



PHOTO: MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG, COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL TALENT SUPPORT (ITS®)

## STRING THEORY LOCAL DESIGNER KEVIN KRAMP TAKES KNITWEAR TO NEW DIMENSIONS.

BY MARY O'REGAN

**Kevin Kramp likes to do things the hard way.** The Minnesota native is a former violinist, long-distance runner, academic overachiever and, since 2009, an internationally acclaimed knitwear designer, featured in the pages of *Vogue Italia* and *Elle Italy* and on *Style.com*.

"I was extremely achievement oriented from a young age," 32-year-old Kramp says. "I like knitwear because it's difficult and esoteric."

Difficult is right. After sketching and deciding on a concept, most fashion designers begin their creation process by choosing the right fabric; Kramp's method starts by selecting the very fibers that make up the right fabric, which he then knits himself. He sources cashmere, mohair, cotton, wool, angora and alpaca yarns from all over the world, then creates swatches and full garments using a complicated, spider-like knitting machine made up of tension rods, needle beds, carriages, weights, combs and other components.

"Anyone can pick up scissors, cut fabric and call themselves a 'designer,'" Kramp says. "It's very rare to find a designer who knits, particularly in a forward-thinking, contemporary way. The patience, practiced knowledge and juggling of task and attention while machine-knitting eliminates 99 percent of people who try it."

Thoughtful and quick-witted, with a mop of curly blond hair and a rattail winding down his neck, Kramp works out of his parents' basement in a gated community in Lilydale, surrounded by shelves of colorful yarn cones. A large table in the center of the room is covered in test swatches—each attached to instructions detailing the steps needed for replication on his machine.

Behind the table, clothing racks display Kramp's past four collections, which are easily recognizable to anyone halfway familiar with his work. He specializes in androgynous, oversized, chunky, avant-garde designs, such as sweaters with cartoonishly long arms, plunging necklines and high, thick collars that swallow half its wearer's head; drop-crotch trousers and jumpsuits that billow around the thighs and taper at the ankles; and a 155-foot scarf that wraps around the body, forming a colorful tangle of textures like a soft rubberband ball.

"Wearable" is not the first word that comes to mind when considering Kramp's designs, but in the fashion world, innovative, original and boundary-pushing couture often serves as inspiration for more accessible ready-to-wear pieces. These days it seems as though half of Europe is finding inspiration in Kramp's collections. Last spring, he was invited to show his work alongside garments by Chanel, Missoni and Valentino in a group exhibition called "Unravel: Knitwear in High Fashion" at the Mode Museum in Antwerp, Belgium (the show has since traveled to the Netherlands). "Though I had already shown my work in London and Paris and gained a good deal of international press, the moment that most felt like a 'big break' was when I received that call," he says.

Kramp, who interned at *Paper* magazine and studied under Victoria Beckham in London, recently won the Modateca Award at the International Talent Support competition in Trieste, Italy. The award, which included a €3,000 prize (about \$4,100), was given to the most innovative



Two of Kramp's winning looks from this year's International Talent Support design competition in Italy.

and accomplished new designer as judged by a panel of industry veterans, including Viktor & Rolf, Hilary Alexander and Antonio Berardi. Last September he spent time in Milan, where his work was shown at WHITE, an international fashion trade fair and exhibition.

Kramp's main customer base is in Italy, which makes living and working in Lilydale limiting. "Most Minnesotans will spend a lot of money on hunting gear, but not sweaters," he says. But he's slowly introducing his designs to the local market: Roe Wolfe, a new womenswear boutique in Mendota Heights, is carrying Kevin Kramp circle scarves for \$225 and standard scarves for \$195.

"My work is limited to the colder climates," he says. "At long last, one advantage to a Minnesota winter!" +

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### 5 things you never knew about knitwear



1.

Knitting is historically a male activity, originating with sailors, fishermen and shepherds.

2.

In 1916, Coco Chanel popularized knitwear by using jersey, which was typically used to make men's underwear, in her iconic suits.

3.

People often confuse knit fabric with woven fabric, but knitting uses one continuous filament, whereas weaving uses hundreds of separate filaments.

4.

Any material in the world—electrical wire, videotape, hair—can be knit, so long as it's in filament form.

5.

Girls used to be taught to knit in school, because it was considered a useful skill; now most people who learn to knit do so as a hobby.