right wouldn't it? We have always been unbelievably close but we're sisters so we argue. I can be stressed about everything else apart from Sara and I will start the fight. I will get rid of all the tension on her and vice versa on me. It all blows up about nothing and then it's over in about 30 seconds. With sisters you can lose control of yourself in a way that you can't with other people.

Sara: We would never speak to others as we speak to each other. Especially when you are doing a collection, you care so much about it. It is very creative so emotions do come into it. When you get people who can't speak their mind, they compromise where they shouldn't.

Aimee: I have quit a few times and then come back with a coffee.

Sara: She says she's going to quit and I say, "I'll have a double Latte!"

Influences

Aimee: Our mother was our best ally.

Sara: She made us like this, she made us this driven. Her achievements as we were growing up and seeing how passionate she is about her work have definitely influenced us.

Sara: Also, people of our mum's generation, women, didn't generally work. Having grown up with that as the 'norm' and in an equal house-

fold. We were so different to all of our friends, none of their mothers worked. It is fundamental to how we are. I wouldn't ever think about not working, not having my own income, my own security.

Aimee: Because of seeing her so strong it really makes you see the importance of being focused and doing something properly. It rubs off on you, you can't help it. We are an unbelievably close family, you cannot help but be influenced by what each other is doing.

Sara: She gives us a lot of input and advice, helps with the business and the moral aspect because she is such a moral person. She runs such a good business and people have such respect for her. That is something I aspire to. Hopefully, our staff think we are fair and nice and in return they will treat us with the respect with which we treat them. We would never shaft anyone in business, ever! It just wouldn't happen and we would like to think they wouldn't shaft us.

Aimee: You try and build relationships so you are loyal to each other.

Sara: And if someone shafts you, don't retaliate - just leave and don't work with them again. We've had factories which we've felt were dishonest and we have not worked with them again. Those that we do work with are honest, good people on the same level and with the same ethics. We only like working with nice people.

Aimee: You've got to get up every day and go to work, it shouldn't be a hardship, it should be a joy.

Schooling and Education

Aimee: We went to the best school and had the best education. It was a school that focused on personal growth and working at your own speed and developing yourself and I really think it has definitely shaped me as a person.

Sara: You create your own work ethic which is extremely important when you run your own business. There is no-one that is your boss that is going to tell you, "By the way you have three projects that have to be in by the end of this month and you have to do it" it doesn't work like that, you have to do it yourself. I think it is really important you get educated in that manner from the beginning.

Aimee: It teaches you, you're okay to be you and you're not that good at science but really good at maths. I have mild dyslexia, I studied English A-level and I could have gone and studied English at University because of all the help that I had from the school.

Sara: I went to a place called Woodhouse when I was 16, it was really strict, so different from King Alfred's. I hated it when I was told you have to do your homework. I was like, "no, actually, I don't have to do anything I don't choose to do so I won't!" And I didn't! It was funny how your choice of education really changes you like that. I didn't love Woodhouse as much as King Alfred's.

Aimee: King Alfred's is the best place in the whole world! I can't wait to send my kids there just so I can go in again. I don't think any place in life is like it. It went from our mum, then Sara, then me, then my friend and then her middle sister, her baby sister and...

Sara: In a couple of years my little girl will be there.

Creativity

Aimee: Where did our creativity come from?

Sara: I don't know...

Aimee: Genetic, our whole family. Oh, and school, being pushed to be yourself and be creative.

Sara: Mum's a designer, dad designs jewellery erm... both grandmothers are artists.

Aimee: Great Grandfather had a shoe factory, designing shoes.

Sara: All the way back, our other great grandmother had a fashion business as well. Everyone has been creative and all the women have worked.

Aimee: Definitely genetics and parenting and having the freedom to do it. I know so many kids who were artistic but have it beaten out of them at a young age.

Sara: It is a really tough industry, it is hard to keep people interested every season. We deal with the production side. All of this is hard but it is definitely made a lot easier

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by the fact that we have mum behind us with her experience and telling us how to do things but she is not here running the company. I don't find the creative side of it tough, it comes very easily and naturally. Any block that we have is actually quite enjoyable because it means we have to work through it. It is like getting a really big knot in your hair, you just go for it and get it out. It is actually quite fun.

Aimee: It is easier that there are two of us, so you are not just on your own on an island going "Ohhhhhh".

Sara: If I was on my own I would think "I don't know!" but even then, me and Aimee would hash it over.

Aimee: I remember, I used to come over...

Sara: Yes and have a few drinks and try and figure it out. The hard bit is running a business. We are a couple of girls with a talent, we are not business people. We have become business people now, we have learnt to be, but I find myself in a position where I'm the MD. Who the hell thought that was going to happen? Why? I don't want that!

Aimee: Master of Disguise!

Sara: Exactly, that's how you feel. Neither Aimee nor I wanted to be in a management position. It means the creative side has to be done at home, later or whenever.

Aimee: It is weird because it's a design company, it's a fashion brand. We have to be the branding and the design into the running of the business.

Sara: Dealing with factories, making sure everything is of a high standard. All of those things.

Working together

Sara: We always wanted to work together, we actually wanted to live together at one point. We always had plans that we would eventually...

Aimee: Mary brother!

Sara: Yes we did try! (Giggles) Aimee went off for a bit to try and learn something new. It was difficult for Aimee to decide to come into the business with me because we hadn't planned to start the business, we didn't think it would go so well, we didn't know it would become so successful in the short time it did. When Aimee first came out of college, I think she felt quite daunted about coming in as Sara's sister and working with me. She didn't want me to teach her how to do this, she didn't want to be under me and have me tell her what to do, which is fair enough. She said I'm actually going to go off for a few years and do something else.

