

# METAL

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Caroline Polachek, Kerby Jean-Raymond  
Pauline Curnier Jardin, Luis De Javier, Dorian Electra,  
Arvida Byström, Bbymutha, David Pearce, Noëlla Coursaris,  
Antwaun Sargent, Ryunosuke Okazaki





The Kennedy HV



The Kennedy BL

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-Eyewear Culture-









Dorian Electra by Charlotte Rutherford



Kerby Jean-Raymond by Shikeith



Caroline Polachek by 91 Rules



Dorian Electra by Charlotte Rutherford

Director & Editor In Chief  
Yolanda Muelas  
yolanda@revistametal.com

Deputy Editor In Chief  
Poncho Paradelo  
poncho@revistametal.com

Creative Direction  
Yolanda Muelas & Poncho Paradelo

Fashion Director  
Mónica Zafra  
monica@revistametal.com

Editor-at-large  
Arnau Salvadó  
arnau.s@revistametal.com

Features Editor  
Bella Spratley  
bella@revistametal.com

Art Director & Graphic Design  
Teddy Iborra Wicksteed  
teddy@revistametal.com

Senior Fashion Editor  
Romina Herrera Malatesta  
romina@revistametal.com

London Fashion Editor  
Seila Grau  
seila@revistametal.com

Proofreader  
Rocío Garrido Rus

Online editors  
Mercedes Rosés  
mercedes@revistametal.com  
Jorge Lorenzo  
jorge@revistametal.com  
Bella Spratley

Online Fashion Editor  
Martxel Montero  
martxel@revistametal.com

Web Designer  
May O. Caballero

Wep Delevopment  
Crowtect

WRITERS  
Arthur Cross, Bella Spratley, Carla Tomillo,  
Denis Yachmenyov, Ellie Connor-Phillips, Emily Phillips,  
Esosa Aiworo, Gunseli Yalcinkaya, María Muñoz, Prishita  
Maheshwari-Aplin, Sophie Wilson

PHOTOGRAPHERS  
91 Rules, Andy Jackson, Asher Penny, Charlotte  
Rutherford, Heather Glazzard, Jack Bridgland, Javier  
Castán, Luciano Insua, Lluna Falgàs, Palma Llopis,  
Shikeith, Stephen Burridge, Toki, Will and Joan

STYLISTS  
Ana Floubet, Cece Liu, Emma Thorstrand, Jordan  
Boothe, Mirey Enverova, Monica Zafra, Seila Grau,  
Shotaro Yamaguchi, Romina Herrera Malatesta.

Barcelona – Headquarters  
Ramón Turró 100-104, 3ªa  
08005 Barcelona  
metal@metalmagazine.eu  
+34931708619

New York  
113 Avenue C, Apt 2.  
New York, Ny 10009  
metal-ny@revistametal.com  
+13478371541

Advertising & Special Projects  
David Alarcón  
david@revistametal.com  
Jorge Lorenzo  
jorge@revistametal.com  
Alexandra Navas  
alexandra@revistametal.com

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## *Reboot. Rebuild. Reborn*

What future can we imagine from this uncertain present? Have we learnt anything from this two year pandemic still not overcome? Not long ago we were all locked up at home, and now we roam with Covid passport in hand, showing our vaccination cards, still wearing a mask and restrictions have even toughened in some countries. However, despite this being our present, for some strange reason that I can't say I understand, all this seems like a thing of the past. Now that things have improved I am settled back in to the same day to day motions as always, the rush, the stress, the lack of time despite how ever much you stretch it like gum. And of course, also, the trips, the parties, the festivals, the lists of endless desires. We want our world back to how it always was, the one from before, because it suited us fine. But is that really the world we want to live in? Or should we rephrase that question as: what type of world do we need if we all want to stay alive?

Just a quick note from Our World in Data: in African countries hardly 1% of the population is vaccinated, whilst in rich countries 57% of people have already got their full dose. The information is devastating and the question, inevitable. If a pandemic that has now taken more than 5 million lives worldwide, does not make us think and act, what will? Slavoj Žižek speaks in his book 'Pandemic' about a 'new communism', so we either save everyone or no-one is saved. And the historian Eudald Carbonell defends a scientific and technological revolution; which should push us towards a new paradigm putting an end to "anachronistic systems like capitalism".

What is clear is we need a world that is more respectful (towards each other, towards animals and towards the planet) egalitarian and sustainable, we need to re-find ourselves, underline words in the dictionary like 'sharing', 'collaborating', 'helping' and community building.

Above all that's what we talk about with our guests that participated in this edition: designers like Kerby Jean-Raymond, founder and creative director of Pyer Moss, Luis De Javier and Ryunosuke Okazaki, musicians like Dorian Electra, Caroline Polachek and Bbymutha, artists and curators like Pauline Cournier, Arvida Byström and Antwaun Sargent. As well as the model and philanthropist Noëlla Coursaris, founder of Malaika, an organisation that works on a not for profit basis in Congo, dedicated to promote the education of girls and women. "We have to work hard", she said. "We have to close the gap. Not only for women, but also the digital gap." Less statements and more action is what Antwaun Sargent and Dorian Electra advocate. "We need to do a lot more to use the state to take care of people's basic needs and survival," Electra said. But in this edition there is space for ideas, despite some of them being closer to a Black Mirror episode than our most immediate future. Maybe the interview with the philosopher David Pearce is the most disturbing we have done to date. Pearce, forefather of the abolitionist school of transhumanism, defends hows thanks to science and technology it will be possible in the future to abolish suffering, mediated by genetic manipulation to place ourselves in perpetual joy. I don't know if it makes me happy or makes me tremble. Anyway, it's not something that we are going to see happen, so I will end with Kerby Jean-Raymond's words that close his interview: "You have to be optimistic for the future, right? These are tough times, but there are ways to get through them. Many things have changed and routines have been uprooted. The only thing that we can do is be kind to each other, watch what we say, stop being a fucking hater all the time, and get through this shit together. It's the only way to stay alive". Amen.

*Yolanda Muelas*

*Editor in Chief*





# Caroline Polachek

## DREAMING A BETTER WORLD

<i>Words</i>	<i>ARTHUR CROSS</i>
<i>Photography and Creative Direction</i>	<i>91 RULES</i>
<i>Styling</i>	<i>CECE LIU at Jones Management</i>
<i>Hair</i>	<i>CHARLIE LE MINDU</i>
<i>Make up</i>	<i>JEZZ HILL at The Wall Group</i>
<i>Nails Artist</i>	<i>JUAN ALVEAR</i>
<i>Set Designer</i>	<i>ELYSIA BELILOVE</i>
<i>Lighting</i>	<i>JEREMY GOULD</i>
<i>Executive Producer</i>	<i>JILL FERRO</i>
<i>Production Manager</i>	<i>MIA JARRETT</i>
<i>Producer</i>	<i>TJ SILON</i>
<i>Stylist Assistant</i>	<i>TAWNEE CLIFTON</i>
<i>Art Assistant</i>	<i>LUCY KREBSBACH</i>
<i>Production Assistants</i>	<i>MAISIE RUGEN, NATE RENNICK</i>

In Caroline Polachek’s world, we are surrounded by fluidity, systems and artefacts of a modern life imbued with a beauty and richness that represents both the dark and the light in our world. In between these polarities of modern life lies an artist focused on the now, inherently self-aware and deeply philosophical – an artist who is compelled to express the intense emotions in life. Her creations are sewn together by the same gold thread which can be traced through all historic artistic expressions of the human condition. Listening to her music often feels like a heavy weight pressing on your chest suddenly being lifted, or the sharp inhalation of cold air at the top of a mountain just before passing out from oxygen deprivation.



Net shrug DION LEE, swirl bracelet and pillow skirt ZOE GUSTAV/ANNA WHALEN, shoes SIMONE ROCHA, earring PATRICIA VON MUSULIN, ring SOLDIERING ANGEL.





Sbrug PETER DO, bra LIVIDO, trousers and arm warmer KNWLS,  
shoes GIVENCHY, earring SOLDERING ANGEL, ring PATRICIA VON MUSULIN.  
Opposite page: Corset ZOE GUSTAVIA ANNA WHALEN, dress layered underneath DION LEE, boots PRADA,  
armbands and earring PATRICIA VON MUSULIN, rings SOLDERING ANGEL and PATRICIA VON MUSULIN.



Polachek is not, however, tied down by this – she weaves in and out of these more intense emotions with joy, touches of absurdity and silliness in her music videos, and an apparent self-awareness in her lyricism. She is an interesting artist within the PC Music family, no Hannah Diamond of pure hyperrealism but an artist with one foot strongly in this world. This can be seen not only through her continued work with producer Danny L Harle on her own music, but also through her transference of collaboration with many artists who also sit within and around that space, such as A. G. Cook, Charli XCX, Umru and Oklou.

There is no doubt to almost anyone paying attention to popular music right now that Polachek is accelerating through this lockdown straight into pop stardom. In this journey there is no compromise involved. Caroline Polachek isn't diluting her artistic vision for any sort of broader appeal, she is rather bringing you into her own world as it steadily stretches itself outwards, slender-limbed into new spaces.

As an artist, she is currently going through a process of writing new material, as well as testing out new music to live audiences for the first time as shows return. This is a moment that is not just about the new. However, these shows see Polachek consolidate a relationship with an audience – many of whom, paradoxically, haven't seen her live before but are deeply familiar with her. A large part of her journey in her solo career and its growth has in fact happened after the success of her debut album, *Pang*, where lockdown tightened its grip and we holed away listening to music.

We speak as she settles into a new apartment. It is within this shifting landscape of boxes and through the digital echoes of a Zoom conversation that we discuss these themes of past, present and future, where we as individuals and collectives sit, and our journey between them.

Arthur Cross: Have you had time at all to dream and think about the future over the past year?

Caroline Polachek: It's funny. I feel like, in a lot of ways, I'm still catching up with the present. I've felt this very extreme sea change in the way people exist online since the start of the pandemic and I think, just like anyone else, I have one foot in and one foot out. In this month in particular, I feel like I'm more interested than ever in catching up to the present moment. I think there's a really exciting and interesting return to language that's happening right now between podcasters, the prevalence of Substacks, a return to blogging and a new renaissance of poetry. It's interesting to me because this record that I'm

working on right now is defined by a departure from language. I'm more interested in texture, melody and abstraction than I ever have been before. So, it's interesting to find myself at this juncture, and to reconcile with it, to be like, okay, am I going to double down? Or is this a wake-up call to reinvestigate my relationship with language?

AC: Recently you've been using choral groups in your live performances as well. It feels like you can get lost within those elongated ethereal choral patterns in a way you can't, sometimes, when lyrics come in. Is that what you are seeking to do?

CP: In some ways it's the opposite. What I'm hoping for is the opposite of ethereal; what I'm hoping to do is just things that are so objectively embodied. For example, you see a choir in front of you, of 11-year-olds or 14-year-olds. There's just so much context from where these kids are from and their process of learning and the expressions on their faces. It's the opposite of a digital synthesiser, I guess. So, the combination of those things is very interesting to me.

AC: So, you find that voice roots things more in the present, then?

CP: Oh, yeah! The human voice carries more information than any other sound, period.

AC: When you're talking about writing your new music and how it's moving away from words, what is that sounding like?

CP: I always tend to write non-lyrically. At least at first, even songs of mine that are the most on the nose like *So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings*. That song started with a melodic motif – a synth and keyboard motif – and then everything got written over and then spliced together. I realised that a lot of songwriters are the opposite – they'll start with a text – but, for me, it's always either groove, structure or melody, and then words are the last thing. So, in that sense, the stage three of the song-making process has changed, not stage one and two. I guess what it means is that I'm more curious about pursuing the mood in its own right rather than the mood as it relates to external events.

AC: What do you mean by that?

CP: For example, when I write lyrics, it usually feels like decoding, a little bit – like I'm listening to what the melody is already expressing and then I try and put words to that expression. On my last album, I did a lot of very personal work because there was so much going on in my life that I wanted to talk about,

but I was very rarely showing up in the studio with the bravery to talk about these things. So, I would write melodically and then listen and say, okay, well, this song is very clearly very sad. What can this be about? And then, well, actually, this was going on and this is very sad. So, obviously, this is where the song came from. It's like a detective process, but this time around I'm more interested in describing the moods themselves rather than linking them back to ontological events.

AC: Does lyricism still exist at all within what you've created? How are you mapping out any sort of words or lyrics when you're writing these new songs?

CP: It absolutely exists. It's just looser, more playful and abstract. And this is a mode of writing that I've gone in and out of my whole career. There's a song called *Amanaemonesia* that I did with my former band called Chairlift which is, completely, free association, but still has a very strong character. And then, *Bunny Is A Rider* is a song I did just a few months ago now, and that song follows the same methodology as well.

AC: Okay, yeah! This made me think of your extended mix of *The Gate*. There was a reintroduction of voice with your vocal melodies throughout the whole album being recapitulated, elongated, and revoiced. What was the thought behind creating these larger spaces? Is it so other people can insert more of their dreams and thoughts into it? Or is it more what you're talking about, there being a deeper expression of the music that doesn't have to be lyric-based? Are these sections still about you pushing meaning outwards?

CP: Yeah, totally.

AC: I guess it's like a form of Reader Response Theory, which makes us wonder whether it's the author that actually matters or whether it has more to do with the audience's input.

CP: I was thinking along slightly different lines, actually. I felt that the essence and mood that get established in *The Gate* were only half executed in the original – it functions as a prelude to the album. It's also a place that I felt had way more behind it than I allowed it on the album. I couldn't have started the album with a 10-minute ambient track. I mean, I could have, but it just wouldn't have felt right. So, I liked it as the idea of the final gesture of the album being a return to the introductory track, almost as a gesture of invitation to loop the album in a way. But, also, the place we started, we now return to, and it's blossomed into a fuller version of itself. It felt like a nice way to end the album cycle.

AC: That makes so much sense and I really thought it was so beautiful. So, it feels like what I've been saying contradicts what you think about when you're writing music. It's not like you're creating space for other people to embed ideas of futures, you're still very presently expressing your emotion within it.

CP: The beautiful thing about music is that everyone will do that by default. Unless you make it so theatrical and so descriptive that there's no room being given for it, but I trust the listener so inherently I don't feel I need to do that on my end.

AC: Yeah, that makes sense. I guess that's what pop music is also about, in some ways: allowing ambiguities to exist in quite a clever way.

CP: I think that's what all music is about.

AC: You have said that you haven't had time to think about the future. You were trying to catch up to the present, in a way, and pushing forward to that. I was wondering what it was like going through a year of non-performance and then reemerging and playing at the Greek Theatre in L.A. Did that feel like a rebirth for you in your project, like moving into the new chapter of your music?

CP: It absolutely did feel like a rebirth. But it also felt like a way of lassoing what people have shared through my music since that album came out, bringing it into the present moment. I released my last album just a couple of months before the pandemic hit, and I think I'm very lucky and still bewildered to be able to say that the listenership really deepened and grew during the pandemic. I emerged with all these people who are connected to the music that weren't prior. That was quite surreal for me, but I think also surreal for them, for everyone, to be in this one space together and relive a lot of shared memories together that we'd experienced separately. It felt pretty powerful, That show was so early in the summer and so early in the return of live music, so it was most people's first big group event like that, so the electricity in the theatre was just so intense. It was incredible.

AC: Talking of rebirths, do you see an emergence of old and new in your aesthetics at all, for example within your work with Timothy Luke? Do you feel like there is old and new within that?

CP: Definitely. I think, in some ways, I grew up as a child and teenager with a very strong sense of romanticism. When I say romanticism it includes this love for very formal expressions of emotion that





*Dreaming a Better World*



*Jacket MIU MIU, earring PATRICIA VON MUSULIN,  
rings SOLDERING ANGEL and PATRICIA VON MUSULIN.  
Opposite page: Bra and suspender trousers BARRAGÁN.*



have existed through painting, music, linework and architecture. Things that have a lot of emotion in their form – most of where you find that is through old things because they have been very powerful, have entered the canon and have stuck around. Everything from Arthurian tales to Tudor architecture, to 1970s dresses and thrift stores that are clearly doing the mediaeval thing. So, you get these layers of back-referencing of romanticism and romantics, and I had this strong sense that ‘my people’ (in quotes) have always existed. I hesitate to use the word nostalgia, it’s more that passionate, romantic people have always existed and are speaking to each other through art. I care a lot about positioning myself and my work in that lineage. I don’t think about it in terms of referencing history, it’s more of a nod to this thing that I think has always existed and that I feel passionate about keeping alive.

