

# WWD Atlanta

March 2003/Fall/A Supplement to WWD

## FIFTIES FLASHBACK

Poodle skirts, tailored suits  
and sweater-girl knits are back,  
as designers revisit the  
Eisenhower years.



SECOND-STORE SUCCESSES \* MAKING MATERNITY HIP \* DIVING INTO DECATUR

# BUYING, NOT CRYING, FOR ARGENTINA

The Central Buenos Aires Showroom brings South America to the American South.

By Rebecca Kleinman

It's a well-known phenomenon — a vacation can become a life-altering experience. Some travelers meet a future spouse, move to a country they fall in love with or, in the case of showroom co-owner Lewis

Perkins, start a business on a whim.

The Emory University MBA graduate with a degree in art history had worked at the High Museum of Art and in consulting before a trip to Argentina in March 2002 threw him a career curve.

"It changed me. I met my business partner, Gisela Tan-

nenbaum, and all my clothing designers, in Buenos Aires. Since then, I've been back four times," said Perkins.

The two founded the Central Buenos Aires showroom in Atlanta the following month, which proved an ideal situation for both. Tannenbaum had lost her jewelry company when Argentina's economy failed, though she still lives there, and

Perkins had always dreamed of tying his business and creative backgrounds together.

In August, 2002, they plunged in, opening a 1,500-square-foot showroom loft in Atlanta's West Side neighborhood. Perkins likes the area because it attracts a creative community of interior designers and artists, and for its proximity to local retailers like Scout and G. Gilbert boutiques. It is also convenient to AmericasMart.

"It's so easy for me to just run over to my accounts when they need something and to bounce ideas off of each other," he said.

Perkins participates in the AmericasMart fall and spring Premiere shows (on the fifth floor), but decided against opening a permanent showroom in AmericasMart now, for fear of overextending. He'll make the move after gaining more experience and when the timing is right.

"I saw too many start-up companies spend money like crazy during the Internet boom, only to go under. It taught me a lesson about how to grow a business," he said.

The original business plan called for eventually setting up shop in New York. But Perkins said he's having too much fun being a big fish in a small pond, and he's too pleased with the changes and vision at AmericasMart to leave now.

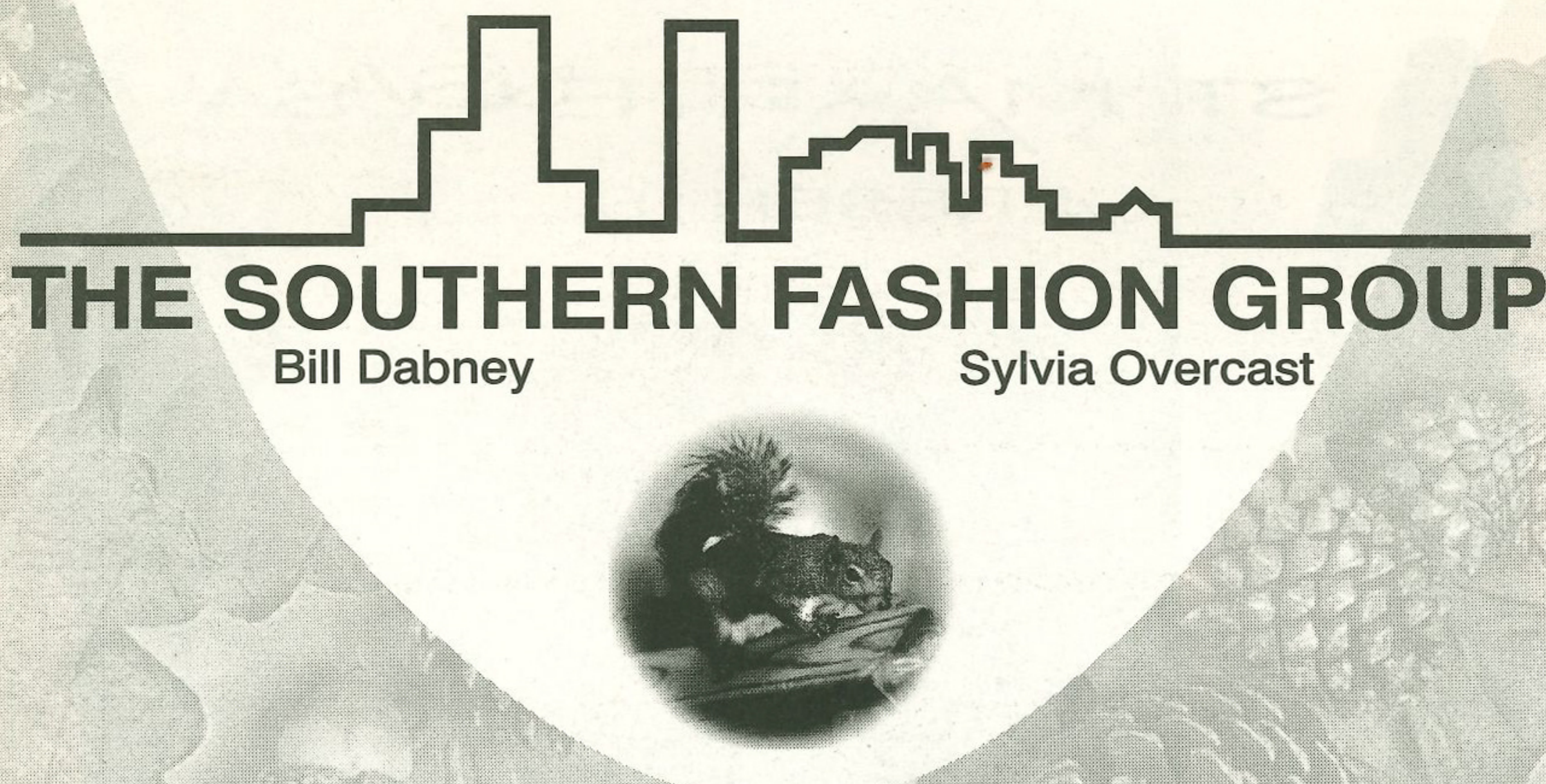
October's show, his first market, brought in 15 new accounts. With no minimum order requirements, retailers all placed more than \$1,000 orders.

