

With COCO ROCHA front and centre as host of the resurrected *Project Runway Canada*, it would be tempting to declare the supermodel “back.” The truth? She never left.

By **RANDI BERGMAN**

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# Oh, Coco!



# C

**CO ROCHA** hasn't logged this much time on Canadian soil since she was a teenager plucked from an Irish-dance competition in Richmond, B.C., and dropped into the deep end of high fashion two decades ago. "When people ask me where I like to go out, I'm like, 'My dad's house!'" she says. This summer, she's swapped her parents' Vancouver-area pads for a downtown-Toronto high-rise, where she's been camped out while filming the reboot of *Project Runway Canada*. (She also took a quick jaunt to Quebec's picturesque Magdalen Islands for this shoot.) It's a far cry from her suburban spread in Connecticut, and her three kids—Ioni, 10, Iver, 7, and Iley, 4—are along for the ride and loving the hustle and bustle of city living. "They think it's the coolest," she tells me from the apartment over a video call.

Fresh-faced and sun-kissed in a simple white tank, the 36-year-old supermodel looks right at home. Outside her window, "Toronto summer" (as the season's been affectionately dubbed by locals) is in full swing; bike lanes brim with fair-weather riders, sidewalk patios buzz with conviviality and parks are lush and verdant. But Rocha's extended stay isn't just a personal homecoming; it's part of a broader cultural upswing for Canada and a renewed appetite for celebrating our own at home and around the globe.

*Project Runway Canada* first hit the airwaves in 2007, during the early boom years of reality-TV competition shows, when new formats were being churned out like butter. The series, based on the blockbuster American franchise, paired supermodel Iman as host with designer Brian Bailey as mentor and crowned Evan Biddell and Sunny Fong as its two winners—both of whom went on to carve out successful careers. Yet, despite its respectable run over two seasons, the show fizzled—it was hard to make the maple leaf stand out against louder, flashier international noise.

Enter the redux, which is hitting Crave in November with a judging panel made up of some of Canada's best-known fashion names. There's Rocha, in the dual role of host and judge; *Fashion Television* pioneer Jeanne

Beker; streetwear superstar Spencer Badu; and Aurora James, the accessories designer behind Brother Vellies and the force who brought the 15 Percent Pledge into the cultural spotlight. To boot, the competition unfolds in Toronto Metropolitan University's fashion department, itself a launching pad for international stars like Erdem Moralioglu.

According to Rocha, the competitors are top-tier and, true to form, "so kind, so good and so nice," she says. "Now, it's up to Canadians to put their money where their mouths are to support them." While Rocha champions shopping local, she knows patriotism alone won't sustain the industry. The moment is ripe for ensuring that Canadian designers measure up on the international stage—through mentorship, resources and cash, all of which are built into *Project Runway Canada's* framework. Her face lights up when she talks about the fresh crop of designers eager to be discovered, and it's clear that she believes they're more than ready.

The supermodel also serves as an executive producer on the show, a role she says has injected her days with renewed energy. "After 20 years, [your career can] become... I don't know if you'd call it mundane, but then you get a project like this and you're like, 'Now *this* [is] something new and exciting!'" It's her first time producing, although she's no stranger to television, having served as a guest judge on *America's Next Top Model*, *The Face* and other editions of *Project Runway*. Each episode features a rotating roster of models representing a wide range of sizes, ages, skin tones, genders and backgrounds. "As a model, [I felt] it was important to encourage viewers to feel like, 'Hey, that's me,'" says Rocha.

*Project Runway Canada* is the perfect stage for the magnetic energy Rocha has carried since her breakout moment: Irish jiggling down Jean Paul Gaultier's fall/winter 2007/2008 runway. "Coco stood out from the start," says her fellow judge and long-time friend Beker. "She's more than a model; she's a performance artist." Her early years are the stuff of fashion legend: Discovered at 14, she signed with an agency and quickly landed an exceptional six-month exclusive contract with photographer Steven Meisel, an association that set her on the path to stardom. "I didn't realize how rare it was when he signed me, and the association alone made everyone curious," she recalls. Meisel kept her true to herself, only offering the occasional technique tip—but the star power was already there. Rocha soon became an industry darling, appearing on countless magazine covers and in fashion spreads (the behind the scenes of some were captured for posterity in the iconic 2009 documentary *The September Issue*) as well as on runways and in campaigns for everyone from Chanel to Dior to Marc Jacobs.