AC: I find what you’re saying really interesting: creating that space for people who have a similar clan and self-expression. If it has existed before, is it a new future or a rebirth of those old ideas? Or because you’re saying it’s continuous, do you not see it as a rebirth?

CP: Well, they never died. I think one thing that I care a lot about, maybe now more than ever, is making music that can help people harmonise or become harmonised with the present moment –people who are, like me, clinging on to so much beauty that has existed at different times in the past – and helping [them] find a way to stay spiritually alive during a present moment that those ideas can be at odds with. We’re in an increasingly faceless, automated, digitised, transactional society, and I think a lot of popular music helps people harmonise themselves with capitalism and with materialism, which, of course, slots really well into the advertising landscape, into the strip mall landscape and into the hustle landscape of infinite growth. I think it’s important to make music that is not necessarily escapist, but where these romantic ideas are situated in the present moment and allowed a way of living in 2019, in 2020, in 2021 – where you can straddle both realities at once, where you can straddle this romantic connection to art and also feel as if you live in the present. Every generation of artists, I think, has a responsibility to do that, to answer that question, because it can never be answered the same way twice.

AC: In *Bunny Is A Rider*, the lyrics make reference to ‘satellites’, and it feels, in the way the character is jumping around, that they represent a freedom from overbearing modernity. In that sense, do you think that the character is able to romantically leap out of the constraints of modern life?

CP: *Bunny Is A Rider* is very literally about disappearance. It’s about this very feminine sexual aspect of unavailability, non-response and making yourself unavailable. And, for me, personally, it’s a fantasy, because I’ve never felt more available in my life. I feel completely surgically attached to my phone. So that song is very Freudian – my unconscious sneaking out the back door and becoming Bunny.

AC: How did you see it as Freudian?

CP: You know, that which you’re repressing finds other ways of existing. In this case, it’s total irresponsibility and blowing everyone off.

AC: In *Bunny Is A Rider* you used the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur as a foundational story arc within the video. What did the Minotaur represent for you in that story?

CP: The Minotaur represents the camera very literally – we made a few allusions to that. There’s a shadow of the Minotaur that’s thrown by the camera at a few points, and then it charges through the wall, and the video ends with a matador sequencer where I kill the camera. I was very inspired by videos showing paparazzi following people. The body language of this person walking, running, being pursued and sometimes having a flirtatious relationship, allowing the camera to catch up and then shrugging it off, and then hitting it away, kicking it or swinging a hip bag at it or whatever. I felt like this tension with the camera was going to be something that I felt very stressed about in returning from the pandemic as well – feeling so physicalised, feeling so not in my own body and not ready to be on camera. And yet the demand of being not even ‘just’ a musician but a person in 2021 is you have to be on camera. So, I think that song was about letting off some steam there. But every aspect of that video was a bastardisation of different narratives. Obviously, I’ve never studied proper bullfighting, I was just doing a cartoon impression of a matador’s movement. It’s the same thing with the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur because the best part of that myth really is Ariadne’s thread, how Ariadne gives Theseus a thread that he unspools behind him – much like the Hansel and Gretel tale of the cookie crumbs –, how he uses it to find his way out of the maze after killing the Minotaur. But we completely abandoned the thread aspect. I liked the idea of being completely lost and disoriented and not having an escape plan.

AC: How did it feel to take control of the idea of the lens of the camera in that way?

CP: It was quite exciting, actually. Mostly because the process was unlike any other I had ever worked with behind the scenes of a music video. Because I’m mostly moving backwards, the labyrinth had to be planned out in a very exacting way so I would know how many steps and what my timing was. I was rehearsing with my choreographer playing the camera so that I knew where my eyeline was going to fall, where my head needed to be facing at any given point. Just to execute this very simple, natural walking pace required really, really precise choreography, and that was fascinating to me. Again, after a year of not being a physical person, to really break down such simple things such as where your eyeballs are looking at and how many steps behind you have before you have to turn around and shift your gravity from one foot to the other just in time. These things were very exciting to do under the circumstances.

AC: You were talking earlier just briefly about how you felt like you were becoming digitalised. Is there an escape for you out of that? Or is it just something that you have to get used to?

CP: We’re all getting used to it, and it’s not like we’ve ever arrived. The landscape keeps changing as well. But I think, for me, the antidote to that is – if there is one – movement. It’s things like choreography, being onstage, and body awareness.

AC: What do you think it is about choreography and body awareness that allows people to escape from the pressures of that highly digitalised, watched world?

CP: It’s a world that no digital tool has any bearing on yet. I’m sure it will, once we get the chip implanted in our brains (laughs), but our relationship with our bodies and with movement is one thing that we have a purely psychedelic relationship with. I guess Apple Watch, treadmills, and certain biostatistics for sure exist, but that doesn’t really inform one’s body control. So that’s one place where the power of your unconscious, your subconscious mind in the literal control of your body reigns supreme.

AC: If we take things back to myth, we were talking about Theseus and the Minotaur. Did you feel like there was a sense that you were breaking out or subverting that myth? Or is that something you were not really hyper-conscious of?

CP: I felt like a little magpie just collecting bits of it, taking what I wanted from that and in a very irreverent way.

AC: In *So Hot You’re Hurting My Feelings*, it also seems like you’ve maggied the myth of Hades and Persephone. Is that the correct interpretation of that video?

CP: It was more just the location. Yeah, it was the Looney Tunes version of Hell, which of course includes those myths, but also the Catholic depiction of Hell, the Halloween version of Hell – always the most archetypal Hell. I loved the idea of Hell not being a place where you’re tortured physically but where you are just bored out of your mind and time just stretches out in front of you forever. I guess for me, that’s what a long-distance relationship is like, because it’s not actual hell but it’s a form of purgatory where if you’re in love with someone, it’s painful. And if you’re not in love with someone, you’re wasting your time, and this state of your time being wasted and you suffering is my personal hell. So, there we were.

AC: Were you brought up Catholic, or what were your first conceptions of Hell? Did you ever think about that when you were younger?

CP: Well, no, I was brought up American. America is obsessed with these binaries, and the Heaven and Hell binary I think played a lot into 1990s culture. For example, I was obsessed with Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* and the very heavy-handed Catholic pop iconography in that film, and the way in which that story plays with morality. But then, I also read Dante’s *Inferno* in school, and there is this incredible Japanese film, *Jigoku*, by Nobu Nakagawa; the depictions of Hell are just so incredible – it’s some of the most amazing set design I’ve ever seen. Set design was one of the things that I got to really passionately play with on the *Pang* album because I wanted to do my own little version of Hell.

AC: In Hell, although you seemed bored, it seems like an element of fun and silliness comes through with your dance moves. I know you did the choreography yourself for that, was that the case?

CP: It was totally absurd. I was looking at a combination of line dancing and Scottish and English traditional dance, like the jigging style movement. There’s a lot of similarity between them because the Smoky Mountains in the US are the best-preserved place of what early English colonial culture was like in terms of that accent and folk music. It’s a lot of hands





*Coat DYLAN MEKHI, skirt SHAWNA WU, boots DION LEE, rings Caroline's own and PANCONESI.  
Opposite page: Corset ZOE GUSTAVIA ANNA WHALEN, dress layered underneath DION LEE, boots PRADA,  
armbands and earring PATRICIA VON MUSULIN, rings SOLDERING ANGEL and PATRICIA VON MUSULIN.*





on hips, stomping, and square shapes. I thought it was funny because I think a lot of what I do vocally is so twisty, ribbony and sinewy, and then to do something that was that bratty and angular, I got a real kick out of it.

AC: Do you feel like that's what we all have to do, in a way, to get through the dystopia?

CP: I think combining beauty and a sense of humour is essential as a coping mechanism. In that video, it hasn't descended into total absurdity like slapstick or anything similar; it still maintains a sense of melodic beauty. But yeah, I think especially my generation of women are really ripping that open as well. I think humour has been the domain of men for so many generations. And now it's really exciting. Women are putting their own stamp on it.

AC: As you're going on tour now, it feels like a new chapter is unfurling for you. Are there any changes you expect that might happen over that period of time?

CP: That's an interesting question. I'm obsessed with the live tour videos that Nathy Peluso has been posting. I guess when I watch her videos, it just gets me so excited to refine stagecraft – and I don't mean that in a showbiz way, I mean it in a magic way. The art of feeling the music in the moment and letting the tension from the performance fuel things rather than hinder it. I'm still very nervous when I play live, I get the shakes and I get short of breath. I still get very nervous, so I'm hoping that will melt away more and more as the shows happen.

AC: Yeah. I think with extended touring, you have to get used to it at some point, and it becomes a new normal.

CP: Totally.

AC: So, what do you think it is, specifically, that makes you feel nervous when you perform?

CP: Just the stakes of it. I respect the audience profoundly, and my standards are also very high. I find a lot of live shows exceedingly boring, so I want to do my best to bring something exciting and where there's actually something at stake. Where if I'm making a big mistake, they can hear it or see it because that's what keeps it exciting.

AC: If we return to ideas of the past again, are there any elements of the past that you're looking forward to reinventing or throwing into the future?

CP: Yeah, I'm thinking a lot about cave art right now, and also drawing and very primitive drawing as a medium. It's almost a joke to me that people don't know how to write with their hands anymore. Especially the younger generation will grow up not really being able to write very well. Cursive is not being taught in American schools anymore, so that means people who are growing up in the school system now won't be able to read their own grandparents' letters, they won't be able to read their own constitution. I like the idea of hand drawing or painting as an expression of our own futility, specificity and animateness [sic]. So, I think I'm going to be exploring that a bit.

AC: That sounds amazing, do you ever write letters yourself? Or, when do you frequently write?

CP: Gosh, I mean, I used to so much and I haven't written a letter in ages.

AC: You might be one of the first people to fall within when it comes to it then?

CP: No, really! I've been rootless for so many years now. I haven't truly had a home for the last four years, so I haven't written things or even printed things that run a risk of getting lost or thrown out or neglected or left behind. So, my whole world has gone digital just for portability, just like everyone else's has.

AC: How would you centre yourself when going through that?

CP: Spending time with friends. I do this more compulsively. If I go to a new place, I become hyper social, and then once I get a lay of the land in terms of how people are feeling, what people are doing, how time can be spent together beautifully and what the challenges that we're all mutually chewing on are, a part of my brain relaxes and then allows me to work by myself in a focused way. It's funny, it's like I need to do a scan of a new place. That happens very compulsively.

AC: Just to see how everyone else is feeling?

CP: How people I care about are feeling, what they're thinking about and what's going on in the place. It's like mapping geography conversationally.

AC: I was going to ask how long you're going to be in this new place that you've moved into, do you get to centre yourself in a physical space as well as a social space?

CP: God, thankfully I do. I mean, who knows how long I'll be here? Long enough, I suppose.

AC: Long enough for you to not feel a sense of a complete lack of structure or home?

CP: Yeah, fingers crossed!

AC: How, then, do you recharge when you do get burnt out?

CP: Last time I recharged by reorganising systems like my clothes, the files on my computer, or the way the kitchen is laid out. I can never just relax. I always have to be doing something. But I like the idea of improving my life and my workflow through system reengineering and making things more fluid. Making it so I can find things in the dark fast!

AC: If we move to a more expansive question, I was wondering, do you feel hopeful for the future?

CP: I am trying to answer this honestly.

AC: What is your instant reaction? To not be honest or...?

CP: I guess when I hear the word future I think very specifically about the socio-economic or climate versions of it. The word future that's used in a newspaper way. I don't have hope for that future, but I do have hope for my own. When I think about my day-to-day life, in 30 years, I'm excited about it. I think I'll be extraordinarily surprised. I know, I can't even imagine it, but that's exciting.

AC: I think that's beautiful because I believe we all have to do that. If the grander future isn't filled with hope, it can be so important to centre yourself down into what your actual progression will be. What specific hopes do you have for the future?

CP: I hope to be making music in new ways, having new ways of improvising music, new ways of recording it, new ways of listening to it and maybe, most importantly, new ways of talking about it. I think the concepts of gender and self and friendship are undergoing such radical change right now, and I think we're dealing with a lot of the growing pains of that as collateral. I'm excited for a time where those growing pains are done and maybe we're on to new ones – we'll definitely be on to new ones – but a future where the ones that we're currently chewing on and grappling with have been sublimated into

the fabric of society and are peaceful. Where gender definitions and this idea of individuality that I think has become very toxic have melted away into something else.

AC: It does feel like a lot of work has to happen or is happening right now.

CP: Yeah, it's already happening. So, I think the fruits of that labour will be seen in the future. I'm excited about that.

AC: Yeah, definitely! What is it about individualism that you find toxic?

CP: We've never been more dependent on structures ever as a species than we are now. And yet, there's this myth that's used to sell us things and make us good consumers, that what we consume constitutes a personality and constitutes individuality. I think a lot of pop music echoes that and produces a lot of really good art. That's the thing, I think a lot of Kanye's work, for example, is grappling with individualism. And it's brilliant, as a result, because of the tragic elements of it that he takes on in a very aware way.

AC: What parts does he take on? What is he grappling with at the moment?

CP: His own frailty, right? This switching between 'I am a God' and then 'I have failed myself or I have failed others'. But I'm excited for a more nuanced idea of the self and especially of our relationship with dependency to emerge.

AC: An understanding of dependency?

CP: A sense of interconnectedness. For example, that the things we buy at the supermarket don't just appear, or that when we throw something away it doesn't just disappear, or the mechanics behind our material reality. I think an awareness of that would change a sense of how individuality is handled in pop culture, and the denial of it allows something akin to what we have now.

AC: I think that's really interesting and it makes me think about how we're surrounded by all these different systems where we can get rid of things very quickly. From people picking up your bins or the flushing of things, you're surrounded by places where you can do that easily. You know, you don't have to sit with the things around you.

CP: Exactly, and a heightened sense of that can inform your sense of beauty, awe, horror and humour





*Coat DYLAN MEKHI.*

in ways that I think only make us more human. And that makes good culture; that makes good art.

AC: A heightened sense of what, specifically?

CP: In the sense of the abjectness of things, and also the tight choreography of things. Both being extreme and both being beautiful.

AC: What do you mean by choreography in that sense?

CP: For example, where your water comes from. There's so much choreography in that. A lot of people have worked on that, and a lot of machines are working on it every second, and that is beautiful.

AC: Do you think about that often?

CP: Yeah, I get very emotional about that sometimes, actually.

AC: When you're sitting there, how do you come to that point of thinking about it? Does it just flow in?

CP: Yeah, just very directly, and there's much tragedy in it but a lot of comedy as well.

AC: I guess that's this romanticism returning, but maybe in a different way than when you were talking about it before, imbuing things around you with that sense of beauty. What does that process do for you when you imagine those things?

CP: It makes me feel very small. It used to make me feel like things fell into two distinct categories: holy like wood or things that were handmade or gifts, and then things that were from the trash world that come from a faceless plastic reality. I think last year, it just all merged into one for me where I started seeing the intention behind it. Things from the trash world were put in motion even at their darkest.

AC: Can you give me an example?

CP: For example, someone making money and putting in place horrible mines in Chile to get this metal for a circuit board for a product that's meant to be thrown away after just one use. But that degree of exploitation, greed, and ruthlessness feels timeless and mythical to me. We are surrounded by those, they're part of a timeless spectrum of human emotion. I believe that looking at some single-use plastic thing and not include it in this charged mythological reality is to miss out on a lot of richness.

AC: So, you're saying the intention is sometimes based on capitalistic greed. It's interesting that this doesn't make you feel full of despair.

CP: We can't expect to live in a morally good and pure world; that's never existed and it never will. I think this sort of Yin-Yang is all that's ever been around and all we can ask for.

AC: So, when people think of utopian futures, does that just feel completely unrealistic?

