

## fashion



# A high street collaboration that conjures the swinging Seventies

The designer Celia Birtwell has a new collection for Next. It's packed with gems, says **Anna Murphy**

It's difficult to overstate how few designers have truly left their mark. Even the biggest names tend to come and go, their legacy remembered only by the few. To produce anything that is recognisable to the layperson at the time, never mind afterwards, is rare indeed. Yet anyone who was around in 1970s Britain, and was even vaguely into fashion, not to mention the cultural scene more generally, will immediately clock that this print is by the fabric designer Celia Birtwell, who is now 81. And anyone who wasn't quite there but feels, like me, that they have seen and read enough to imagine that they were will register that this is Birtwellian loveliness too.

That distinctive melding of a floral and a stripe — the kind of cross-fertilisation that has come to be prevalent in 21st-century print design — was Birtwell's signature decades before it went mainstream, and she still does it better than anyone. That her new collaboration for Next renders it affordable is good news for her many fans. This mididress with tiered skirt, for example, is £70, and the blouse version of the same print — in blue on black, with chevron sleeves — is £28 (next.co.uk).

The frock is also available in a second print which squares the same circle differently, creating multicoloured vertical stripes out of a ditsy print. Then there is the more subtle smudgy floral blouse in watercolour shades, which comes either with the sort of big frilly collar Birtwell likes to wear herself (£32), or a more discreet peasant-style tie neckline (£34).



Dress, £70, next.co.uk



Rings, £550, top, and £1,250, Felt London

Birtwell was memorialised alongside her husband, the fashion designer Ossie Clark, in the famous David Hockney portrait of 1970-71, *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*. Birtwell was the Mrs Clark in question, because that is how it went back then, and was wearing a dress by her husband, albeit not in one of the patterns with which she would make her own name.

Percy was their cat, who — sitting on Ossie's lap — also carried “symbolic resonances of the libertine”, according to the Tate website, “and somebody who disregards rules and does as they please”.

A few years ago Birtwell lamented how she can only “still get into a couple of pieces of Ossie's” and said she had to rely mainly on vintage, including a “fabulous, dramatic Mainbocher coat that I drag out for special occasions”. So she must be as happy about her new collaboration as I am.

## A one-stop jewellery shop

Talking of vintage fabulousness, I think jewellery that has stood the test of time can often appear far more striking than something new. Whether you are looking for a piece for yourself or for someone else, can I suggest you make Felt London your port of call? And ideally not merely the website, but the delicious little boutique. Not that there isn't plenty that's gorgeous on the website, to wit a 1950s fringe necklace by a designer who used to work for Trifari and some clip-on studded shell Kenneth Jay Lane earrings (£150 and £80 respectively, feltlondon.com).

The really standout pieces, however — mostly rings — are stashed away in

what the owner Eliza Poklewski Koziell calls her “treasure boxes”. I bought myself a 1970s ring for my 50th birthday that looks like miniature stalactites. It gives me joy every time I look at it. The two beauties pictured — one garnets, one diamonds and garnets — are versions of similar (£550 and £1,250, in store only).

## Hitting the sweet spots

Birtwell is a fan of polka dots. A 2019 Hockney portrait of her shows her in contrasting small and large spots, and there's a longline tiered blouse in the new collection that plays with spotty scale in a similar way (£26). Polka dots have been popular among the luxury brands recently, be it in the form of Prada's black mesh tote bag with sequinned spots (£1,600, prada.com) or a yet more opulent white ballgown at Carolina Herrera, its spots constructed out of tiny sequin flowers.

That we should be in the market for clothes that make us cheerful is hardly surprising after the past couple of years. Ganni's white-on-navy georgette wrap dress is one of my favourite spotty options at the moment (£198, mytheresa.com).

Yet a recent trip to the spectacular *Infinity Mirror Rooms* by Yayoi Kusama at Tate Modern made me think again about polka dots. Kusama, 92, is another fan, and has been known to match her yellow-and-black dress to her giant pumpkin, as you do.

“Our earth is only one polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos...” that artist writes. “When we obliterate ... our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment.” I will never think of polka dots in quite the same way again.