"We thought the clientele would be really conservative, but Kaye Davis [executive director of fashion and Premiere] is building the appeal to our customer. The Premiere show is a higher price point with more of an urban, edgy element," he said.

Tannenbaum was equally impressed. She felt more secure in seeing Premiere booth spaces filled with both emerging and established vendors, including two Argentine designers.

"That's when we knew it was okay to go ahead with our idea," said Perkins, who represents five Argentinian lines.

The showroom's best-selling



## THE SOUTHERN FASHION GROUP

Bill Dabney

Sylvia Overcast

What's the buzz about at Southern Fashion Group? Clothes that are fun and cozy, autumn brights with that fresh scent of style. Don't miss your chance to reap the benefits of a great harvest. Like the squirrel, come gather some fabulous fashions for Fall 2003.

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Lewis Perkins,  
owner of The  
Central Buenos  
Aires Showroom.

PHOTO BY DAEMON BAZAN

designers are Vero Ivaldi and Cecilia Gadea. Ivaldi creates deconstructed, classic shapes from a synthetic fabric resembling crushed silk that can be easily laser-cut into unusual shapes and finishes. Colors are muted metallics.

Gadea pays homage to South American beach society during the Twenties. Her Chanel-inspired pieces include wide-leg cuffed pants, short jackets and pleated sundresses. Perkins said that while Gadea's clothes may appear traditional, upon closer inspection, they are quite modern.

"She'll trim a jacket lapel with organza that's cut raw or use a synthetic material that looks like gabardine to form a laser-cut, circular pattern on a drop-waist, pleated skirt," he said.

A newcomer to this market is Varanasi, a Buenos Aires-based line known for its loose silhouettes, natural fibers and neutral palettes.

"None of these lines are cheap. Gisela works very hard to pick great, often award-winning designers who are highly trained. They're not just cute clothes," said Perkins.

Wholesale prices range from \$80 for a simple skirt or top to \$300 for a novelty dress. Despite the cost, the lines haven't been a tough sell for Perkins.

