

If you were obsessively watching *America's Next Top Model* during the 17 seasons that Nigel Barker was a judge, then you already know that this London native – with the enchanting accent to match – has as much experience in front of the camera as he does behind it. And while we're used to seeing the international photographer, filmmaker and author focus on the world of fashion and beauty, this time he has a new muse – home furnishings with Art Van Furniture.

Barker first met Art Van Elslander, Michigan's furniture mogul and the founder and chairman of Art Van Furniture, roughly five years ago during a trip to Bay Harbor where they each chose to enjoy a vacation. "We just started talking and became friends," Barker recalls. "I met him many times over the past four, five years, socially. And it was a very organic friendship where he really didn't know who I was, and I really didn't know who he was, to be honest." After Barker took some professional portraits of Van Elslander at the photographer's studio in New York last year, Van Elslander asked if he would ever be interested in shooting furniture. "And it was funny because it was a very humble, modest request," Barker says.

The simple request to shoot some furniture, however, was actually a larger scale project that involved traveling to Miami, Chicago, Detroit and High Point, N.C. Barker's task? Lending his perspective and eye for beauty and fashion to the pages of Art Van Furniture's 2014 Spring Style Catalog.

"(Art Van) visits the fashion weeks – certainly in New York and I know other places, too – to get a sense of what's happening on the runways because he wants to inject that sense of fashion and style into his collections when he's actually picking out furniture," Barker explains. "He wants to know what's happening, have his finger on the pulse."

Their mutual appreciation for fashion and style even led to another chance meeting during New York Fashion Week in February. Both Van Elslander and Barker attended Grand Rapids native Pamela DeVos' runway show for her clothing design business, Pamela Roland. "(Van Elslander) was there as a guest in the front row," Barker says.

This attention to runway trends and stylish living is captured in Art Van's spring furniture collection. The catalog, which was released in April, is their biggest one to date. The 144 pages feature Barker's photographic direction throughout the book and on the front and back covers, as well. "The main vision that we brought together was to not treat these things as still-life shots of furniture, but to inject people and life into them," Barker explains. "Talking to Mr. Van, it was always about the people he was selling to – why they buy the furniture, what that furniture means for them in their house."

And when customers walk into an Art Van Furniture store, it's not uncommon for them to try out the pieces they're interested in purchasing. "You know, some people bring their entire family in to sit around a table and see if they like the distance between one another," Barker says. "Does everyone like it? Does Granny like it? You know, how's it going to work?" It was that sense of family and reality in the Art Van business model that Barker says he admired and wanted to incorporate into the catalog. And it was Barker's goal to present images that create or show a certain level of aspiration, too. "Not just average, normal life, but a sort of aspirational life – the best moments that one has, the ones that you remember, the classic moments and the fun moments," he adds.

One of the clearest examples of this concept is represented on the back cover where a woman is relaxing by the pool on a piece called the Cannes Resort Seating, which was shot from above to capture its size and shape. "We brought it to life by putting the little boy in there who is about to squirt her with a water gun," Barker explains. "That all of a sudden tells the story of what most people's lives would be, and it puts a smile on your face."

The front cover, Barker says, is a bit more avant-garde. A model is shown wearing Michigan designer Katerina Bocci's elegant, draped dress



created from upholstery fabrics in Art Van's Thread & Feather collection. "This idea just kind of came about from wanting to tell the story of how fashion and style comes from the runway and seeps all the way through to home furnishings," Barker explains. "It's whimsical. It's fantasy, but it's fun. It has a sense of humor, and it's a wink and a nod to everything that goes on inside the catalog."

'THE FACE' OF BEAUTY

For those who still crave a fierce modeling competition and Barker's dignified critiques, you can catch him as host on Oxygen's second season of *The Face*, which premiered in early March.

Along with Naomi Campbell, models Lydia Hearst and Anne Vyalitsyna join in as supermodel mentors for the new contestants aspiring to be the next "face" for luxury hair care brand Frédéric Fekkai. "For me, the essence of the show is to get to see the fact that there isn't just one way to the top," Barker says. "There isn't just one way to do it right."

In recent years, the fashion media, designers and retailers have been urged by critics to improve not only diversity hiring practices for models, but also to only work with models who are age-appropriate. While much of the industry's criticism still focuses on a model's weight and photo manipulation, as well, Barker says that the issue isn't black-and-white. "As far as girls on the runway, many times they're too skinny, but we're seeing a shift towards girls who are full-figured," Barker says. "The world is changing. Sometimes a bit slower than we'd like, but it is moving. I think all of us just have to demand what we want to see." 👑 — Audrey LaForest