Instagram: @annamurphy

Right: Gaby jumper, £110, sezane.com.  
Far right: roll-neck, £69.95, massimodutti.com



If you are anything like me I will imagine you are all too well aware of what gets in the way when it comes to the theoretically straightforward act of finding clothes that suit you. You probably think it's something to do with the size of

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# Go on, stick your neck out (or not)

Are you swan-necked or more of a duck? **Anna Murphy** gets the expert advice on what to wear



your bottom or the length of your legs, your lack of waist or your amplitude of bosom. Perhaps it is.

But have you thought about your neck? Not, to be clear, in the Nora Ephron sense. We all know the writer felt bad about hers. She wrote an essay telling us just that. It was called, of course, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*. Yet Ephron was aggrieved by the skin on her neck, not the length of her neck in the first place, which is what we are going to talk about here.

The personal stylist Anna Berkeley insists that neck length is one of the most important factors when it comes to working out your stylistic happy place. “Looking elegant is so much to do with the neck,” she says. “If you think about all those inherently elegant people like Audrey Hepburn, they were all swan-necked and so easy to dress.”

Ephron didn’t need to worry on that score. She was cygnus through and through. Although not to the degree of her nemesis, the husband-nabbing Thelma Rice (based on Margaret Jay) in her autobiographical novel *Heartburn*. Thelma — in what has to be one of the best descriptive passages yet written — had a “neck as long as an arm”, not to mention “a nose as long as a thumb”. So a black swan in every sense then, our Thelma, given that black swans are the ones with the longest necks.

The basic rule of thumb (sorry) is swan good, duck not so good. The

good news is that you can fake it to make it. The same applies if you are one of the rare few who has the aforementioned arm-neck. If your neck really is overly long, you can make it appear shorter.

Berkeley tells me she comes across “more clients with short necks than anything else”, a fact she used to be surprised by yet no longer is, but that still tends to take her unsuspecting customers aback.

**Are you a duck or a swan? How to work out if you have a short or long neck**

At this point you may be unsure, like those clients of Berkeley’s, where you sit on the swan-duck spectrum. The stylist offers a body mapping service that nails

**A V-neck, as worn by Gitta Banko, below, helps elongate the neck**



**“We have all heard of the French tuck. Now there’s the polo-neck tuck to consider**

this and countless other key proportions that will transform the way you shop (available online or in person, [annaberkeley.com](http://annaberkeley.com)). The simplest approach, however, is to do the polo-neck test.

“If you don’t look good in one — and most people know whether they do or not — that tends to mean you have a short to medium neck,” Berkeley says. And — newsflash — she insists that even an average neck will look better with the polo-neck “folded inside”, as she puts it. Really?

“A lot of people think you just put on a polo-neck and it sits where it sits, but actually, if you turn the neck inside out you can play around with where it sits so as to be more flattering.”

We have all heard of the French tuck. Now there’s the polo-neck tuck to factor into the equation.

**Advice for ducks (short necks)**

For those who are edging towards duck it’s all about your neckline and, more specifically, whether it sits low enough to reveal the clavicles. If your clavicles are in play, then — bingo! — so are you. “That bit around the base of the neck,” Berkeley explains,

“everything needs to be below that in order to elongate.”

So that means scoop necks, V-necks, open shirts or blouses, lower-cut tunics. If you like a collar, and your neck is short, look for styles that sit lower, softly fall away or are spaced to allow more skin to show. “Anything that has that openness that reveals as much of the neck as possible is the best way to go. It’s not that it needs to be that plunging or dramatic. But the lower you go, the better you tend to look.”

You also want to avoid earrings that are too long — “nothing past the jawline” — as well as short necklaces or chokers that truncate the neck. Longer necklaces are fine, just go for something that hangs in a V, such as one of Missoma’s on-trend pendants or Kirstie Le Marqu’s stunning lockets. “A mid-sternum length, between the base of the neck and the cleavage, works well.” Bear in mind, too, that a shorter haircut, which increases the visual distance between the head and the shoulders, is also likely to be your friend.

**Advice for swans (long necks)**

And what about those few arm-necks out there? How best to avoid looking like Mrs Peacock in the library with the lead piping? You take the opposite route, of course, embracing higher necklines, or mitigating lower ones with a choker or a shorter necklace. And you can — yay — go the full Versailles with the chandelier earrings.