CP: Oh yeah, obviously. I think it exists for some, and it will exist for the very rich, but not for the rich who are paying attention. Do you know what I mean?

AC: Do you feel that to be able to cope with the world you have to sit with the idea of those contrasting things with a sense of awareness?

CP: No. In fact, I feel like there are a million siren songs calling you away from that awareness constantly. So, you have a whole restaurant menu of coping mechanisms but the one that I find to be the most compelling is just thinking about the flow of things, where things are from and where are they going to.

AC: You see it as a coping mechanism rather than the way things are?

CP: It's the same thing, I guess.

AC: In what way?

CP: Maybe that's arrogant for me to say. We know one version of a coping mechanism is vision, right? Seeing what's going on and trying to create a sense of understanding. Other coping mechanisms are the opposite. It's like retreating. I guess the reason I say it's arrogant is because, who am I to say that what I'm seeing is macro? I'm a tiny speck of a consumer; I'm not like Elon Musk. My access to data is extremely limited and very micro. So, I guess I'm still operating on very peasant terms (laughs). But it certainly is, at least emotionally, a coping mechanism.



# Kerby Jean-Raymond

## BRING IN THE HONEY

*Words* *EMILY PHILLIPS*  
*Portraits* *SHIKEITH*  
*Special Guests* *MORGAN BOBROW-WILLIAMS, SHAUN HARDY*  
*Styling* *ROMINA HERRERA MALATESTA*

Innovation and authenticity are two defining forces at the heart of Pyer Moss. Founded in 2013 by Kerby Jean-Raymond, the visceral Creative Director uses fashion as a means of translating his personal interests in art, film and politics into luxurious fashion garments – an approach undeniably rendered in his premiere couture collection. Kerby’s work is of rebellion and risk-taking, encapsulating the delicate equilibrium between nostalgic themes and social commentary. Reflecting on the shared experiences of people of colour, collated in his designs, he blends provocative showmanship with exquisite craftsmanship and philanthropy.

*Hair & Grooming* *NIGELLA MILLER using Dior Beauty & Sbiseido Men at The Wall Group*  
*Photographer Assistants* *KAHDEEM JEFFERSON, SEAN MANUEL*  
*Stylist Assistants* *CAROLYN BRENNAN, TALIA BROWN*  
*Car provided by* *ROSCO ABUSHI at Abushi*  
*Special Thanks* *OMARI WILLIAMS & NATE HINTON at The Hinton Group*



Coat and trousers REEBOK BY PTER MOSS Collection 4, shoes REEBOK BY PTER MOSS Experiment 4, jewellery JOHNNY NELSON and Kerby's own. Morgan & Shaun wear full looks PTER MOSS and gloves REEBOK BY PTER MOSS.





Kerby Jean-Raymond's debut couture collection for Pyer Moss, *Wat U Iz*, was recently unveiled as the first Black American designed collection to present at Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week. It was a joyous spectacle, conjuring a wholehearted sense of celebration of community and Black invention. The collection sparked a dialogue akin to a history lesson but injected with an expedient dose of Pop Art humour. Shining a light on twenty-five overlooked inventions born from the minds of Black people, the garments abandoned the usual silhouettes of the brand opting instead for bulbous and quirky forms. Discernable in the designs were Black contributions such as the mop, peanut butter, ice cream, thermal hair curlers and the horseshoe, all found in a list at the US Library of Congress and the Black Inventor Online Museum. The campy surrealism redefined the possibilities of exceptional craftsmanship and the meaning of couture.

With the only woman leader of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown, opening the show with a poetic speech, the necessity of mobilisation became ever apparent. The vivacious vocals of rapper 22Gz and the operatic background singers bellowed over the live music soon after, complimentary to the clothes, and elevating what could have been a classic catwalk to a jubilant spectacle, unparalleled in its exuberant atmosphere.

Simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and dead serious, the collection gave effect to a steadfast message on the erasure of Black and Brown history as a direct result of whitewashing. Kerby proposed to play with the oppressive structures that have failed people of colour in the past – to not only defy them but also to rewrite them.

In the current social climate, it's not hard to become disillusioned and disappointed by the work that is being done to amplify Black narratives. However, Kerby managed to create a stimulating fashion event that played with concepts of grandeur and childish cartoon caricatures from animation studios like Pixar and shows like *Sesame Street* and *Teletubbies*, whilst maintaining an assured representation of Black narratives.

Kerby's rich history in New York's Flatbush serves as a grounding body for his work, imbuing him with an understanding of the real-life consequences of oppression and a solid set of friends that have been by his side since his youth. He is an uncle, brother, designer, cultural commentator, creative director, musician, and human being. He is critical of the oppressive structures that have allowed society to slip into a duality, advocating for imagination and for a world without hate.

He is witty, intelligent, and critical of culture. An empath by nature and an artist by nurture, he offers a key perspective on the state of the world as well as his own identity as a Black man. It can be challenging to move within these spaces, but his ideas have often been to give a loud and clear voice to people of colour. With compassion, Kerby Jean-Raymond is forging the future of fashion. And we're here for it.

Emily Phillips: Your shows extend beyond the clothes into music, social issues, dance and food, which all contribute to creating a very stylish and close-knit, family-party feel to your shows. Can you share more about why you're doing fashion differently?

Kerby Jean-Raymond: I don't know any other way. Pyer Moss is the culmination of all my ideas. I don't divorce any of my hobbies or my life and personal interests from the brand. The other thing too is that I live in New York, I work in New York, and I was born and raised here. So, when I go to the MET Gala after-party, or my show, it's the kids I grew up with [that are there], and they are genuinely excited for me because they've been with me every step of the way. Half of the people that show up to my stuff are friends that I've known since first or second grade. I meet a lot of new friends who are from all around the world and some of them may be celebrities, but the people who I hold dear to me stay with me and they get blended into the scene. But whenever the people who I've met in the entertainment and Hollywood fashion space come to hang out with us, especially those who are not from New York and move here for work, they're like, Oh! It's home-cooked food here! It's people who've known each other for more than 25 to 30 years. So, it transfers in everything that we do, and keeps that same energy because it's just who's around.

EP: That's really beautiful. You don't often hear a lot about people having their friends around in the industry so many years later, especially not from their childhood. So, that's really incredible.

KJR: It's a little hard to navigate because I approach new friends with the same trusting energy that I give the friends I grew up with – and sometimes that backfires. Some people are not altruistic, or they think that I'm not altruistic, so they treat me differently. It's a learning curve, especially when people are not used to how we roll. But if I do something for you it's because I genuinely like you, not because I want anything in return. I think that's a hard thing to navigate and it's good that I have my friends around who can show newcomers our example of that loyalty in our lives, but some people don't always get the hint and don't respond to it in a way that I would hope for.

EP: You are a source of inspiration for many young creatives and designers alike; but also just kids. You speak about your nephew CJ a lot, who I imagine looks up to you and the work you do a great deal. But who do you look up to? Who inspires you?

KJR: CJ looks up to me, but he's a little bit of an asshole sometimes too. He's coming into his own and he's in that 'mean' age right now. When he was little, he was completely attached to me and wouldn't make a move



Photography  
**Andy Jackson** *Born Artists*

Styling  
**Romina Herrera Malatesta**

Starring  
**Adeng Nyamam** *Elite, Raven St. Claire Models,*  
**Symone Lu** *Cochrane Casting*

Hair  
**Akihisa Yamaguchi**  
*Using R+Co Hair Care*

Makeup  
**Ayaka Nihei**  
*Using Jones Road Beauty*



Nails  
**Mamie Onishi** *Using OPI*

Casting  
**Roberto Javier Sosa**

Production  
**Yohan Yoon, Ashley Tong**

Location  
**Prospect Studios, Brooklyn**

Lighting  
**Glenn Lim**

Retouching  
**Alberto Maro**

Stylist Assistant  
**Carolyn Brennan, Johanna Aquino, Sean Manuel**



*Peanut Butter - Embroidered Pyer Moss Creamy Peanut Butter jar label.  
Opposite page: Horseshoe - Light blue sleeveless taffeta gown with horseshoe décolleté and cut-out waist and thigh.  
Waterfall ruffle at the front with brass 3D sculptural horseshoe belt.*

*Special Thanks to Dylan Johnston at Prospect Studios,  
Busbwick Community Darkroom, Photolab LLC.*



without me. He called me uncle-daddy. He was like my son. He is like my son. He's just going through his little mean ass teenage years right now. He's a good kid, the sweetest kid; but he's hell hormonal. He wants to play basketball. He likes girls. He's figuring it out. I look up to a lot of people close to me. One of the people I look up to is Brittany Escovedo, who helped me start this brand and works for me to this day. My family also. And Nate Hinton – who's on this call –, who's built his business in a very white-dominated space and takes Black people to different heights. He truly changed my life. And then there are a lot of women around me who have inspired me from day one. For example, Kay Unger – I was with her last night. She's definitely like my mum. She came into my life at the right time. I met her when I was 14, seven years after my mum died, and she gave me my first job in fashion. She's still puppeteering and pulling strings because she loves me like her son and she's there to this day if I need something. For example, I just started dating someone and she quizzed the girl last night; I felt so bad for her (laughs).

EP: How about in design?

KJR: In the design space I really look up to Kahlil Joseph, Lena Waithe, and Melina Matsoukas. I dedicated my show to so many dope American designers who I feel are some of the greats in the world: Jeremy Scott, Bob Mackie, Patrick Kelly and Christopher John Rogers – who is developing a fire silhouette and whose colour scheme is crazy. I look up to sneaker designers heavy too. At Reebok, I'm surrounded by some crazy designers who put me to shame, and I have to technically rediscover feet every time. This one kid, Evan Belforti, helped me design The Experiment 4's and The Sculpt. He's so trapezoidal in his way of thinking.

EP: Awesome.

KJR: I'm also a huge Rick Owens fan. I think he's not only a designer, but he's almost created his own in-real-life Sims – a world you can go to. I've never missed a Rick show until the one that happened yesterday, but when you go to a Rick show, you see these seven-foot-tall ninjas coming in and they're dressed in black high heel boots. I'm always like, holy shit, this man has fabricated an entire world! I was talking to someone the other day about people who are fully expressed – who've dealt with their emotional traumas and healed their inner, wounded child – that go out into the world and create these worlds around their thoughts and their ideas: people like Dolly Parton, Liberace, Freddie Mercury, Michael Jackson to a certain extent, and Prince.

EP: Let's chat about your couture collection, *Wat U Iz*. Your narratively rich designs served as a tribute to

twenty-five Black inventions drawn from an extensive list at the Library of Congress and the Black Inventor Online Museum. The show was an ambitious conceptual project, but you managed to put on an incredible extravaganza, a whole production, even after getting rained out. Tell us about the importance of having a good party and celebrating your achievements – particularly after so long without in-person shows and parties.

KJR: I've had a lot of deaths in my family this past year, and just around me in general. I lost one of my close friends a few weeks ago and another close friend a month ago; my aunt at the top of Covid; my stepbrother's mum. I've lost a lot of people who were close to me, and I think the way I'm approaching my work now is from a place of celebration, collaboration, and happiness. When we got this opportunity to do couture, our first inclination was to be self-serving and create to compete with other couture designers. But that wouldn't have brought anyone new into the world of couture and that's why we redesigned it twice. We got to the point where we had created these sculptures and these sort of *Teletubbies*, *Sesame Street*-like things, because I primarily wanted to pull in new eyes on the art form. Then I wanted to use the opportunity to sell clothes because nobody sells couture – there's something like fifty couture consumers in the world. So, I felt it was a higher-level platform for me to communicate on. I wanted to make the communication easier and just funny and inviting.

EP: How are you feeling now?

KJR: I think this past year has changed me a lot and I was angrier about a lot more things than I was grateful for. In that gratefulness and newfound energy, I wanted to create something that was a little bit more lighthearted, less serious. All that technicality and all the other things don't really bring a smile to people's faces. You go to a runway show and everybody's on their phones. What we were able to do is stop people in their tracks and call attention to some of the legends that, in that space, have tried to do this joy-bringing – everybody from Betsey Johnson to Jeremy Scott to Patrick Kelly. I think the result of that energy and that happiness and that ease of entry for people, to be pulled into couture in that way, not only reinvigorated and made onlookers feel something but it also lessened the barrier of entry and made things a little bit lighter at a time when we really needed it. What results from that is people will be stuck in the rain and be like, This thing feels so good, I'm just going to dance and fuck my shoes up, and then come back the second day and then do the same thing and dance and fuck my shoes up, and then come back two months later from the MET Gala and dance and fuck my shoes up. That's the energy I want. I don't want to bring any darkness to this world.

EP: The collection follows perfectly everything you have been building at Pyer Moss. Can you explain to us a bit more about how you conceived the idea? I read in Vogue that it came from an Ayahuasca ceremony, really? Please tell us more about it. Did you have it clear in your mind from the beginning what focus you wanted?

KJR: We're at this point now, with so many collections in the chamber, and we were just thinking the morning we got to Joshua tree. Then we had a call with someone on the board of the Couture Federation and we were invited. At first, we had this intention of using the platform to release this other idea that we had been working on. It was still going to be contradictory and disruptive, but it wasn't in the spirit of happiness of creating something light. It was, again, self-serving. We had intended to use the platforms to get more eyes and to sell the product line.

EP: But you ended up doing something completely different because of the ceremony.

KJR: That night my whole team did Ayahuasca, and it was life-changing. It was the craziest experience of my life. I think every Black person should do it, and then I think every Black person should follow up with talking therapy, and then every Black person should have a group of people that they can do group therapy with outside of talking therapy with a professional in a very loving environment. I think that's super important for all of us. I think for us to heal and to radically expose the systems that oppress us and to be triumphing in this fight, we need to heal. So much of that has to happen. So, when we did that, our moods changed and our experience with each other changed. Our experience with what we were looking at, what we had drawn, what we had for Collection Four, what we had ideated in that eight hours between the ceremony and the call, completely shifted after that. Beate Karlsson on my team started drawing these bubbly ass blimp-shaped things. I hated it. But then I went back to it, looked at it, and I just saw this peanut butter jar in my head. It was the first look I sent to the team, and I was like, somebody draw a peanut butter jar. They were like “why?” And I said, George Washington Carver. Then I went to look for the inventions list a week or two later because we had just started drawing shit. It was just inventions that are Black contributions that I remembered; it wasn't even inventions per se. It was more so things that represent Black culture. Then it got a little bit more specific and precise.

EP: I think that's very interesting. How did the process evolve?

KJR: As I did more and more research I was like, holy shit! I didn't even know we invented the traffic light and all these other things! So, I asked, how many other kids

don't notice this? And then it became a responsibility. Knowing those things isn't to establish any sort of supremacy over another person or another race or anything like that, it's just to say, I could do this too. Somebody who did this is like me, especially when the world is constantly beating you down and telling you that you can't do it. Somebody just like me, from a similar background as me, invented the air conditioner? We have so many examples of Black excellence right now that are rooted in entertainment. But there's so much shit happening in academia too, and in the science space, in the STEM space, all these other things that are equally, if not more important than some of what we currently idolize.

EP: Yes, I agree.

KJR: I've been good at highlighting our past in different ways and talking to us in different ways, but I wanted to use this opportunity to pile on and say, okay, we did this and this and this. I also wanted to create some controversy too because when we started, I drew up all these dresses – and they were great – but I was like, cover them. I'll give you an example: the hair roller dress was supposed to be a print. If you look at some of my collections, I always have a wedding gown or something, so it was going to be more of those with the sublimation of these prints of these different things alluding to the inventions. And I thought, man, that's going to be cool for the fashion kids. But who cares though? There are so few of them, and there are so many of my nephews. So, I'd rather do it for CJ so he can immediately see it. And in the way that the show was conducted too, we had similar messages being delivered in two different ways from Elaine Browne and 22Gz. I wanted it to be something that makes an impact over the years and is not just consumed in seven minutes and spat out.

EP: Coming back to your peanut butter pot garment, it really caught my imagination – it made me think of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup prints. Was that an intentional reference?