Those early years, when Canadian models like Rocha, Daria Werbowy and Jessica Stam took the >

Top and skirt (Issey Miyake)  
and boots (Tod's)



Dress and boots (Marc Jacobs)



Dress (Loewe)



Blazer, shirt, tie and skirt (Thom Browne) and hat (Ruslan Baginskiy at SSENSE)



Shirt, skirt and boots (Ami Paris)





Jacket and skirt (Cecilie Bahnsen)  
and boots (stylist's own)

international scene by storm, coincided with the rise of runway platforms like Style.com and have been of particular focus on social media lately, with users resurfacing old clips of Rocha and her crew: the “digital supermodels.” She is careful not to wade too deeply into nostalgia, though. “Agents sometimes want to recreate that era through us, but the industry’s changed. Back then, some models were told ‘Wait until they call for you again’—to essentially disappear until the right moment. I never stopped working, but social media saved my generation from being cut off like that.”

Today, the power to remain in the spotlight is in her own hands, and she’s wielding it deftly through TikTok and Instagram, where millions follow her from the runway to family-dinner nights to the glam chair with her frequent co-star Toronto makeup artist Veronica Chu. “Social media gave the public a voice,” she says. “Models can’t be ‘aged out’ if fans still want them.” Rocha’s career has never stopped evolving—and she doesn’t need a callback to know that she’s still It. Or, as Charli XCX put it in her newly minted mantra for extending Brat Summer beyond its 2024 peak, “I’m interested in the tension of staying too long.”

In an industry obsessed with the newest, hottest and latest, Rocha says that her most meaningful experiences have been with the collaborators she’s worked with the longest—like Gaultier and Christian Siriano. “Gaultier keeps his girls forever. At [his] final couture show, 200 of us came back, many in tears,” she recalls. For the 2020 celebration, she reprised her iconic jig wearing feathers and tartan—this time to Missy Elliott—and earned uproarious applause from the star-studded audience. “Those relationships matter more than booking the ‘coolest’ face of the moment.”

Once dubbed the “queen of posing” by fellow supermodel Tyra Banks, Rocha has a knack for serving in any situation—a skill she now passes on to models through Nomad Management, the agency she co-owns, and her Coco Rocha Modelling Camp, an intensive coaching program that has trained the likes of Kendall and Kylie Jenner. For Rocha, it all comes down to individuality. “It takes a certain kind of person to stand [out] against the crowd,” she says. “My generation [of models] was

told ‘Do whatever they say if you want a career.’ That’s not healthy advice. The best careers [happen for] people who have a point of view and stick to it.”

Personality is especially key in preparing for an uncertain future—one where AI is increasingly used to create fashion imagery. “In modelling, we’re known for photos, but you can’t sustain a career on just an image. You have to bring more to the table—performance, emotion, presence,” she says. “AI can take a model’s job, but it can’t replicate the feeling in a room when you perform.” She’s cautiously optimistic about it; her team even experimented with creating an avatar of her back in 2020, something she says got her wheels turning about the possibilities of new tech. “AI is a tool, like a hammer—it can build or destroy,” she says. “It will take some jobs but create others we can’t imagine yet, and I think there will always be space for traditional photo shoots, just like theatre still exists even though we have TVs.” The industry was resistant to social media in the beginning, she notes, something that seems outlandish now.

All this talk of the future feels far removed from Rocha’s day-to-day, which is anchored in more grounded pursuits—like building a new home for her family on a plot of land close enough for her children to get to school easily and for her to commute into New York City. It will also mark the first year all three kids—who make frequent comedic cameos on her social channels—are out of the house. Also keeping her grounded is her husband of 15 years, James Conran, with whom she shares not only her children but also her agencies and creative projects. “They just work so well together, and I think that’s really given her a superpower,” says Beker. “She has this incredible partner at her side who really understands the business, the media and, ultimately, the artistry—what it’s like to be an artist like Coco.”

The duo is cooking up more newness, but Rocha is tight-lipped about what comes after *Project Runway Canada*. Meanwhile, she’ll be back in Toronto this fall to film the final episodes, which she’s sure will thrill audiences at home and abroad, declaring, “It’s a show that says ‘Here’s the talent—pay attention!’” ■



Coat, jacket, cardigan, polo, belt, socks, boots and hat (Maison Margiela) and shorts (stylist's own)

Top, skirt, belt and boots (Ralph Lauren)  
and rings and bracelet (Sophie Buhai)

For details, see Shopping Guide.  
Talent, Coco Rocha (Nomad  
Management and Public Image  
Management); makeup artist and  
hairstylist, Nicolas Blanchet (Folio  
Management, using Dior Beauty  
and Oribe); digital technician, Aljosa  
Alijagic; photographer's assistant, Isaac  
Leblanc; stylist's assistants, Laurane  
Verdier and Delphine Décoste; market  
assistant, Amer Macarambon;  
production intern, Marc-Élie Labrie;  
editorial producer, Pénélope Lemay;  
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