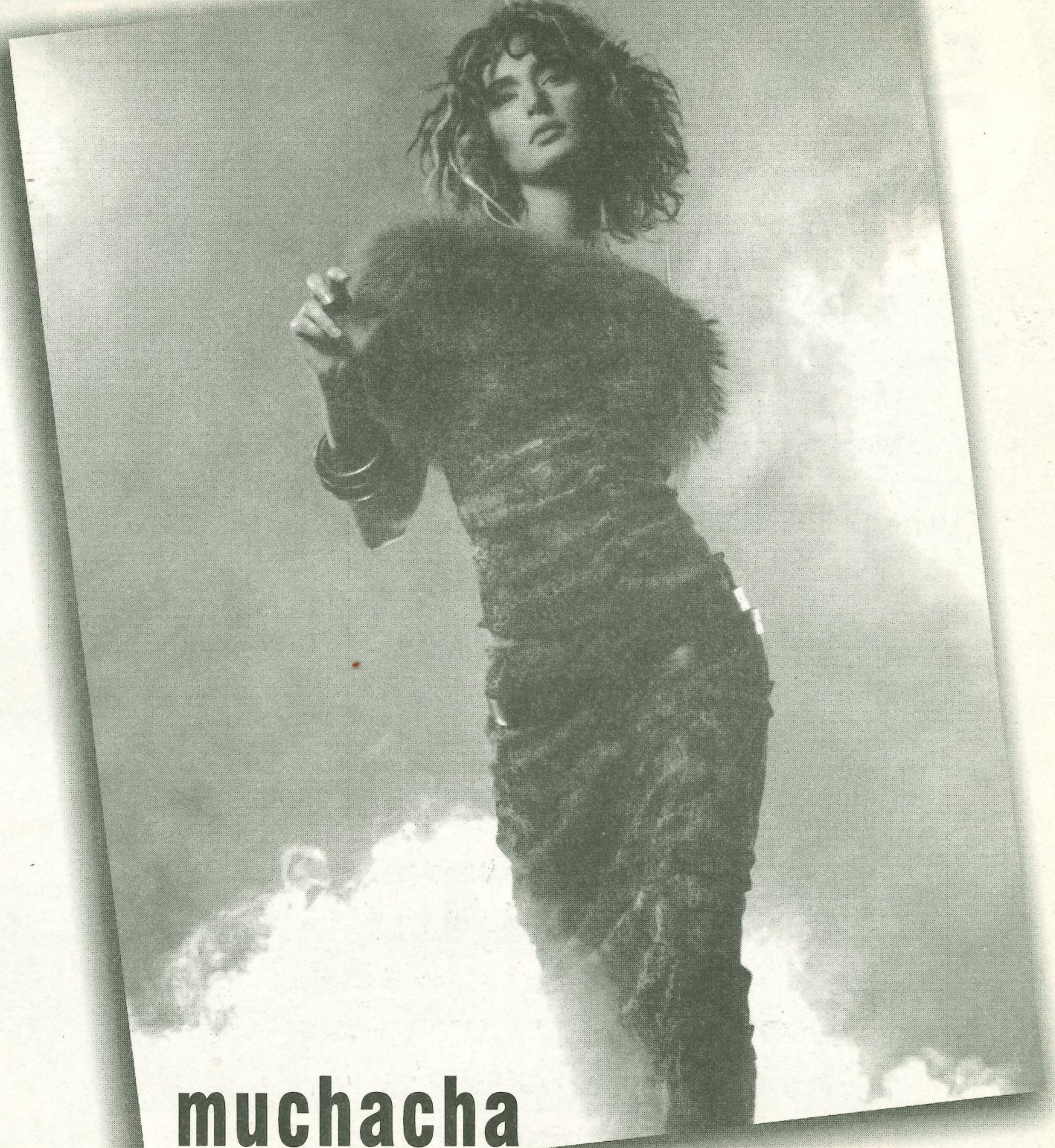
"The type of client I approach is looking for something different in quality, design and origin. Latin America is very hot right now, and it's alluring to them."

South America's appeal is at such a peak now that the showroom may have to undergo a name change to encompass more South American countries. Perkins has already contacted designers in Colombia, attended Miami's Fashion Week of the Americas event and branched out into accessories.

After showing in Los Angeles and New York, he also plans to hit shows in Las Vegas, Dallas and Chicago, funds permitting.

"Atlanta worked out to be the best base for now because you can get anywhere, and it has cheap airfare," said Perkins — two must-have perks for someone who's bitten by the travel bug.

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