KJR: Honestly, I didn't reference anyone intentionally at first, and once we started to put things together and share it with the Federation and they had to approve the collection by going through the whole thing, I started to see it – but I never saw Andy Warhol. I saw Jeremy Scott and Viktor & Rolf – but they're not American. When I was studying what other people have done in couture, I looked at McQueen, Valentino, Schiaparelli, Iris Van Herpen, and was trying to intentionally avoid what they were doing. But after a while I embraced it – especially the American designers. There were a lot of colour tributes in there to Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren. And I wanted it to honour us (Americans).





Coat GUCCI, trousers LOUIS VUITTON, shoes PYER MOSS The Sculpt Red, jewellery JOHNNY NELSON and Kerby's own.  
Opposite page: Full look LOUIS VUITTON, jewellery JOHNNY NELSON and Kerby's own.





EP: The campy humour in your eccentric designs hints at the fun of your personality. On paper, journalists will have you as the designer whose main characteristic is political engagement, but your friends know you as the comedian. You’ve said of the couture collection that you didn’t want it to be “regular” but rather “like *Sesame Street* and Pixar.” So, the camp nature of the clothes was intentional, with humour at the root of who you are as an individual. But, why do you think it’s important to maintain a sense of humour and lightness within the work you do, and in fashion more generally?

KJR: I faced so much tragedy as a kid, and I’m still unpacking those traumas. If anything, the last two years have taught us that life is super short. So, I’m going to try to get through it as happily as I can. In the beginning there was a lot of pressure to keep up, to sort of adapt to whatever energy was in this space in the industry. I would see what my favourite designers were doing, what they were acting like. I couldn’t replicate that though because it isn’t me. I can’t be mean; I can’t yell at models – it’s not my style, it’s just not who I am. It’s not my intention to piss people off or leave a bad taste in people’s mouths. Overall, the energy around the brand is so young and so inexperienced; everybody is just trying to figure things out because there’s never been a brand like this for us. And the last thing I want to do is, with that confusion while everybody is trying to figure this shit out, have a sense of tension. The work that we create should be fun because everything else behind the scenes is really stressful.

EP: Do you think humour, entertainment and extravaganza help when communicating a message?

KJR: You definitely catch more bees with honey than shit.

EP: Pop art is part of a crossover between what might be defined as high and low cultures. Is that a topic that interests you: moving between exclusive work and work that is simply for the people?

KJR: Yeah, I think from now on, I want to use that couture platform and platforms like that – whether I’m at museums, doing gallery shows, or creating these conceptual films – to get those high-level ideas out there with no intention or pressure of trying to monetise them. But, at the same time, I do have a business with Pyer Moss, and it is our responsibility to win in that space and make sure that it’s commercially viable. Because if it ends, I’m afraid of what that message would trigger in all the kids who are trying to do the same thing as me. So, it’s important that we have a sense of extravaganza with some of the platforms that we’re offered, but at the same time, that we also balance commerciality and accessibility because, as a designer, my goal is to get the

clothes on as many people as possible. I don’t care how much they pay for it. I just want to see my stuff on as many people as possible.

EP: The horseshoe design refers to your time with The Horse Nation at Standing Rock, showing solidarity to the protests there against the North Dakota Access Pipeline. How did that experience touch you?

KJR: That was one of the wildest experiences of my life. I was meant to go to Art Basel that year, but my boy Vic Mensa hit me up and sent me these news articles. He was like, “Yo, have you seen what’s happening?” I saw that they were blowing water on people in freezing-degree temperatures and people were getting frostbite from being out there protesting. I was like, well, what do I have access to? It was gloves, socks, heat warmers, leg warmers, coats, and those types of things. So, I flew up to Chicago, we got a bus, and we drove the bus from Chicago to South Dakota. Man, when we got there, it was something like negative seven, and by the middle of the night it was about negative twenty. Our phones didn’t work because it was too cold. We had to sleep in a huddle. It was the craziest experience. But there was so much love there.

EP: Wow.

KJR: When I met the people of the Sioux tribe and The Horse Nation, I experienced joy in a way that I hadn’t experienced before. These people had everything and to an outsider, it could look like they had nothing. But the things they were trying to protect were nature – that’s what their possession was. They wanted to protect the land’s right to exist, the water’s right to not be polluted, and the ancestral space that they were promised in dealings with the United States government. But then there came some capitalist interest without any deal-making with the tribes, encroaching on their land and potentially polluting one of the last clean water reservoirs that they all used. So, as with everything that happens around the world, it affected me as a person.

I’m an empathetic person, so I could feel what the people were feeling, or at least I could try to put myself in their shoes. And when I’m in a position to help I always try to, as much as I can. Sometimes I can’t and I still do it. It might mess me up financially or whatever the case, but I still do it because I know I’m going to be okay.

EP: No, that’s important and I really respect that. So, your chess-piece suit captures the zeitgeist. It references the noble African-Egyptian history of the invention of chess. Tell me more about this look.

KJR: Honestly, when we were going through the list, we picked out the things that we were most surprised about, and some of those things had conflicting histories. I think

that’s part of the erasure that we’re trying to correct. So, a lot of these things don’t even exist on the Internet, and you have to go into libraries and really research through physical books and, for whatever reason, the powers that be don’t show the history of these things from the Byzantines and Indians to all of these different Black and Brown origins – those things got whitewashed. So, I think it’s important, especially in these twenty-five looks, to expose the hypocrisy of the current age but also the erasure that’s happened systemically over time.

EP: I’d like to speak about the meaning of this collection for your career and this crucial moment in your life that you find yourself in. It seems to me that this collection is making a big statement on everything that has come before at Pyer Moss, and everything that you have associated yourself with – now, it seems like you want to take it even further. I imagine it must feel very stifling having to carry the title or label ‘activist’ or ‘Black’ designer all day. Can we speak a bit about this? This edition of METAL explores the possibilities of constructing a new, better world, and I’d like to talk a bit about that with you. Do you envision a world without labels or does that sound totally utopic? A world where a designer is just a designer, and a trans actress is just an actress. Where we don’t have to always be justifying, defending or reclaiming our identities or ourselves...

KJR: People are tribal. We need something to belong to. I was in a gas station the other day coming from Emily Bode’s wedding and I was talking to this guy who was American flagged out. And then I realised that he just needs something to belong to. I don’t think it is realistic to imagine that people would not want titles, hierarchy, or territory. It’s what makes people feel like they have a sense of purpose – something to protect. I think, even in aspects of fashion and how we create art, we go after these awards because we want validation, we want fellowships and we want community. It’s just an extension of who we are as people and it’s in our primal nature, so I don’t think that that’s ever going to go away.

EP: How do you feel when people call you an activist?

KJR: I’m not an activist. I’ve never been an activist. I don’t know what that word even means. I’m not activating. Well, I know what the word means, but I’m saying that I don’t know why I would be called an activist. I know true activists who spend every day lobbying, gathering answers, and working with policy makers in their communities incessantly. I would say I’m more of a philanthropist and someone who provides a platform for those who are currently facing oppression. I also use my resources to help them get out of these situations of oppression, whether it’s financially, my ability to communicate on their behalf, or my ability to corral people – powerful people – to make changes

for them. But I don’t know if any or all of that would qualify me as an activist. I think those sorts of labels like ‘activist’ and ‘Black designer’ are fine, and you can call me whatever you want, but it just will get confusing when I inevitably am not doing those things and people are trying to hold me to something that I never agreed to.

EP: Is the United States still the country of dreamers?

KJR: Yes. It is the greatest country in the world – that’s why everybody wants to come here. That’s also why everybody who’s already here wants to fix it and make sure it’s not completely fucked up. If the US wasn’t great, everybody would just leave because there are so many reasons to. I think this is a place where two Haitian immigrants can meet at a nightclub, make \$600 a month combined, one of them dies, and their kid still turns out to be at the top of fashion.

EP: What are you, and the creatives you run with, dreaming about?

KJR: I’m dreaming about a self-sustaining ecosystem where creatives like me don’t have to face the things that I have faced to be successful and can realise prosperity, generational wealth, and integrity in their work. Also, where they can continue to create platforms to pass this down and pay this forward. That’s what I’m doing; that’s what I’m building at Your Friends in New York – it’s the macro-dream.

EP: So, coming back a little bit to the couture show, Elaine Brown, the only woman leader of the Black Panther Party, gave an incredibly inspiring talk at your show and I would love to hear more about why you specifically chose her.

KJR: Because of what you just said. Elaine Brown is one of the most interesting characters you’ll ever meet in your life. She speaks her mind. She is radical in every sense. She doesn’t take any shortcuts in her approach to being an activist and being a mouthpiece for oppressed people. She’s been doing the work and I wanted to show people how it’s done.

I think in this past year we’ve been getting a lot of lip service from white people who purported to care about Black lives, as well as Black people with means, of means, and from means, who pretended to care about Black lives. I also saw the abuse and all of these committees and things popping up just to take money from corporations and essentially steal on the back of Black pain. It was all kind of funny to me and I thought, wow, this is going to be a wild eighteen months, after George Floyd. I watched it all unfold and I was just like, let me show you how it’s done. Let me bring in the OG. Real respect is real, and I think that’s what mine and her relationship is.





*Refrigerator - Light blue organza sleeveless mock neck ruffled bustle mini dress and white refrigerator with multicolor alphabet magnet appliqué.  
Opposite page: Hair Roller - Dark orange velvet robe with teal satin piping, exaggerated shawl collar  
and cuffs with quilted detail and floor length hair roller wig.*





EP: Did you know her personally before the show?

KJR: We reached out before the show; we had to get to know each other very well. Elaine is not a person that you can just book for something; she is not like that at all. You have to mean something to her for her to leave her house. Same with 22Gz, he isn't somebody easy to work with either. He's from Flatbush as well, so he's not known for being approachable.

EP: There is something in the far-reaching and organising spirit of Pyer Moss that creates a nonetheless politically engaged community. Can you speak to the current and future forms of your community and why was Elaine the right fit?

KJR: I want people to know that part of this community is actually doing the work and not just calling themselves activists – not just retweeting something and going back to sleep thinking that they've done their job for the day. You've got to get out there, you've got to actually do it. And even me, I'm doing as much as I can with the schedule that I can, but I still don't do that – I still don't call myself an activist.

We need to aspire to the point where we're radically organizing in order to create systems that just don't temporarily put a Band-Aid on things. You can't call corporations to action one summer, get a couple of billion dollars in donations and then say that the work is done and go fatten your pockets. That's not the move.

EP: I agree. So, you are writing and drawing your own story, and we are so excited to speak to you about it. What are you enjoying more right now in this chapter of your life?

KJR: Self-help. Again, this has been a very tough year, and I think I've had to sit and deal with a lot of negative thoughts and internal conflicts. I think one of the things I'm super excited about is coming to terms with a lot of things by being in therapy. Just ridding myself of toxic people that my insecurities have brought on; people that nurse my insecurities; and they might not know better, but they continue to use and abuse where they see a weakness and take as much as I'm willing to give without ever saying like, "Hey, I see you've given enough." You can't expect that from people who leach, you have to create those boundaries yourself.

I think right now, what I'm most excited about is that I'm getting the tools to actively better myself so that I can put myself in a position of peace and just remove myself from all that noise, turmoil, and negativity. Especially in this industry, because you meet so many good, dope people, but then there are some, even the ones that you've helped or that you've advocated for the most, even at your own expense, that leach. Sometimes those are the people that resent you the most and you have to ask yourself why you

helped them in the first place – what was that insecurity and how did that insecurity breed this action that now brings in a new insecurity? I'm just learning how to better cope and navigate that space so that I can avoid the things that have trapped me in the past.

EP: The fashion show is ephemeral, over in a matter of moments and often forgotten just as fast. In some cases, it starts, goes nowhere, and tells us nothing. How can we take a message like yours and sustain it beyond the bounds of the runway, so it echoes through both the industry and wider world for more than just a moment, so it's given the chance to actually and effectively bring about change?

KJR: Well, that's what we're working on. I think what we've been good at is introducing multimedia into this space. We use a lot of short films and documentaries, and, as we expand, we're moving into exhibitions and books and things that are a little bit more sustainable so that the message we deliver in these runway shows echoes and reverberates for years to come versus just being a figment of someone's memory. We don't consider ourselves necessarily just a clothing brand. We're more of an art project than anything.

EP: Okay. Yeah, absolutely. So, I'd love to know why you chose to start making couture, especially because Gaultier stopped producing it based on couture being a more or less unviable project financially for them. It reminds us this is the part of fashion that is, sometimes, for our indulgence. Can you speak more about why, despite the challenges, you chose to start making it?

KJR: The opportunity came to us, and when it did, I thought the same thing. But I used the platform to educate and show that we're just opening the door. When I went to Reebok as the creative director, that hadn't been done before. It was just another door opened. I wanted to show people who didn't know what couture was what it is and put them on to it, but then also make the barrier of entry low and understand that this is going to be my avenue to give you my high-level ideas and some of my passion projects without having to mix that in with my normal runways and pollute it with things you can't buy.

EP: In line with that, political fashion is something of a catch-22, because you want to represent and advocate for what you believe in, but you also want people to appreciate the clothing. How do you keep successfully combining both elements over and over again? Is one more important to you than the other?

KJR: It's a crazy balancing act, but we have been perfecting the formula. As I grow, I become less and less literal and figure out how to weave these messages in. They're less political and more so a representation

of my thoughts. So, if I was the sort of person who only cared about rock and roll or rap music or whatever, my collections might look like that. If I was a person who just cared about florals, my collection would look like that. But I'm a person who cares about people and about the world and the state of it, and self-preservation for people who have been oppressed. So, that's what shows up in my work.

What I've seen, though, is we and other brands who are altruistic get a lot of press for the things that we do. And then you get these other designers who may not fully understand the space or what they want or who just want to come in and use the opportunity for notoriety because they're facing financial pressures or whatever the case is. But I'd caution them to really think about what's authentic to themselves and not try to be specifically political, but instead just try to be specifically human and it'll come out a lot more authentically. There's no need to try to be reactionary to every piece of news if it doesn't correlate to who you are as a person in the community you represent.

EP: In your childhood, your godsister's husband – and fashion inspiration – was a FUBU fan, but you looked for "anything made in Italy". Your brand is proudly African American, displayed by the wonderful tent from your show (look 13). From seeking Italian clothes as a child to putting American garments on the runway, how has the way you relate to Europe changed over time?

KJR: I think what I always appreciated was the style of urban brands, and I've always represented those that were coming up from and being born out of hip-hop culture. However, I also appreciate the craftsmanship and the quality of Italy. My reverse responsibility with Pyer Moss is to in-source that quality. One of the things that we've been doing very well in the past seven to eight months is getting that quality out of domestic factory partners in New York and LA – it just requires more fine-tuning.

At the same time, we're working with Portugal and Italy on bags and shoes specifically because that equipment is readily available there and there's a lot more experience there. But there's no bias per se for Italian versus American or Portuguese or Peruvian manufacturing. It's just a matter of where we're going to be able to get reliable quality every time. I think it's a bit like growing pains, as we learn what factories do what, and which regions do certain things better than others.

EP: You have always been inventive with material – from exhibiting a waterproof wool bodysuit and a flotation device made from recycled bicycle inner tubes at MoMA's *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* to sensitively designed coats that protect wearers well from their environment. I would love to talk about your thoughts on the future of textiles. What are you working on?

KJR: Primarily, when I'm dealing with textiles, I'm looking at things that fit within the story. The piece that you referred to was a sculpture I did for the MoMA made from bicycle inner tubes. What that was supposed to represent was rising water levels, specifically in places that are fashion capitals and are facing really grim climate futures. What I wanted to represent in that work is what will inevitably happen if we continue to consume, manufacture, and pollute at our current rate and not offset it. So that's how those things would be conceived. Even in the collection, a lot of times, if I'm using Kevlar it's representing gun violence. It's part of the storytelling. But I'm still considering sustainability and I think what needs to happen is we need to reduce our use of water and source things more local to distribution so that the waste from transportation is less. As it pertains specifically to the materials though, I like to explore things that are made out of composted materials, upcycled, or biodegradable, but also maintain a luxury quality. So, we've moved away from synthetic fabrics and things that are harmful to the environment such as plastic. It's a constant learning experience because every time we go to these fabric shows there are always new, insane innovations. I think the future of textiles, ultimately, is going to become more and more responsible.

