



After years of designing bespoke leather jackets and jeans for discerning Hollywood celebrities, California-based fashion designer Mychael Darwin has lost nothing of his love for working with leather.

Leather garments for the stars

*F*ashion designer Mychael Darwin has a studio in downtown Los Angeles, but he spends a lot of time in his out-of-the-way workshop in Orange County with a radio and rolls of leather and denim for company. It's the goods not the glamour that appeal to him and even accolades such as being named designer-in-residence at the Golden Globe Awards have not tempted him to put down his scissors and tape-measure.

"I just love making beautiful things," he says, by way of explanation. "That's my gift to the world. It took me a few years to find that out, but my mantra is this: in the pursuit of beauty and perfection, there is no such thing as how long or how much. When you are trying to create beauty, there's no time limit."

It's a principle that led him, "totally by accident" to create a new exclusive leather printing technology called Leathergenix, launched earlier this year. Leathergenix takes high-intensity photographs, art work, graphics, or logos



A jacket by Mychael Darwin.

PHOTO: MYCHAEAL DARWIN OMNIFIC STUDIOS

and “makes them come to life in the most premium leathers in the world”. The exact technology is patent-pending, and only a few select employees know all the details of how the technique works.

“Leathergenix emerged when I was asked to create a custom leather jacket with an intricate photo incorporated into the design,” he explains. “We can take any colour-rich image and make it become one with the hide, all while maintaining the natural suppleness and hand of the leather.” Less sophisticated leather printing techniques can only print on the top of the hide and can degrade the integrity of the leather, he insists. In contrast, Leathergenix creates what he calls “a three-dimensional image-rich leather canvas that can be applied to many categories”, including handbags, accessories, jewellery, footwear, furniture, automotive and nautical interiors and other interior design applications, as well as the Mychael Darwin mainstay, apparel.

He offers more detail: “One of my clients, someone who owns a large stake in a major, major bank, sports teams, you name it, came to me totally out of the blue and said she wanted me to make her a new, dressy short leather jacket. She had just had a new baby and she wanted the baby’s picture on the back of the coat.”

This initial approach came a number of years ago. He found one company in the US who could do it and says that, for that time, the quality was “premium”, but he set himself the challenge of perfecting the idea. “Really, the secret is in the ink,” is all he will say. “We experimented for five years and developed our own ink.” Other early successes with the technique include printing a Nigerian oil baron’s coat-of-arms onto the leather upholstery for his private jet.

“Everything I do, I want it to be the best. That’s what I strive for,” he says, explaining why customised jeans he made for the LA Lakers basketball team have silk pocket lining and decorations in real gold. A classic-cut woman’s black leather jacket in the workshop has a kingfisher blue silk linings that may only be visible for a split second if the wearer reaches inside to answer her phone, but is an important



All leather with genuine 18 karat gold firemen's jacket clips and buttons. Mychael Darwin designed this in honor of the fallen 343 firefighters on September 11th 2001 at the US World Trade Center attack.

PHOTO: MYCHAEAL DARWIN OMNIFIC STUDIOS

touch as far as Mr Darwin is concerned. “It gives her energy while she is walking around,” he says. “She can feel it. She has it going on on the inside. She knows it was designed for her. It’s art; she is wearing art.”

Natural attraction

Silk matters to him because it is natural. Leather matters to him for the same reason. To the usual arguments of leather being naturally breathable, adaptable, sensual and beautiful, as well as being a prime example of recycling waste material, Mychael Darwin adds a theological dimension. “If it’s good enough for God,

it’s good enough for me. The first clothes were from skins,” he says, referring to chapter three of the Book of Genesis. For him, the important things in choosing the leather he works with are that he has to feel it and “experience” it. “The touch is the most important thing; the look is also important but is secondary, I think,” he continues. “I try to merge the two, but the first thing people want to do when they see leather or a leather garment is to touch it. You can’t help it. So I try not to limit myself to leather based on names. I try to base it on touch and artistry. How does it look, how does it feel, how does it handle? Usually the better leathers are the ones that work best. And, for my customers, I don’t really care how much the leather costs per square-foot.”

