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In the Driver's Seat

by [Semmi W.](#) | Posted January 31, 2013

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Their Starbucks collaboration may have been out of left field, but Kate and Laura Mulleavy of Rodarte are in the driver's seat.
Source: [caffeinenicotine.com](#).

If fashion were a sport, rookie designers would be wise to take coaching cues from Kate and Laura Mulleavy, the sister act behind [Rodarte](#). On the field, their mastery of colour theory and bias cuts routinely score winning touchdowns. Take for instance, this year's SAG Awards; Kerry Washington made headlines for her choice of dress - a stunning white Rodarte gown with delicate silver trim and a corseted bodice.

But pushing forward with a strong offensive is not just a matter of technical wizardry. The Rodarte playbook takes full advantage of strategic branding maneuvers. In less than seven years, the duo has managed to expand their mass appeal without losing their artsy "it" factor. From directing costume design for 2010's *Black Swan* to last summer's Los Angeles Philharmonic's production of *Don Giovanni*, the Mulleavys have acted as guest editors at magazines, created diffusion lines for Target and Gap, launched a capsule collection for Opening Ceremony and more recently, forged (a seemingly) unlikely partnership with [Starbucks](#).

For the holiday season, Rodarte designed a limited edition gift collection that included to-go tumblers, coffee mugs, gift cards, tote bags and cup sleeves. Still available at some Starbucks locations, each item features a silver, pixelated motif with neon green accents. In an official statement, Starbucks referred to their first couture collaboration as "masterful," pointing out how Rodarte's creative spin on Starbucks merchandise is "modern, digitized and all about perspective," adding, "the collection is timeless and seasonless, making it the perfect gift for the style aficionados on your list."

It's an odd and, in many respects, an understated pairing, but for Rodarte, an influential yet small fashion house, partnering with Starbucks has just been another step in turning the label into a lifestyle. "Our clothing is specialized," Laura Mulleavy [told](#) the Associated Press, "and when we are thinking of Rodarte, we choose

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Kerry Washington wears Rodarte
at the 2013 SAG Awards.
Source: au.ibtimes.com.

“
Fashion is an
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”

things that say who we are as designers, but we're not limited to that. We like the idea of collaborations and putting our thought process somewhere else."

Through the Starbucks venture, the sisters have been able to communicate their design aesthetic without actually having to cater to multiple dress sizes. "When you think of brand value rankings [which coffee retailer] would be

the one that Rodarte would partner with? Starbucks is extremely innovative... they are always adapting to new products and looking for ways to build relationships with their customers so I would agree that it's the right choice," argues Professor **Gretchen Harnick**, Assistant Professor of Fashion Marketing at Parsons The New School for Design, "I think it's less about mystique and more about brand relevance."

Yet, Rodarte is not an easy label to find. Creating a **brocade dress** that retails for US\$2,760 doesn't make sense unless it communicates an aura of rarity. Despite their clothes being featured in the permanent collections at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Mulleavys have had a tough time finding a suitable market for their clothing line. Critics and bloggers alike gush over Rodarte's inventive spirit, but often deem their pieces too expensive or unwearable; or as Robin Givhan of the *Washington Post* once put it, "a dazzling display of technique - put to no functional end."



In industry circles, both sisters function as outsiders. They don't schmooze. Their father acts as their sole business advisor. And while their remoteness is sometimes mistaken for being cold, or what Anna Wintour **once** dubbed as a "naïve façade," both sisters are not fazed. Watering down any one of their explosive couture pieces has never been up for debate. In an **interview** with *TIME's* Style&Design Editor Feifei Sun, Kate Mulleavy explained, "we made a conscious decision from the beginning... it takes time to understand who you are in clothing. I don't pretend to know it overnight."

The Starbucks-Rodarte collaboration may represent a whole different ball game, but the Mulleavy sisters have a track record of endurance. Just two months after its release, Rodarte will be back on the runway at New York Fashion

Week, doing what they're best known for - fashion. As with any starting lineup, protecting your position depends on consistency. If you understand your role, then you can focus on your strengths and avoid being fouled out of the game. Fashion is an aggressive sport and you don't win by sitting on the sidelines. You have to keep playing.

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