EP: I hope that we see that because I agree with how important it is. So what changes do you think we're going to see in the rules that used to make or break you as a designer?

KJR: There are no more rules. That's really what we did. When I say we, I mean the last generation of the past ten years, all these designers you've seen just coming up and completely shaking shit up and disrupting everything: from Virgil Abloh at Louis Vuitton, to Matthew Williamson at Givenchy, to Heron Preston and Willy Chavarria at Calvin Klein, to Jerry Lorenzo and Kanye at adidas, and Martine Rose working with Balenciaga. All these different, non-traditional players coming in from mixed-media backgrounds and completely fucking things up. If you look at it, the it-bag of the past twenty years is the Telfar bag – and it's not even leather. There's just so much disruption happening, and with the way that marketing is happening there are just no more rules. Telfar just launched a TV channel – that shit is incredible to me. The audacity of just saying, look, if you want to get the news about our stuff, you better come to our channel. There's going to be no linear approach to brand building, and I think the brands that are taking the biggest risk face the biggest rewards.

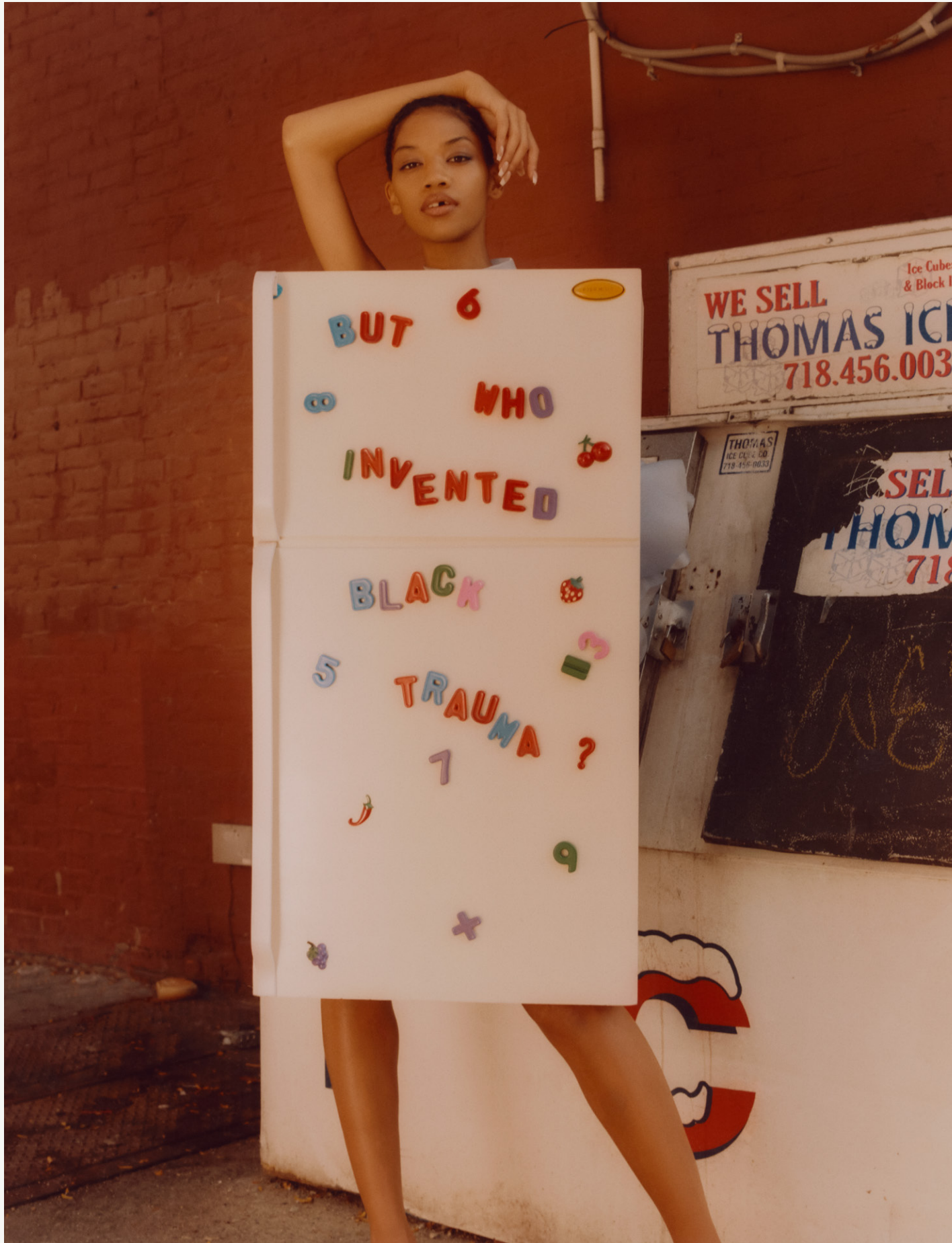
EP: There is a sense of maternal guidance attached to the Pyer Moss brand identity. After all, your mother, Vania Moss-Pierre is the brand's namesake, and your film *Seven Mothers* goes into detail on your experience.





*Air Conditioning Unit - Marigold silk chiffon pleated skinny strap bustier gown, the bodice is pleated with open cage back grosgrain ribbon trim.  
Opposite page: Curtain Rod - Evergreen silk/cotton damask curtain rod beadpiece with fringe and ASL finials P&M. Halter neck tie  
back cropped top with matching pin-tucked straight-leg trousers.*





How do the women who have been in your life relate to your design process?

KJR: Sometimes good. Sometimes really bad. But I think, overall, the brand is built in a way that intentionally includes women. Most of the people behind the scenes that have been doing this stuff with me for years are Black and Brown women who've had their own ideas and want the clothes to fit them a certain way. Even the person who helped me build the brand is a Black woman. Now, we're finally launching women's clothing in the coming months; that's all being done by a team of women that have overall direction from me, but then they're developing it in their own image.

EP: I'm really excited to see all the work you've got coming out soon. Some of the garments we can see in the collection relate to happy childhood memories: ice cream with sprinkles as a treat, the old-school phone your dad carried, etc. What memories do you have of your childhood?

KJR: My dad used to buy ice cream for everybody – all my friends. That was his little flex. You would come out and get seven bucks, and all the kids would get like fourteen ice cream sandwiches. And, man, the next day I would go to school and everybody wanted to be nice to me because they knew my dad was going to buy them ice cream. Also, my father is a technician, so he was always fixing consumer products and all these broken things around the house. We always had broken electronics around the house because he was a bit of a hoarder too. There was one of those big 1980s cellphones, and I used to walk around the house pretending I was on the phone with it. So, when we were choosing how to represent these inventions, I wanted to focus on that time period – growing up in my household from around 1991 to 1996. So that's why all those things, even the black leather sandals, are the ones that my dad wears. He always had his pinky-toe sticking out. So, we were going to make the pinkie toe but it looked a little gross. The mop thing came out gross too, but we wanted this gross little 'rug ratsy' feel – the toe thing was really nasty though, so we just scrapped it. But when we were developing the couture collection, everybody kept on submitting designs, shoes that look like our shoes, and I was like, no, no, no. This has to look like my childhood. So, we were very specific to that era.

EP: Were you always interested in fashion?

KJR: No. I was always interested in sneakers. I wanted to be a sneaker designer.

EP: Okay. So, how did that come about, going from sneakers into fashion? I ask this because I want to know if more than anything, you saw fashion as a vehicle for your other interests like art and music.

KJR: I went into the High School of Fashion Industries at age 13, and they had a shoe design programme I was super excited about. But by the time I got into the school, Giuliani had these budget cuts and cut the programme. I ended up being defaulted into a garment construction one that I hated because they had us doing little baby dresses and rompers and stuff like that. But my niece was born at the same time, and I remember making her a romper, and the satisfaction of a person wearing something I had made was a high that I've been trying to replicate ever since. I think that's what drew me to it.

Then I got my first job and my first internship around the same time. I was working at a sneaker store out in Brooklyn called Ragamuffin, and at the same time I was interning at Kay Unger in New York. I was around 14 by then. Later on, I helped start Marchesa with Keren Craig and Georgina Chapman, and I just started to embrace it more. It wasn't until very recently with the Reebok deal that I started to make sneakers of my own. I just took the long way home to get back to footwear.

EP: It must be really nice to finally be doing that. And why is hybrid style that works across genres, scenes, and communities the most exciting?

KJR: It's when you get to see a culmination of who everybody is, right? I think these hybrid models are working with people the same way MySpace did. MySpace was amazing because you could go into a page and see what kind of music or images that person was into. You could write a blog, and you got to see who the Top 8 were. I approach fashion with that same sort of MySpace mentality where it's this culmination of all my ideas. And it's exciting for me to see other creatives that are able to do that as well.

EP: Finally, how do you see the future ahead of us? Are you an optimistic person? Because there are always those who say the best is yet to come, but how do you see the future?

KJR: You have to be optimistic, right? These are tough times, but there are ways to get through them. I've had my really emotional days and my I-can't-take-it-anymore days. No one alive in the past twenty-four months has been a stranger to those feelings – some people worse than others. Some people have experienced more loss than others, more tragedy than others. But I think, as a people right now, what we're experiencing is collective sadness. We're losing a lot of people; millions of people have died across the world. Many things have changed and routines have been uprooted. The only thing that we can do is be kind to each other, watch what we say, stop being a fucking hater all the time, and get through this shit together. It's the only way to stay alive.



FEATURING LOUIS VUITTON AUTUMN / WINTER 2021-2022

Photography  
**Will and Joan**  
*Denise Agency*

Styling  
**Mirey Enverova**

Starring  
**Taishi Suzuki, Molibo Sow, Daniel Christian** *Rock Men Paris,*  
**Anis Ben Choug** *Elite Paris,* **Daynice**

Hair  
**Quentin Lafforgue**  
*ASG Paris*

Make up  
**Fanny Maurer**  
*ArtList Paris*





*From left to right: Molibo wears monogram mirror raincoat and wide leg denim trousers, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Daniel wears tartan suit and trousers with oversized buckle calfskin belt, all LOUIS VUITTON.*







*From left to right: Taisbi wears monogram quilted parka jacket, workwear trousers and Millenium trainers, all LOUIS VUITTON. Daniel wears pleated straight leg trousers and calfskin cowboy boots, all LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Taisbi wears pleated straight leg trousers LOUIS VUITTON.*



*From left to right: Anis wears green fur jumper LOUIS VUITTON. Taisbi wears monogram quilted parka jacket LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Daynice wears long line oversized denim jacket LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Molibo wears monogram quilted parka jacket and oversized striped shirt, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Workwear trousers and Millenium trainers, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page from left to right: Taisbi wears double-breasted jacket, oversized striped shirt, trousers, jacquard geometric blanket and LV Sprint sneaker, all from LOUIS VUITTON; Anis wears long line oversized denim jacket, wide leg denim trousers, oversized striped shirt and Millenium trainer, all LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Long line oversized denim jacket, wide leg denim trousers and Millenium trainer, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page from left to right: Molibo carries Keepall 55 travel bag with Lawrence Weiner logo  
and wears green fur jumper, all LOUIS VUITTON. Anis wears silver monogram felt parka, LOUIS VUITTON.*





*From left to right: Daniel wears monogram mirror raincoat and oversized striped shirt, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Molibo wears shell suit jacket and pleated straight leg trousers, all LOUIS VUITTON.*





*XL scarf and tartan suit jacket with oversized buckle calfskin belt, all LOUIS VUITTON.*



*Cabas Zippé tote bag with Lawrence Weiner logo LOUIS VUITTON.*





*From left to right: Molibo wears monogram quilted parka jacket, oversized striped shirt, workwear wide leg trousers and Millenium trainers, all LOUIS VUITTON. Taisbi wears shell suit jacket, pleated straight leg trousers and calfskin cowboy boots, all LOUIS VUITTON. Opposite page: Molibo wears green fur jumper, oversized striped shirt and Sideway sunglasses, all LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Taisbi wears monogram quilted parka jacket LOUIS VUITTON.*



*Daniel wears damier ribbed jumper, oversized striped shirt and bucket hat, all LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Taisbi wears shell suit, oversized striped shirt and Ciclone sunglasses, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page, from left to right: Molibo wears green fur jumper, workwear wide leg trousers and carries Keepall 55 travel bag,  
all LOUIS VUITTON. Anis wears silver monogram felt parka and oversized striped shirt, all LOUIS VUITTON.*



## Pauline Curnier Jardin

FEMALE MISCONDUCT TO UPSET  
THE SOCIAL ORDER

*Words by María Muñoz*

*Portrait by Palma Llopis*

Autumn is creeping up on us, our skin disappearing under layers of clothes and our worlds are shifting in colour. On a rainy day, I had the pleasure of talking to one of my favourite artists, Pauline Curnier Jardin. She is transgressive and joyfully mixes the tragic with the comic to create an astounding mass of images of excess and violence. The artist combines inspiration from history, religious and non-religious rituals, debauchery, operatic gestures, musical scores, and performance. Her cinematic language often adopts ancient mythical narratives, which she deconstructs and disrupts to generate desire and revulsion. Her focus is on the experiential and to bring knowledge from other times into the present; which, in turn, raises questions about feelings and ideas.





With a career spanning over twenty years, Pauline Curnier Jardin, born in 1980 (Marseille, France) divides her time between Berlin and Rome. Her layered practice moves across different media such as film, installation, performance and drawing. Through film, as an anthropological tool for research, she explores topics such as cosmology, the universe, society, capitalism, hyper-celebration, folklore, the allegory of the different, identity, polysemic characters, sexuality and cruelty, unutterable desires, perversions, martyrs and torture, and vernacular religion.

Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950), a homoerotic cult movie that depicts a prison full of horny young inmates, set in motion the approach for Curnier Jardin's movie, *Bled Out/Qu'un sang impur* – a disturbing film about killer grannies who regained the ability to menstruate, which made her win the German Preis der Nationalgalerie in 2019. The reappearance of bodily fluids signalled a sexual and murderous desire that results in them killing young men who crossed their paths. Through historical homages, double meanings, and feminist winks and nods, Curnier Jardin never shies away from making connections that serve her social explorations – in this case, the sexuality of mature women.

Prior to this, in 2016, Curnier Jardin filmed her chant d'amour to Mediterranean processions in honour of Saint Sebastian. *Explosion Ma Baby* is a sensorial typhoon of Dionysian excess. In a crowded procession, families bring newborns to the saint. This baroque, citywide celebration radiates a kind of Bacchic joy – both cathartic and liberating. During the Covid pandemic, Pauline was locked down in Rome, and she could not travel to her dear Easter processions. Thus, she made a video collage of Easter masses and processions found on Facebook. *Le Lente Passioni (Slow Passions)* presents two or three socially distanced people performing the usual religious rites and choreographies. Like the orgiastic grannies serving their post-menstrual prison sentences, these private worshipers have to seek ecstasy alone.

In 2021, she had her first solo institutional exhibitions, at Index Foundation in Stockholm, Sweden and at Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin, Germany. I met her at the latter, where she took me into her unique arena: a large-scale salmon pink amphitheater – which brings to mind both bread and the circus in ancient Rome – with a film installation as the centre of the spectacle. Reminiscent of her dear friend Ana Pinto's text *Brest is Best*, this work, titled *Fat to Asbes*, taps into what Sacher-Masoch called “the mysterious affinity between cruelty and lust” – the symbolism of amputation, bodily mortification, and the way early Christianity redefined the relationship between the body, the underworld, and social order. Meat, skin, wax, confetti, blood, intestines, smells, ritual, alcohol, excess, fat and ashes are some of the materials the artist shows here. Carnavalesque transformations, processions, and the violence of patriarchal rituals are its content and formal attributes. Our conversation revolves precisely around these and other malformations created by patriarchy.

María Muñoz: How does growing up in Marseille, a place of cultural crossroads and religious syncretism, permeate you as a person and, of course, as an artist?

Pauline Curnier Jardin: I think Marseille is the main source of my inspiration for a certain tone, a certain colour. If you know Marseille, you can easily recognise how much of it is in me. The city has a very special femininity – and masculinity too. It has a very special gender identity which is truly inspiring. And I am made up of that. If we talk about inspiration to create art, the artist is one part of myself, but this ‘myself’ is made by the city.