Aimee: I kind of did a few of my own things as well. So I could have that.....

Sara: Independence. She thought she would come back to the table with some thing to bring and so we would be more equal and it would be better. Then I got pregnant and Aimee said "You're not bringing someone else in to a job that I can do and I am not risking our business when I could be doing it". And, to be honest, all credit to her. I just went off and had the baby.

Aimee: I think I had 7 months to learn how to run it, I didn't even pick up the phone for 4 weeks! It worked because I had to learn loads in a short space of time. I was left to make my mark. I just had to get on with it and then Sara came back to work and there was a much more equal sitting. I am as stubborn as a mule. Try and tell me how to do something, I say bugger off. You don't walk into a company and know how to run the business, I had to learn all of that, bite my tongue and take it on board.

Sara: It was good when I left because I wasn't there to tell her what to do anymore and she had to deal with her mistakes. By the time I got back we both felt it was more equal. She automatically took on the jobs that she liked more.

Aimee: We had always decided to work together. It was an ideal time where I came into the company when it was small enough, now the company is growing more steadily.

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Sara: The last couple of months have just gone wow! It has been amazing. The autumn/winter collection was so good, the response was amazing. We have opened with Harvey Nichols this season, Selfridges this season; we have got merry Bentons department store. It has really changed, we've had to take on distribution and take on more staff.

Aimee: You need to take opportunities when they come to you and not force them. I think people run away with what they planned.

Sara: We are both quite emotional when it comes to decisions, we think, whether it feels the right thing to do. Even when we employed new people recently we considered if we liked them and if we could work with them. We use our gut instincts.

First Collection

Sara: The first collection for Harrods was these little Indian skirts that I made when I was at college, Harrods bought them. I think I got some scarf material, I was on a placement and working at Armani for a while and then Jasper Conran. I found these beautiful scarves and made these little skirts. I sold so many that I had to go back and buy more materials. I had a notebook which had a sum: one scarf equals two skirts, small, medium and large. It costs this much and makes this much profit and I undervalued it and that, I think, was it, I cut it all myself so I didn't have to pay a factory.

UK Fashion Expert Award

Sara: Princess Anne presented the awards. She was lovely, really charming.

Aimee: She said that we had done really well and it is a big feat to win this and be in that situation.

Sara: She had an amazing figure, fantastic! I didn't expect that! She spoke really knowledgeably about the industry, she really knew her stuff, she wasn't just delivering a speech that someone else had prepared. She clearly knew. I thought that was really interesting.

Aimee: Her whole talk was really detailed.

Sara: She obviously knows more than me. Perhaps she can come and work for us!

Current Collection

Aimee: The inspiration was Sherlock Holmes, Pinocchio. All regal and opulent, rich silvers with gold buttons. Very reminiscent of something else.

Sara: The Englishness of Sherlock Holmes was really important. The whole feeling of fairytales with a grown-up edge.

Production Process

Sara: Our product process starts with sampling. The first sample is made, the pattern is amended to make sure it fits okay, the patterns then go to the factory to make sure the sizes are what they should be, the factory then has to make up another sample which is checked, labelled etc. When the production starts you have quality control that goes into the factories to monitor the products to make sure the quality is perfect. They are then checked again. It is a difficult one because you can't afford to produce things at this level of the market that are badly made.

Aimee: It makes our garments much more appealing as well.

Sara: The production takes ages. It is good producing in the UK because it means we





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have a lot more control. We would rather spend the money on getting the quality checked and have people know it has been well made.

Aimee: Cause and effect isn't it?

Sara: Definitely.

Current trends and styles

Sara: We love Vivienne Westwood and Gwen Stefani. We like Gwen's style at the moment. She's a real grafter, she works really hard. I hated that whole trend for symbolic clothing, I just don't get it.

Aimee: There was a quote that Sara is supposed to have said, in *The Guardian* or something, ages ago, "I don't understand this, the sensation of the woman's slash rock symbolising the rape and emancipation of women?" (Giggles)

Sara: I just don't get it, women do not want to look like that. I am sorry. Be symbolic in other ways, culturally or whatever but you don't need to do things that are ugly for the sake of it.

Sara: Oh, and the trousers, with all material hanging off them.

Aimee: Something has to look good and be practical. At the end of the day let's get down to what it really is, this is not art, it is a creative industry but they serve a specific function, they have to fit, they have to fulfil whatever function they need and look nice. It is a really simple equation.

Sara: I hate over-complication, make your brand inspirational and creative.

Plans

Sara: We have lots of plans for the brand. It is quite scary because there is so much happening and we are two little people.

Aimee: And, at the same time, it never really seems that real.

Sara: At the end of the day it's not a cure for cancer, it's not hurting anyone and there are worse things. If there are problems you have to try and always look at the other side of the coin. I just didn't expect it. A lot of people don't have the opportunity to use their skills, we have and we would be wrong not to take it.

Aimee: It is so much fun as well because we are together and have the support of one another and mum, our family - so it is all perfect and we want to embrace everything that has happened.

Hobbies

Sara: I don't know.

Aimee: I do, I constantly consume. What are our passions?

Sara: I love spending time with my daughter. I am a workaholic, if I am not doing this work, I am doing another project, anything that is work related. I go home, play with my daughter, put her to bed and then I work. I like having friends round and poker nights.

Aimee: Eating, I love eating, I love food and I love to cook. Like today I will work out what I will make for dinner, organise it and then go home and cook it. My boyfriend is the same. We are very sad! A whole evening will be spent making dinner.

Sara: That's all you need, good wine, good food and good friends. I also walk a lot because of the dogs.

Aimee: The two of them running in the park together is the most hilarious thing you have ever seen, they look like rabbits.