



JACKET AND PANTS (ACNE STUDIOS), BEANIE (JACQUEMUS AT SSENSE), BOOTS (VINTAGE DOLCE & GABBANA AT VESTIBULE VINTAGE LE PALAIS BOUTIQUE) AND EARRINGS (MDW JEWELRY)

Turning Heads

Heather Diamond Strongarm is one of the freshest faces in the fashion industry, and she's taking it all one stride at a time.

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Styling collaborator LAURENCE MORISSET







F YOU'VE BEEN PAYING ATTENTION to the runways in the past few years, you might have noticed a brand-new face with incredible range. Model Heather Diamond Strongarm can do ethereal for Carolina Herrera, rock star for Versace or quirky for Jil Sander, and she has

had the honour of closing for Marc Jacobs and opening and closing two separate shows for Dior. Yet despite this meteoric rise, Strongarm is still incredibly humble about her success; on Instagram, she posts photos from each show with the caption “Kitchi Miigwetch”—offering “a big thank you” to the fashion house for including her.

Strongarm was only 16 years old when she was discovered through a model search in her small Anishinaabe community of Fishing Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, and she soon found herself strutting down the international runways of high-fashion houses. Yet when I speak with her via Zoom near the end of the summer, the 19-year-old Saulteaux-Cree model isn't surrounded by a glam squad—she's sitting in a nondescript hotel room in Toronto, having just chaperoned a grad trip for her younger sister.

Is it exciting for the high-school kids to have a buzzy model in their midst? Strongarm, who's sporting a pink hoodie, slicked-back hair and a glowy no-makeup look, quashes this idea pretty quickly. “They're all rez kids—I grew up with them—so none

of them really care,” she says with a laugh. She grew up in a super-small community of fewer than 2,000 people, and when I mention that when you Google “Fishing Lake First Nation,” most of the hits are about her, she says, “That makes me feel a little bit awkward” and adds that she wishes her aunt Sheila Tucker, a fashion designer whose work has been shown at Paris Fashion

Week, came up more in the search.

Family comes up often in our conversation, with her sister just off-screen during our video chat and her mother and grandmother feeling like invisible presences, and she often cites the advice and support they've given her. Whenever she can, she goes back to her community, where she'll spend time with them, bead and pick medicines. She also heeds the advice of her kokum (the Cree word for “grandmother”), who always told her to be humble and not have a big head.

It's this important family advice that Strongarm seems to be heeding. In spite of her palpable beauty, Strongarm is soft-spoken, modest and almost puzzled by the level of interest in her from the top

fashion houses, despite having won the Canadian Arts & Fashion Awards' Fresh Face of the Year honour in 2023, been named one of *Vogue's* 10 Standout Models of Fall 2023 and modelled in both Bottega Veneta and Swarovski campaigns.

One of the shows she walked in last fall was for Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) designer Justin Jacob Louis. He had been tracking▶

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BLAZER (SPORTMAX)
AND EARRINGS (SIMONS)

BLAZER, PANTS, CHAPS
AND BOOTS (SPORTMAX),
POCKETSCARF AND EARRINGS
(SIMONS), THREE SMALL RINGS AND
BARREL RING (SOPHIE BUHAI) AND
BISON RING (MDW JEWELRY)





TOP, PANTS AND SHOES (BOTTEGA
VENETA) AND SUNGLASSES (BOTTEGA
VENETA AT HOLT RENFREW)

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her rise and wanted her to model his eponymous debut collection at New York Fashion Week. (He is also the creative director and founder of the well-known streetwear brand Section 35.) "It was really exciting to have her walk for us, considering all the houses she's been walking for all over the world," says Louis from his home territory of Nipisihkopahk. The designer felt that it was really special to have her take part; she closed the show in a faux-fur printed coat made in collaboration with Canadian outerwear company Freed & Freed and a custom Thundercloud Jewelry neckpiece. "[On the runway], she's confident, she has this aura around her and she's killing it," he says. "She knows what she's doing."

In conversation with Strongarm, Louis noticed that she was kind of shy, so he started talking about powwows, which opened her up, as she dances jingle dress—an Indigenous women's powwow dance. "I realized she's just one of us, and she's kind and humble, and I really appreciate that," he says. "It was really refreshing for me." For Strongarm, it was a rare and fun opportunity to be surrounded by other Indigenous people in the fashion world. When she was initially discovered, she thought that her career would lead to more Indigenous fashion runways and events. "Sometimes I get a little sad that I didn't do Indigenous [fashion], as I could have met so many people," she says. "I've only walked shows with Valentine Alvarez, Quannah Chasinghorse and Celeste Romero a few times, and I rarely see them. So I'm basically the only Indigenous person backstage, which is really lonely." While she's far away, she taps into her language, reciting a prayer in Nakawe (Saulteaux) in the lineups before entering the runway. "Sometimes I say the morning prayer in Nakawe, and it usually calms me down. And if it doesn't, then I just, like, dissociate," she says with a laugh.

It's one of the few moments that Strongarm sees as bittersweet, as is being homesick from all the travel. "Being away from my family and my reserve and suddenly just being by myself is hard, but I know it's worth it," she says. Seeing the world and walking



ON KAYDENCE, STRONGARM'S SISTER: JACKET (MELITTA BAUMEISTER), DRESS AND HAT (ISSEY MIYAKE) AND NECKLACE (VINTAGE)
ON STRONGARM: TOP AND PONCHO (ISSEY MIYAKE), CORSET (SIMONE ROCHA AT SSENSE) AND GLOVES (VINTAGE)

on these prestigious runways has been beyond her wildest dreams. "Growing up, I never thought that I would travel this much. I never thought that I'd go to New York, because I grew up poor, and meeting all these new people has me shocked. I've met cool people I never thought I'd meet."

Yet she doesn't plan to be the only Indigenous person backstage for long. She's got a two-part plan for that. The first is to usher other Indigenous youth into the modelling world. "My advice for them is to get out of their comfort zones and try things that they like, even if they [feel] too shy to do it, because you never know what might happen," she says. "That's what I did, and I didn't expect to be here today." Second, she plans on taking a step away from the modelling industry and going to a post-secondary school for social work. "I don't know when, but I will for sure because if I don't, my mom will kill me," she says, laughing. And with that, she politely wraps up our conversation so she can head to Montreal for our photo shoot, her younger sister tagging along. ■



JACKET (CHRISTOPHER ESBER), EARRINGS (MDW JEWELRY), ONYX RING (CHRIS COOK III AT LA BOUTIQUE BORÉALE) AND BARREL RING (SOPHIE BUHAI)



TOP (FUGNITTO), SHORTS (FLEUR DU
MAL AT SSENSE), GLOVES (SIMONS),
BELT BAG (1980S GEORGES RECH AT
FEATHERSTONE VINTAGE) AND BOOT
COVERS (MELITTA BAUMEISTER)

TANK TOP (GUEST IN RESIDENCE
AT SSENSE), SKIRT (BEAUFILLE),
VEIL (NOÉMIAH), HEADBAND, PEARL
PINS AND BELT (VINTAGE), BOOTS
(PROENZA SCHOULER) AND RINGS
(STEFF ELEOFF)





JACKET (CHRISTOPHER ESSBER), CAPRIS
(BEAUFILLE AT SSENSE), BELT (JÉA),
EARRINGS (MDW JEWELRY) AND RING
(CHRIS COOK III AT LA BOUTIQUE BORÉALE)

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