MM: What about the Mediterranean style? I think Mediterranean cities look alike.

PCJ: Yes. The Mediterranean, of course, is very present in me. It's true that every big Mediterranean city has this very Mediterranean specificity. In this sense, Marseille is a very superstitious place. It's very messy, chaotic, it smells, it stinks, it's kind of vulgar, it's excessive... But also, it's a very popular city – it is a poor city, just to be clear! Nevertheless, I must say that I have been super inspired by Marseillaise women.

MM: Moreover, it's a mestizo place: Europeans, Maghrebis, people from the Sub-Sahara...

PCJ: I would say that it's a very Algerian city, it's amazing. Did you know that some Africans name Marseille the most north-east African city? And to be honest, it's true. The thing is that I wasn't even aware of this diversity until I moved somewhere else in the north [of France] where there were no Africans, at least not as many as in Marseille. The place is very peculiar, it has a kind of unique cosmology. The mixture is great, it's cosmopolitan, very mixed, and that crazy combination makes it extraordinary. Marseille is very Catholic but very Muslim at the same time. This syncretism is similar to what you would notice, I guess, if you go to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. Actually, when I was in Beirut, I kind of felt like I was at home.

MM: Last year I was in Marseille during Manifesta, the nomadic biennial. It was hard as it was the first summer during Covid and everything was very uncertain, even more than now. Leaving aside the strange situation, I thought that we don't have this kind of integration in our cities in Spain despite being one of the closest points to North Africa. I believe in Spain, immigrant communities are much more separated. I noticed this kind of cohabiting integration in Palermo (Sicily) as well – they even have a procession dedicated to a saint where different religions parade together.

PCJ: Yes, probably the story of this integration must have been horrible, but somehow now there is cohabitation. The north of the city is the poorest and maybe the most isolated, but connections are better now. Public transport

has been always an issue in Marseille. For example, not long ago, there were not many ways to go to Les Calanques, a very beautiful natural marine landscape. Nowadays there are two underground lines that connect the north of the city with the sea. Leftist politicians who were in charge in the city council built those lines. That mayor was one of the most corrupt we ever had, he was even connected with the drug mafia. But he had this idea of building up underground lines from the north to take all the population – mostly consisting of Algerians and Moroccans – to the city beaches. He also built two kilometres of beaches in the city centre saying that every Marseillaise needs to go to the beach. The beach is for everybody, not only for the tourists. And I think that is awesome. The idea, the concept behind it, is that many people living in those areas never get to see the sea. I think it was a nice gesture.

MM: You are a fan of processions and rituals. Can you tell us about Marseille and its ritualistic forms? How much of it is theatre and how much is ritual?

PCJ: Well, I want to say something else about Marseille that maybe answers this question. The city is like a big theatre, and of course people are very theatrical. They comment on everything, sometimes to make friends, sometimes to tease you. Now and again, it is really annoying, but some other times is beautiful. You find people just laughing, enjoying life. Fantastic humans comment on each other. If you wear a hat, they would say, “Ha! You are wearing a hat!” One can find this kind of behaviour in the writings of Marcel Pagnol, the novelist of Marseille. When you read his books, you understand the whole thing about being annoying and being great at the same time, just like the Marseillaise.

MM: I like happy people, people that smile, it makes my day easier. I wonder if the role of women in the south of France is like in southern Spain, where I am from, or even southern Italy – which is very similar to Spain.

PCJ: When you grow up in Marseille, being a prepubescent woman is hell, meaning that you have to go through the hell of constant comments. At this point I need to talk about the harbour, open to the sea and welcoming everyone. Like the city, it's a gigantic theatre that includes prostitutes, sailors, immigrants and generally poor people as actors. It has this sort of mythology, an extraordinary cosmology for misery and trouble. The seaport, like every seaport, is a point for exchange and trade. Needless to say, the themes I am treating in my work such as sex work, a certain type of femininity, or to be over-feminine come from here. A lot of women are dressed like sex workers, but they aren't. At the same time, they know how to reply to men when they are bothered as confidently as a sex worker, with the same impudence and arrogance as a sex worker. So, this is how the women of Marseille are, and that was my model (laughs).

MM: I see, that is why your pieces are so worldly and theatrical...

PCJ: Yes, a theatre of the world!

MM: Speaking of womanhood, I came to see your piece about menopausal women, *Bled out/Qu'un sang impur* around three times. It left me speechless. It was so different, so empowering, it really has stuck in my mind, making me wonder about maturity, sexual desire, femininity and reproduction. Where does your interest in menopausal women come from?

PCJ: It comes from different places. Even though I'm still young, I always wanted to be a granny. I've been looking forward to being an old lady since I was a child.

MM: Really?

PCJ: Of course! I think all women are fantastic.

MM: Aren't you afraid of growing old?

PCJ: Je ne sais pas. Maybe I don't see the reality. On the other hand, to answer your question, yes, I'm scared of not being physically able to do things. I'm worried about the degeneration of my body in the physical sense. Now I'm 41 years old, and I have never felt really bad, even after having two children. I'm quite amazed by grannies, by the figure of the grandmother, and of course by my two grandmothers, especially one of them. My grandmother was a huge influence on me. She had a remarkable way of telling a story. She'd sit in front of the TV and tell stories. She collected horror movies on VHS and taxidermized animals. She was into lingerie coquaine. Not for herself, yet she would buy the most outrageously sexy underwear for my cousins, dressing them like dolls. In addition, she had a strong sense of femininity and enjoyed it even when she was very old. Having someone like that gives you a lot of strength and somehow a trajectory for the future that's hopeful. I carry her with me in my personal style. She was very inspiring.

MM: I can imagine that!

PCJ: Perhaps when my grandfather died, she discovered that sort of sensuality through her female grandchildren.

MM: So, this is why your piece *Bled Out* focuses on menopausal women and their sexual empowerment? And the bleeding! In my research I did not find anyone who dealt with old women's sexuality in this way...

PCJ: For me, blood has another meaning. It's related to our period and the reason why we bleed periodically. Once you get the blood between your legs, it isn't a sign of death, pain, or wounds anymore. It's a sign of life, of a cycle that has the potential of reproduction. And for the ones who have the chance, or luck, it is a choice. Think of





*Solo Pour Genevieve, 2018, mixed media Installation.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
Photo: Marc Damage.*



*Qu'un sang impur, 2019, Courtesy of the artist  
and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
Photo: Luca Girardini.*



*Fat to Ashes, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
Photo: Mathias Völske.*

*Fat to Ashes, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
Photo: Mathias Völske.*



*Fat to Ashes (still), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.*

*Fat to Ashes (still), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.*



*Qu'un Sang Impur, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Photo: William Minke.*



all the blood that's lost during our periods. I had this image of every woman in the world bleeding together, young and old. It's scary but pretty funny at the same time. Like a splatter movie once a month. It makes us quite powerful as women.

There's something intriguing about seeing an older woman bleeding between her legs. And I was always thinking how fun it would be to use this blood that is connected to life – since new lives are created through reproduction – as a substance to kill men. This is what happens in the film. It's a funny horror-film trick.

MM: (Laughs.) The revenge of the grannies for being taken apart. Because it seems that when we, women, pass the reproductive stage and our bodies wither away, we are no longer useful in the heteropatriarchal capitalist society. Did you once say that menopause is the last niche where capitalism cannot enter?

PCJ: I must clarify I'm not revolutionising anything as I'm very much inspired by French-turned-Barcelonian author Virginie Despentes when she says that she's writing for the ugly, for the old – basically, for the women that are out of the market. Well, out of the male market. If you are not heterosexual maybe it's another story.

I pretty much like this idea of old women being out of the reproduction system, out of the sex trade, and definitely out of the capitalist market. I always thought that it would be amazing to be out of the sex trade and simply stop being a sexual object. Because when you are young it's very hard to find yourself outside of this sexual gaze. When I was a child, I kept thinking that I'll have to wait until I become an old woman; for me it was the only way. Nowadays things have changed a bit, and I've found other ways. Thus, yes, maybe the menopause is the last niche where capitalism cannot go. Maybe it's some kind of haven from it. But, to be honest, I don't know enough about the real experience of it.

MM: Of course, you still have a decade ahead of you. In any case, we women have all these misconceptions – probably established by men too – about menopause: we have to take hormones to feel good or happy, we become weak, sexual desire goes away, etc. It's actually treated as an illness.

PCJ: Yes! And you have to do more sports and so on. Maybe it's true, but at some point your body will collapse anyway. I mean, you can always take medication, but that's your choice.

MM: And what about the sexual desires of mature women, which you deal with in your work as well?

PCJ: There's a huge misconception around sexuality and menopausal women. Sexually active women are much more open and freer after their forties. I started to interview a lot of women, close friends, even my mother. And I basically discovered that they all had much more

fun sexually after the menopause. I can completely picture that. They told me their sex lives had gone into overdrive after 50. Then I thought, wow! If they have that, why is there so much mystery amongst them? And you know what, this is exactly what the film is showing. A bunch of mature women enjoying their sexual desire. The norm imagines that we, as grandmothers, spend our time making cakes for the kids, not having much to do except sitting on a bench chatting with our friends, like a retired person. But the fact is that we have much more fun in bed!

MM: So, it seems that going through the menopause is like having a fire burning within you. Thinking about the time of witches, holding rituals on the beach... There's no doubt these women were menopausal.

PCJ: I think there's a lot of female strength that needs to be explored. I had this intuition that menopausal women have these dark superpowers! Imagine a menopausal horror movie. Older women going on killing sprees, seeking vengeance for young women who have been harassed. And I had another thought. If middle-aged men get viagra, why isn't there a super libido enhancer for middle-aged women on the market? Imagine every menopausal woman in the world on fire and on the hunt for sex.

MM: That would be amazing! Maybe we don't need viagra, it's just a matter of not hiding our desire. So, let's break this taboo and start supporting each other and ourselves against that false idea sponsored by the male gaze. And, talking about solidarity, there is a lot of talk about sorority. Do you think that women attack and discredit each other more than men?

PCJ: I think sometimes it's true, we are very critical amongst ourselves. But, on the other hand, there is a whole profitable industry around it. There are some very popular American TV series picturing women bitching at each other and gossiping. It's apparently the only thing that women can do together, especially middle-class American women. I must say that, in general, French women are in fact horrible between themselves, really! They are not supportive at all. Although I think it's changing. I don't know if I would call it sorority, but I feel there is a sort of awareness. Plus, I am thinking of our grandmothers, feminist thinkers and activists. There is an awareness from the new generations about what they have done, about causes they want to respect and support.

MM: No doubt about that! In fact, I don't know if this is, again, a strategy structured by white male patriarchy. New generations are more liberated and probably able to break these rules.

PCJ: Of course, it is a strategy, but more than from men, it's a strategy that comes from the capital. If you keep women away from thinking, you keep them powerless. For capital, women should just be at home and reproduce. Yet, at some point, they are going to get very frustrated

about their condition. They are going to look at each other to see if one is happier than the other. This is not a happy life: having no choice to do anything else is not happiness but resignation. Then again, as Virginie Despentes would say, it's like being an unpaid whore, and this is horrible. You are a sex worker in your own home. Of course, it will bring a lot of frustrations!

When I look back at the generation of my grandmother, I see there was a lot of frustration. At that time, I believe there weren't many women who wanted to have children. But probably, anyhow, after the war, having a child was the only way to subsist. A gesture of surviving, because after horror, it's a very organic and natural way to keep afloat. However, at those times, children, especially babies, were not regarded as persons. It's very new that we consider babies human beings. For instance, nowadays, when a baby is crying, we know that they are in pain, or something is wrong. Before, at the time of my grandmother, they put them in a separate room and lock them away because there was the general idea that children often make drama and must learn to behave. Imagine the tension between a woman totally frustrated at home, and then this idea that when the kid is crying you have to let them cry and put them away. What a situation! Definitely we are better off now.

MM: Right, it's getting better, especially here in the north, fathers and the male figure have a much greater participation in the parenting process. They have long paternity leaves and sometimes they stay at home while the mother works outside. I can tell you in Spain it is not like this, at least not among the people I know. And the government policy is light years away from co-parenting.

PCJ: This is a territory I never approached in Spain, even though I have several connections to your country. Did you know that I was supposed to be a flamenco dancer?

MM: How come?

PCJ: Yes, I studied flamenco for eight years. I was the youngest flamenco student in France, I started at the age of ten. As a kid, when I was six, I travelled to Seville and I saw an old woman, a flamenco dancer. Watching that powerful woman – I reckon she was around sixty, seventy – entering on stage and rocking down the place, I thought, yeah, that is what I want to be. I believe that southern Spanish women, maybe not all of them, are very special.

MM: For sure we are (laughs), especially flamenco dancers – they are deep and energetic. Moreover, matriarchy is very important there. In the axis of family management – taking into account that families are the smallest sociological organisation – southern women have a big role. The only problem is that it's not socially recognised; needless to say, they aren't paid. Still, almost 25 years into the 21st century, when I'm in the south, I see families with three, four kids, where the man says, “My wife never needed to work.” And I think to myself, what

the fuck? Taking care of the house, the husband and three or four kids is a full-time job! More than that, it's a 24/7 job.

PCJ: I know! I also know that when they [men] come back from work, they have a drink at the bar (laughs).

MM: True! Well, this is changing, women go to bars too. But let's move to professional factions. Do you think it is needed to specifically highlight female artists? Or, is gender not important, as opposed to the quality of the work or the artist's talent?

PCJ: I don't know, to be honest. I never look at myself thinking whether I am important enough to be featured in a show. I am mostly concentrated on my work.

MM: Yes, but I am talking about the feminine view. Female artists have another discourse, a different sensitivity – the latter applies to any job, including politics.

PCJ: Of course, if I can open opportunities for other women, I will do it.

MM: For instance, if you were offered to curate an exhibition, would you try to put more women in the line-up?

PCJ: I don't know, this is too speculative. I think if the artwork is good, I would select male artists as well. In my case, of course, the fact that I am taking a lot of space in this exhibition, *Fat to Ashes*, at Hamburger Bahnhof, it is sort of a statement. But there were already a lot of women artists taking a lot of space up before me. I am just continuing on that path. To be honest, if my work is opening possibilities to other women, it's great! It's an honour to empower them. Even more, it's amazing, but I hope it will go further and empower everyone, not only women.

MM: I agree. Empowerment is a big part of your work. I believe that it has a very specific positioning and that it could be very inspiring for new young female artists, not only thematically but as a new road to explore. I'm not young, but it did have a big effect on me. Are you aware of this?

PCJ: I understand, yes, but I hardly see it... At the end of the day, I am alone in my studio. I live in my own world, I'm not living surrounded by people giving me that kind of feedback or telling me that my work had an important impression on them, a major effect on them. This does not happen to me!

MM: Well, you are still young, maybe in a few years you will see it.

PCJ: Of course, and I hope so. I will be very flattered.

MM: Nowadays, there is a tendency in the contemporary art scene that leans towards certain social issues, and I





*Qu'un sang impur, 2019.*  
 Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
 Photo: Luca Girardini.



*Peaux de Dame (Lady Skin), 2018, mixed media installation.*  
 Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.  
 Photo: Anna Reutinger.



*Peaux de Dame (Lady Skin), 2018, mixed media installation.* Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Photo: Anna Reutinger.



*Qu'un sang impur, 2019.* Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Photo: Luca Girardini.



*Solo Pour Genevieve, 2018, mixed media Installation.* Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Photo: Marc Domage.



*Fat to Ashes, 2021.* Courtesy of the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam. Photo: Mathias Völske.



have the impression that they are taken just as a trend. For example, feminism, gender fluidity, queer philosophies, inclusive practices. I would say that 99% of male artists declare themselves as feminist, and they even go further and appropriate the discourse. Does it bother you that male artists appropriate women's narratives?