Best not biggest

Mychael Darwin started out designing clothes for a famous US leather clothing retail group, Wilsons The Leather Experts. During the 1990s, he got to know intimately the group’s suppliers and the different types of leather they had on offer. Born in Virginia, his family moved to

California when he was in second grade at school and he studied fashion design locally. Independently, he secured clients for ball-gowns he was making, including for the Oscars. This led to his meeting a wider group of contacts in the movie business, and then the music business, which in turn brought him work designing clothes for singing stars to wear on world tours, including Michael Jackson's Dangerous tour, which began in Munich in June 1992 and ended in Mexico City in November 1993. Disney gave him his own brand, printing images of the corporation's high-earning princesses onto leather jackets and a range of other products. He only started making jeans more recently at the insistence not of a client but of his wife. She said she couldn't find a pair of jeans that fitted her properly, so the designer began making them.

"I've been doing leather a lot longer," he explains. "I've been doing leather since I started in the fashion business, mainly jackets. Today, I source the leather I use mostly through two friends, one in New York and the other here in Los Angeles who both own tanneries. Small-scale, compared to a lot of tanneries, but they are there and whatever I need, they supply it for me. I can get crust to finish in a particular way, chrome-tanned, veg-tanned. I'm just a small guy and I always just source what I need. I don't care which country it comes from and I don't care how much it costs."

His development of Leathergenix has had an impact on the way he works with these tanneries. He does the printing in his own workshop, but how the leather is tanned and finished have changed dramatically, he says, following years of testing and research and development in which he played a direct part.

Game-changer

Small-scale does not scare him. Towards the end of 2011, Mychael Darwin featured in *Forbes* magazine as one of the people it labelled as 'The next game-changers', describing him as a favourite among the Hollywood A-List. Since then, he's had a substantial number of calls

from people who want to help him make his business bigger. He confirms that he is looking for an investor, but insists it must be the right type of investor. He's not interested in people coming in and handing him a million dollars if it means they take over the control of the company. "That's not going to happen," he says firmly. "I'd rather just be small. I don't want to live my life according to what other people think. I can think for myself."

Opposite sides

This takes the discussion into the area of opponents and lovers of leather. Hollywood has both, but the opponents are usually far more vocal. "They're entitled to their opinion, but I just don't believe what they believe," he says. "We're supposed to wear shoes, and drink milk and eat meat. Am I going to abuse animals? No, but I am living as part of the ecological system, part of the cycle of life, and it amazes me that we even have to have this conversation, as though right had become wrong and wrong right. If it's cool with God, it's going to be cool with me and I couldn't care less what the opponents of leather think. I'm sorry they feel that way, but I'm not going to change my principles

because they don't like them. Can't we all just get along?"

People who are champions of leather need to speak with one voice, he believes. Fragmentation will not help the cause. The group of players that stretches along the full length of the leather value chain has to be in agreement; he says this applies to every industry, that there is strength in unity and weakness without it.

Whatever their arguments against leather, he insists that for companies that make, sell or advocate synthetic alternatives, the fight is rooted in money. Some people, including some of the big names in films and television, are ignoring the pressure these opponents bring to bear. The clothes in his workshop at the time of our conversation include two pairs of leather jeans that he has made for Today Show presenter Natalie Morales, one in black and one in silver, both with a multi-coloured silk lining that goes down to the knees. Other people he has made clothes for include Anne Hathaway, Julianna Margulies, Natalie Portman and Kate Winslet and his studio is full of their messages and tokens of appreciation. As the *Forbes* article makes clear, Hollywood loves Mychael Darwin and Mychael Darwin loves leather. 🌟



Silver leather jeans with silk lining, made by Mychael Darwin for Today Show presenter Natalie Morales.

PHOTO: WTP