PCJ: To be honest, yes! Even more, in recent times, there are a lot of people declaring themselves queer. To represent women is going to be a bit difficult if you are a man. At the same time, I do think it's great to have men on our side, that's for sure. Nonetheless, I understand that there's a need for non-mixed environments. For instance, Black feminists want to stay between Black women. It's completely understandable, and for me it's kind of obvious as some groups are more vulnerable than others and not all have the same problems. As a consequence, this applies to activists too. For me it is fine if they act separated. In any case, I want to remark that it's great to work with men who understand us. It's so annoying to work with men who are embarrassed by feminine questions, who are frustrated, or those who are avoiding us in a very blatant way. For me, it is key to work engaged in exchange and to live with men who empathise with us and who are on our side. And finally, about declaring oneself as something, I find it highly problematic, but this is very personal. I think language has a lot of potential, but at the same time, it is very political. In my case, I hope my work is regarded as feminist, but also anti-liberal and somehow epic. There are a lot of adjectives that I am not able to use because English is not my language. Again and again, defining oneself is tricky.

MM: I understand, you don't want to be placed into a box.

PCJ: Exactly. Because I'm not putting anyone in boxes either, or at least I try not to. And it's something I'm avoiding in my work all the time. As the work you can see here, *Fat to Ashes*, there is nothing moralistic in it. Even from a so-called feminist point of view, what I am trying to say is that things are very complex: indeed, patriarchy is very violent, it's killing and making bodies suffer. But at the same time, it has created a special gaze, a sort of pleasure, a sort of complexity. Patriarchy has created the whole culture in which we are living in and with which we are dealing. Then, yes, I am trying hard to build up a kind of liminal, opaque cosmology. Once you can define it, it is immediately finding its opposite, because paradox is the only thing that can be offered.

MM: That is very poetic. Life is indeed a paradox. Would you like to talk a bit about *Fat to Ashes*, about this large-scale amphitheatre and the film?

PCJ: I want to emphasise that all the images mixed in the film are taking place in Europe, north and south. I want to remark as well that the piece is not about religion but about traditions. The amphitheatre in the installation is a gesture to the Roman culture. The Romans were a very

brutal and violent civilisation, and they were the model of the first fascists. They were the first massive killing machine, reporting torture and making it visible. They colonised more than half of Europe, took over some places in Africa and in the Middle East. Yet this is our culture, and we keep being fascinated by them. I understand that we still admire its cultural universe – architecture, sculpture or philosophy. But the sad fact is that we are similarly fascinated by the real first fascists. And I find amazing the way the collective subconscious works, forgetting the evil part just because we always think we are angels, or we want to appear like angels. But we aren't. And anyway, it's so fucking boring to be an angel, right? Why do we always present ourselves without the dirty part?

MM: It's sad, but I guess it is part of our belief system, the system they built for us. And breaking these kinds of paradigms is very difficult. We find opposition even between ourselves, often labelled as the ones wanting to destroy our own cultural heritage. Nationalism or patriotism come from there.

PCJ: Of course. And the thing is that our system will lose efficiency if we start seeing our dirty mind all the time. One could not continue killing and extorting if one had already recognised how dirty we are. So, this is just how Western humans are.

MM: Going back to *Fat to Ashes*, the work features the Saint Agatha festival in Catania, the Cologne carnival and a pig slaughter. How do you bring these themes together and how do you transform them into a creative process?

PCJ: I was working on this project for seven years, collecting a lot of filming, a lot of processions. Mainly in the south of Italy as the first location, but in addition I started investigating other places. I filmed the Cologne carnival and I had wanted for a long time to film the slaughter of a pig. The project should have continued, and I should have filmed more than twelve different rituals and processions, but with the pandemic everything stopped. Very quickly, I knew that there was already something. These three films are very different indeed, so I decided to mix them.

The idea was to build a triangle establishing these three different angles or themes that will come together in the editing process. The movie is about cut-with-cuts. The film is showing a lot of cuts: the cut of the pig, the cut of the breast, the cut of the laughing face in the carnival. And yes, it's as technical as it is conceptual. I felt very comfortable immediately, meaning that I was conscious that there were enough formal connections between the three of them. Between the pig's and the woman's cut, then guys dressed as cops, police, or military, the Blackface, and the native costume in the carnival. I had there already everything I wanted to say. Then it was just a matter of finding the reason to get people inside this

nightmarish crowd, this sort of physical and emotional turmoil. The video is criticising the facts but showing the pleasure we see in it too.

MM: Old Europe has a very cruel history – 2000 years of exploiting, conquering, generating wars, taking the resources from others and constantly assassinating directly or indirectly. Talking about murder and death, in the beginning of your career, you did works about martyred women and their sacrifices. And you took on how history, especially Catholicism, represents women: always suffering, being abused and punished, like for instance Joan of Arc.

PCJ: I took mainly historical female characters who came, in the case of Joan of Arc or Bernadette Soubirous, from extremely miserable families. At that time, when not coming from a rich family or from nobility or aristocracy, the only way to exist as a woman, even as a hero, was to be ascetic. In the case of Joan of Arc, and in the case of Bernadette Soubirous too, that meant that being connected to God, being ascetic, they were immediately taken by the political power, thus they became political objects. When they were not efficient as political objects anymore, they were considered witches and ended up being burnt. Joan was my first big work and the subject of my thesis. Before the feminist revolution, to be recognised by society as a woman, you had to be mutilated, abused, or else you had a story that always ended badly.

MM: The mystics and the witches!

PCJ: Witches are often in my work.

MM: Coming back to turmoil. Which of the contemporary dystopias concern you the most: climate change, ecology, sexism, racism, the global emergence of fascism...?

PCJ: If there is one thing we should fight first, it is racism. I don't know how to reply to your question because they are all terrible, however, I strongly believe that the worst thing is racism. I don't understand why people are protesting against the vaccine and so on, but it's certain, everybody should protest against racism.

MM: To finish, I would like to do a quick personal questionnaire – I have called it *Trap*. I would like you to answer with one word. Individualist or collectivist?

PCJ: Hum, tricky... Collectivist.

MM: Left or right?

PCJ: Left.

MM: Revolution or consensus?

PCJ: Revolution, always.

MM: Irreverence or plebeianism?

PCJ: Irreverence.

MM: Subverting, transgressing or outright breaking?

PCJ: Transgression.

MM: Mainstream or underground?

PCJ: Mainstream and overground.

MM: Culture of spectacle or counterculture?

PCJ: Both. Thinking cinema-wise, I would say both. I love commercial movies but likewise I am very much inspired by primitive and experimental films.

MM: Finally, as I can see that you've been a very determined person since you were a child, do you believe in the ultimate project that can absolutely define you? What would it be?

PCJ: I really want to make a film for the cinema.

MM: Do you mean a feature film? One that everybody can see in a cinema instead of a museum or gallery?

PCJ: Yes. When I was a child I saw *La Nuit Américaine* (in English, *Day for Night*) by François Truffaut. I was seven then, and I just said to my mum, I want to be the guy saying what everybody has to do, the one who's making the film.

MM: Actually, this is one of my favourite movies too! But, wait a second, I thought you wanted to be a flamenco dancer.

PCJ: (Laughs.) Well, I'm 41 and I can't drive, but eventually I will make a film.

MM: So, you are going to do a film inside a taxi?

PCJ: *Taxi Driver* is another of my favourite movies. Movies inside taxis are great, like Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* – especially the Paris piece, which is about racism but in a very twisted way.



# Luis De Javier



OKAY, BITCH, WHO REALLY ARE YOU?

*Words*

*ELLIE CONNOR-PHILLIPS*

After becoming known for creating work that captured the spirit of the queer underground rave scene, with cinched waists and G-strings, Luis De Javier is levelling up. With his sights set on the Hollywood Hills and a significant number of celebrity clientele already supporting, De Javier is expanding his practice, reconnecting with his Spanish roots and consistently honouring the queer community that has been his constant source of inspiration. Fashion’s sassy, exuberant, underground prodigy is growing up – without losing a hint of his “don’t fuck with me” attitude.

ALL WARDROBE BY LUIS DE JAVIER SPRING/SUMMER 2022 COLLECTION, BOOTS NATACHA MARRO.



Photography  
**Jack Bridgland**

Styling  
**Lisa Jarvis**

Production  
**Dais Agency, Hattie Jackson**

Hair  
**Ross Kwan**

Makeup  
**Sophia Sinot**

Photographer Assistant  
**Aaron Crossman**

Stylist Assistant  
**Jadzia Scott**

Hair Assistant  
**Ryan Humpage**





Creating work at the intersection of queerness, fashion and clubbing, Luis De Javier is building a vision of the future with his point-shoulder, cinched-waist, sexily clad creatures which transcend boxes such as gender or sexuality. De Javier's latest collection simultaneously feels like the highest end of a catwalk presentation and the queue outside a particularly well-dressed warehouse rave. It's precisely the multipotentiality of his garments what creates such a genuine excitement in all who see them. The fur coats, for example, which curve up at the top into the horns of a bull, truly have the innovation and poignancy of early Alexander McQueen. Yet, somehow, these are pieces that I would, without a doubt, expect to see on some of the most creative dressers in the queer underground clubbing scene here in London. There is something truly special about De Javier's work, it seems to hint at the dawn of a new era in fashion – and many people have noticed it. Celebrity clientele includes Kim Kardashian, Willow Smith and Rihanna, to name just a few.

Ellie Connor-Phillips: You recently released a new body of work for Spring/Summer 2022, *The Reclamation*. Could you tell us a little bit about this collection?

Luis De Javier: There were a lot of changes. I had a concept that I wanted to do for a long time, but I really wanted to do a show, show, show for that concept. So that just kept changing and changing because of Covid. So, in the end, I was like, okay, what am I obsessed with? Vampire hookers! I always want to put out a political message with every body of work and represent myself and my community. I feel like it's something that is especially important when you're from the underground scene, as it's up to you to put your experiences out there and make people actually feel what you feel, as they may not experience it themselves. For example, what my friends and I experienced recently is how unsafe it has become during the night. How something that was so very important, and the part of the day where we felt most empowered, being Creatures of the Night, became the moment where suddenly we were just a target. So, I wanted to reclaim the night and reclaim that space. That was the main starting point, and from that we wanted to be really centering and empowering towards women, transgender people, non-binary people and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. That was essentially the main message that I wanted to portray, and I wanted it to be very sleek and also very rough. And to make sure that it had that "don't fuck with me" aesthetic, which is something that hopefully will be carried along with the brand DNA.

ECP: There are more elements of traditional womenswear in this collection, and despite it being genderless, there is a real sense of female power and liberation. What do women mean to you and your brand? Do you feel that your body of work both celebrates women and the female experience while including and being accessible to non-binary and transgender individuals?

LDJ: It was actually the first time doing it properly, because when I did my second collection, it was my first time doing womenswear. Women have always been pivotal in my life and I've always wanted to honour them, but when doing the second collection I realised that yes, I was honouring them in my head, but I could not make them feel empowered in a 3D printed corset where they couldn't move. So, I really wanted to dip into more wearable stuff that would make me proud to see on my girls, and that they'd be able to wear. And they'd be able to feel cunt. So that was the starting point. What I've always been very fearful of in womenswear when I studied fashion – and obviously I believe in no gender, no labels whatsoever – is this dart in the bust that always tells what gender the garment is for. Like, I'd find this fab little dress and it would have this dart in my tits that made me look saggy. I wanted to give everything the female visual starting point, then make sure that it would look good on any type of body - instead of doing darts and such. Instead, we tried making sure that we bent the boning right, finding new techniques so that it would look good both on a flat chest and on someone with double D's. That was really exciting because I also dipped into stretch fabric and even base layers, which I'd actually never done. And then, when the time to do the casting came, everything looked great on everyone and that's what I enjoyed the most – just taking the pieces to new places with their own momentum.

ECP: It's obviously amazing when your designs come out how you intended, but then to see your work become something else when worn on different people, the pieces looking different and great on all of them, it must feel incredible.

LDJ: It's amazing. I just want everyone to feel comfortable. I'm obsessed with bodies and I want to find other types of cuts that would give the body different shapes so that everyone can wear my work and feel empowered. I want there to be no boundaries in that sense. It took a long time to research everything. Now seeing it, it's like... Yes!

ECP: How does your Spanish upbringing affect and influence your designs? Are there any people,



places or traditions that really play a role in your inspirations? And how does this harmonise with your experiences living in London? How do you combine the energies of both your birthplace and current home?

LDJ: When I left Spain I was young and just hungry for so much more. I dreamt of a bigger city like New York or London and just wanted to leave Spain behind. But as soon as I got here and found my tribe, I started appreciating and connecting to my roots. Then, I was thinking, oh my god, I can't believe I've just left to look for something when I had everything that I'd ever wanted there. Especially, for example, incredible directors like Pedro Almodóvar and the Almodóvar girls in his films and everything they represent – they are very fiery and passionate, whether it's about love, violence, business, anything. That intensity is implemented in every single part of their life. When I moved to London everyone was so polite, and I became very polite and very British. Then I was like, wait, no, my fiery Spanish ass is telling me to have a healthy balance and find the space in-between those two identities. I feel like I've reached that point this year, after so much personal growth during lockdown, really sitting with myself and being, like... Okay, bitch: Who are you, really?

ECP: Do you have plans to work or live in Spain again in the future or are you staying in London for now? What do the two places mean for you and your work?

LDJ: I went back to Spain for two weeks after releasing this collection, I went to my mum's house and started researching the fall of the Franco dictatorship. How young people and the underground scene rebelled against it. Then all the amazing directors and films that came after that, which I seemed to forget when I first moved to London. I feel like it's really calling me. I want to support young, emerging Spanish talent. It's amazing, and it deserves to have a bit more exposure. There are some amazing creative kids that, wow. For the moment, though, I'm definitely going to stay in London. I'm not done with London at all. I've only been here for around two years, so I definitely feel like I've got a lot of stuff left to do. I want to move to another big city also to see another culture and meet other people because there's the same kind of tribe in each different country. There's like a base for that tribe and I want to try every base. Then retire in Spain, grow old and wear a wig every day.

ECP: Taking risks has been a part of many iconic designers' history. Do you think you would be where

you are now without having taken risks? Where did you get that courage and drive from?

LDJ: Not at all. For example, I did my debut in February 2020 in Fashion Week and it was all very quick – I had to do the collection in a month and a half. I was very young and very eager. Obviously, the collection wasn't smart in terms of me thinking of my career or thinking about my future or buyers. I was just like, look at me, I'm doing a show! But I feel like that's what brought me here – that way of doing things. I don't fucking care, I'm literally just doing what I want. At the end of the day, now, with a bit more knowledge, I'm trying to achieve the same kind of body of work but also having in mind everything that comes with it. At the end of the day, a girl has got to eat.

So, yes, I definitely feel like taking risks and just being very true to who you are and what you believe in is essential to being successful, especially when you come from a marginalised community or a part of society that is less understood. You just have to be 10 times louder in order for people to hear you and give you the time of day. You just have to make noise and then that's when people will start to pay attention, and that's when they might try to understand. I want to make people feel empowered, but I also want people to see what's going on in my head or in my community, what's happening to people I want to represent – not just, “Oh, that's cute. I'm going to pull it.”

ECP: There is so much innovation, bravery and risk-taking that happens within the queer community and queer nightlife, such as underground gigs and illegal raves, or the fact that they continue to exist when oppressed by law or threatened with violence. Queer venues being carved out as safe spaces also shows the resilience of LGBTQ+ people when faced with barriers. Is this something that you relate to, and did this perhaps fuel you or equip you for the way you navigate your way through the fashion industry or through your work?

LDJ: Definitely. Being queer, I've learnt to be aware that there are always going to be so many noes, there are going to be so many eye rolls and there are going to be so many people saying you're too much. There are going to be so many labels of that's so unnecessary. I feel that just having the experience of me putting on a miniskirt and going out in heels and encountering people who just weren't okay with that really prepared me for every single no that I've had in the fashion industry. It's like, okay, that's fine, I just have to stay true to myself. I don't want to sell my soul to the devil. Everyone's going to have an opinion, everyone's always had an opinion.

ECP: It's similar to the queer experience of not fitting in and then finding where you belong – if you push past those initial noes, or initial situations that didn't work out, it might lead to exactly the place you're supposed to be in.

LDJ: Yeah, exactly. When you encounter those noes, it's easier to push past them as you've been hearing them for a while. First of all, they don't hurt as much. Then, at the end of the day, they don't affect your work because, you know, it's just a no like every single other no you've had before, and those didn't stop you either.

ECP: I've heard you are really inspired by the history of LGBTQ+ nightlife and clubbing. I wonder if there were any specific people or nights that particularly influence you or give you the drive to create? For me, I love the imagery of Leigh Bowery's night Taboo, which began in 1985. Allegedly, he would create an entirely new and never-before-seen outfit for every event there! That sort of passion and innovation thrills me.

LDJ: I remember when I was 16 I started getting into Michael Alig and Limelight, the party in New York. I was just obsessed with the whole dark story of him eventually killing his friend. It was just so real. When you're so young, you just see the party, but obviously you don't really know about how dark and serious that lifestyle and scene can be. I was drawn to how human it was and how life really was for queer club kids. Yes, you're dressing up, but you're living a very intense lifestyle filled with substances and it can take a dark path. That's something that particularly inspired me, the darkness beneath the aesthetic and the story of how things can go wrong. The film was one of the first club kid things I saw when I was growing up, it's very dark.

ECP: It's like something you mentioned earlier – that you want your clothes to tell a story and say more than just being a cute look. Being so inspired by humanity, sometimes that story is a dark one, it's not always happy and positive – sometimes the most beautiful creations carry a lot of weight or darkness with them.

LDJ: Yeah, exactly.

ECP: How important is community to you and your work? So much of your work is inspired by your community of friends, the raves and club nights you attend together. What is it about your friends or a rave that you wish to capture in your clothes – is it the passion put into everyone's outfits, is it the sensation

you feel dancing with your peers? What is the feeling or sentiment you want to convey?

LDJ: It's the whole story – you start heading to the club and you feel like you're this sex symbol. Then you're on the dance floor and you feel like you're seeing God and about to die. The next thing you know, all your demons come to you and you're realising all these dark things about yourself and your subconscious. Then it's Monday and you have to go to work! I want to capture the whole journey of someone's life, playing dress up and being surrounded by people that are just living, having fun. I want to support every single thing they do and be there even when they're seeing God on the dance floor and also when they're about to go to work on Monday. The rise of the Phoenix. It's the beauty of the community – I've never felt so free until I moved to London and met my friends. Everyone is just like a little kid at the end of the day. Dressing up, having fun, having dreams and also hustling on the side, and it's just so beautiful. The sense of community is so prominent and it's actually something that inspired me ever since I began studying fashion.

ECP: How has collaborating with other people shaped your label and helped you realise your visions?

LDJ: I love collaborating. I was on the shoot yesterday and I thought, this is my vision. But it's time to make yours. I'm not really a lone wolf – I appreciate other people's artistry. I don't think I'm the best, I don't think I'm the master of fashion. I don't think I invented shoulder pads, you know? So, there's always so much to learn from everyone. I don't think that my way is the only way. Any way that takes you to something great, together, is the way.

ECP: As well as collaborating with people, I wonder how much you find yourself collaborating with technology to influence, inspire or produce your designs?

LDJ: The thing is, there's only so much you can do in terms of shape when it comes to pattern cutting and draping. So, when my best friend met his boyfriend at the time and he was a 3D renderer and 3D modeller, I was like, oh my god, look at all these crazy shapes that I can't do with pattern cutting! Like fucking horns coming out of tits, but actually looking like horns, not like (Luis mimics two floppy horns with his arms). So, I definitely feel like it does push you towards other ways of creating, because things come into our heads but then we have to actually make it real.







ECP: Does the encroaching presence of technology as a part of both design and production excite you?

LDJ: I love it. Our relationship with technology is an ongoing process and development, I think it should never stop. When I was studying – and, because of the lack of creative influence I had I was studying marketing – there was this whole case study about how, because 3D printers were now a thing, fashion was going go to hell – you would see a jacket or some shoes in a window display, take a picture then print them in your house. There was a lot of fear – but that wouldn’t even have been possible! Especially during this year of lockdowns, everyone just dove into technology like VR headsets, rendering and 3D-printed pieces. It was exciting to see everyone’s different approaches. I find technology amazing as there are no boundaries in terms of what is in your head compared to the final product at the end. I think it’s just going to develop even more, and we will develop in the ways we use it, until it’s utilised by everyone.

ECP: If your work is giving us a glimpse into the world of the club kids of the future, what can we expect from you going forward?

LDJ: I love that, but I also want to branch out in a way. I feel like I was a club kid. I’m ready for the 2.0 version, the Berghain-meets-Hollywood Hills. I’m very excited about ready-to-wear now. Before I just went va-va-voom with everything, the bigger the better, but this collection made me realise how seeing a garment that’s impossible to make and impossible to put on and visually insane didn’t bring me as much joy as when my girls were coming to the casting for this season and they could just put on this stuff and be like, oh, yes. I was like, okay, I’ve found my new love for fashion in ready-to-wear. So now I’m trying to find the meeting point between technology and that, because everything that I did with 3D rendering before was very visually appealing but impossible to wear. I’m excited to try out new materials. For example, I’ve started 3D printing with silicone and rubber instead of hard resin. So, I’m very excited to play around with that and keep the momentum of Luis, the club kid, two years ago wanting to bring the va-va-voom, but also, we’re going to the Hills.

I love the challenge. And I feel like it’s another challenge to create ready-to-wear whilst keeping the brand DNA and the message and delivering a product. Because I also want the people that inspired me to make these clothes to be able to buy them and wear them – that’s what brings me joy at the end of the day, actually dressing these people. So now it’s

about making sure that you can see the brand DNA in something that’s very easy and very wearable.

ECP: There is definitely a shift in a lot of people’s minds – you can keep your aesthetic and be part of a subculture while at the same time being comfortable and able to move. Maybe it’s getting older, or maybe it’s all the time we spent in loungewear during lockdown, but it can be incredibly innovative seeing people finding ways to create looks that are still visually incredible whilst being more comfortable and practical.

LDJ: Yeah, that’s how I want to see it because, when I started this whole journey, I was adamant I was never fucking going to do ready-to-wear. But it is a challenge, and much harder than it looks. It is amazing when you actually accomplish it. I remember I used to wear fruit packaging as looks – try to get some of that reliably to create stock with. It’s not happening. I think I’m maturing and also seeing the brand grow. Also, I’m realising that there’s a bigger market than just the one that I thought was mine. I thought it would only be for queer kids, I never thought a celebrity in LA would wear something of mine. So, I’m just broadening and broadening my work and making sure I can deliver something that everyone can feel comfortable in regardless of their background.

ECP: It’s good timing – it seems like the market is really into supporting up-and-coming designers nowadays and recognising the work that goes into their garments. They’re willing to pay a fair price for them. Lots of concept stores or online marketplaces selling designer goods are flourishing lately too. People seem to be enjoying the ride – supporting through sales helps them feel like they have, in some way, been a part of that journey.

LDJ: Exactly. I didn’t want to do ready-to-wear at first as it seemed easy or, at least, the obvious way to go. But when you think of it, making a one-off va-va-voom piece is a one-off thing you do by yourself, but ready-to-wear has so much preparation before the final piece, everything is so technical. As an independent designer, to sell in these concept stores, for example, you have to put so much work to make sure you have the stock for just that one store. It’s amazing, it prepares you for everything. It also gives people the opportunity to see how much work goes into working with buyers, sorting out stock and production. It’s like a little jump before the big jump. I think, as well, before COVID, designers had more chance of getting a huge deal or getting funding, whereas now you do have to make it on your own.

You don’t need a giant sponsorship, funding or a little fairy Godmother that shows up out of nowhere saying, take my money! I mean, if there is one, hello! It’s good to see a much more realistic and human approach now, that you can make it entirely off your own back.

ECP: Nothing exists in a vacuum, and I wonder how much recent events in the world have affected you and your practice. What is it like trying to be creative with so much environmental, political and social upheaval taking place?

LDJ: In the beginning, before the first show, it was very, very intense because I was doing a lot of media streaming with no money. The two months leading up to the show were crazy, and then afterwards I went to Paris and as soon as I got back, they locked everything down.

I was just in this mindset of, oh my god, I just literally put my health and my whole entire everything to shit, put all this money and time into this collection just for the virus to come. Everything was getting so heavy, but it actually pushed me to keep going because despite everything, I did manage to reach people with that collection, and that inspired me to continue working and putting out messages through my work. I gained a lot of awareness and I wanted to make sure every work had a lot of meaning and research behind it. I completely see also that some people might have not been able to create anything in a year or two, and that’s completely understandable. I’m guessing it just kind of pushed me, in a way, especially with the Black Lives Matter movement and all of the transgender deaths. Then, all of the women’s movements in Poland and Argentina. Those were the things I became more aware of that really pushed me to keep creating and trying to reach people.

In Spain, these issues weren’t really showcased to me so, being in London and seeing all of this first-hand and how my community is affected, just made me think about what could I do to take this situation and do something. But no one should ever feel bad because they haven’t been able to create anything that they’re proud of during these two years because if you’re still here, congrats. It’s been a wild ride.

ECP: You mentioned being very supportive of the trans community, and given the rise in transphobia in the UK recently, what inspires you to speak out on this issue?

LDJ: I just have such respect for the transgender community. Don’t fuck with them. I get so worked up, it’s something that needs to be highlighted

because shit just keeps happening and it shouldn’t. There are transgender people dying every day just because they’re trying to live their truth without hurting or damaging anyone. So, I feel like transphobia is one of the purest forms of how evil humans can be. I just want to give a voice to that community, make them feel comfortable, first of all, make them feel empowered and not make them feel uncomfortable at all at any single moment. Whether it’s through bust darts or a different way of creating a bodysuit, it’s just something that I always have in mind. I would love to have the funding to take it to the next level in that area, but at the minute I just try to do these little things, which hopefully, in the future, will bring much greater things with a much greater impact.

ECP: Do you feel fashion plays a role in the potential to rebuild our world? What sort of role do you think that could be?

LDJ: When fashion is not run by straight white men, that’s when the change will start. It all depends on where it’s coming from. Slowly, more independent designers and people that don’t have such an influence from the patriarchy will have a bigger voice and a bigger platform. Slowly it’s just going to get progressively better and that is going to have a positive influence on society. Then, as soon as people realise clothes are just clothes, and bodies are just bodies, that’s hopefully when it’s going to start getting a bit better.

ECP: If you could change or improve one thing about the fashion industry, what would it be and why?

LDJ: I think, seriously, fashion should not be so elitist, especially for studying and for marginalised communities. I’ve always tried to prioritise POC and LGBTQ+ people that apply to roles within my brand but I see the ratio in other brands or businesses and it’s just insane. Unfortunately, not everyone has the same opportunities, and in the fashion industry that is very prominent. As soon as people from marginalised communities or underrepresented backgrounds can access fashion courses or jobs, that’s when the change will start – because right now we have an influx of people who can afford an elitist lifestyle. The minute that changes it will kickstart everything else.

ECP: We see, annually, a lot of rainbow capitalism around pride month and performative activism from big corporations, brands and even the government, often just ticking boxes on their diversity quota or trying to seem like they’re supportive of the





LGBTQIA+ community. What do you think could be done better by these people to actually support queer designers and creatives, for example?

LDJ: People just need funding to be able to create, to be able to bring to life what they want to bring to life. So instead of putting that fucking Britney, gay-as-fuck playlist on (which I do live for), splash the cash. With the aesthetic queer people have, sometimes the easiest job they can get is in nightlife, but it puts you in this box, tired during the day, and it's easy to get sucked into that lifestyle. Fund some amazing queer organisations or creatives directly and so much could change.

ECP: The power presented in *The Reclamation* collection really portrayed the strength of the LGBTQ+ community when faced with opposition or oppression. What would you like to say to younger people who are maybe feeling scared in these times? How would you encourage them to reclaim the night?

LDJ: Oh my god, to be just completely honest, lead with love and surround yourself with love. Shit is going to happen, but just keep on going. Do what makes you feel good, take no shit from anyone but don't fight back with that anger that you might get bitten by sometimes. The aftermath of fighting back can be really ugly and you don't deserve that – you didn't start it, just stay safe. It's something that my boyfriend taught me that I'm really grateful for. With my fiery Spanish ass, whenever I saw something that was unfair, I would get really worked up. Now I have a completely changed mindset. Just wear that feather corset gracefully.





# Dorian Electra

## BIMBOFICATION, JOKIFICATION AND LEFTIFICATION

Words

Photography

Styling

Hair

Makeup

Photographer Assistant & Video

Production Assistant

BELLA SPRATLEY

CHARLOTTE RUTHERFORD at SN37 Agency

JORDAN BOOTHE

GREGG LENNON JR

NICK LENNON at Exclusive Artists using Mac Cosmetics

LANCE WILLIAMS

TATE SMITH

Breaking down what they call “the false dichotomy of separating pop from experimental,” Dorian Electra is the gender fluid artist on the scene making a digital artistic world that plays with ideas from masculinity to economic theory. They were part of Lady Gaga’s selection of remix artists on *Dawn of Chromatica*, and today they revel in creating outlandish caricatures that sometimes show the fragility of – and easiness to change out of – violent hegemonic masculine identities.



Blazer LINDOW ARCHIVE, top and shorts FOREVER 21, tights JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO, boots PLEASER USA, bracelet and arm cuff JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO.





You might recognise Dorian Electra from *Man to Man*, a song that makes the happy existence of gay desire between masculine men visible and audible. For that video, Dorian dressed in a Michael-Jackson-in-Thriller-style costume of a shiny red jacket and also strapped into a boxing kit and armour. For this interview’s editorial, Dorian stretches through a broader spectrum of jokified, bimbofied characters. We talk about memes, economics and the new deluxe version of *My Agenda*, out this November, ahead of their world tour.

What I personally love about Dorian is their important position as a descendant of the drag artists that inspired gender theorist Judith Butler, whose book on the performative nature of gender (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) remains an important part of understanding queer theory. This philosophy implies we can only be truly seen through other people’s eyes. Everyone looks through their lens of culture, language and learning to map what we do, how we look and how we sound into an idea of what gender or identity is – like putting together a puzzle. Dorian directs that interpretative power making smart symbolic choices that tease the viewer: what gender am I? Ultimately, it doesn’t matter! Each costume is fun – and what’s comfortable depends on the day. Today’s incarnation of Dorian Electra develops on their past sharing informative pop videos about gender and politics.

In their 2020 album *My Agenda*, Dorian did the inconceivable: putting together the Russian punks Pussy Riot, Rebecca Black – known for “Friday” – and The Village People. It’s a whirlwind running kick circle pit of masculinity that has transformed into a meaty 22-track tearjerker. The debut album has 12 more songs added to the existing record. Situated as an exploration into the culture surrounding the men’s rights movements and related political subcultures from a leftist perspective, Dorian’s album joins the tradition of pop stars rallying for political action.

*My Agenda* investigates incel culture and the perspectives of men who feel like feminism is preventing their own sexual prowess. In summary, Dorian says: let’s listen to those hurting and have an open discussion. We can respond to right-wing beliefs by reminding people of the oppression experienced by people who aren’t cis men: it is economic as well as social. The exploitation of the so-called caring class (care workers, shop workers, cleaners) has been brought into stark relief during Covid. We discuss the Internet, the future, and neoliberalism – defined as a set of political and economic policies that promote free market capitalism, dismantle the social safety net, and ultimately protect the interests of economic elites at the expense of all others.

Bella Spratley: You are an artist who has seen great success in this digital era thanks to your playful hyperpop and immersive music video worlds. How has the Internet influenced the birth and life of Dorian Electra?

Dorian Electra: I started making music videos online in high school and uploading them to YouTube. It was really on MySpace that I first felt I could make music videos, have an audience and online community. Having that audience and connection to people through the Internet gave me a sense of purpose. Otherwise, it was just making a video on my dad’s camera with some friends when I was in middle school or earlier.

Audience and purpose play a large part in the work that I do and in feeling like it’s connected to a community. The Internet absolutely has been a huge part of that. As an independent artist too, the Internet has been so powerful to get my work out there totally independently, to distribute it, have it reach people, and for them to share it.

BS: Awesome. Watching your videos, I felt like you expressed a political activist side from when you were very young. I guess you are tired of talking about the “I’m in love with Friedrich Hayek” video that launched your career. But I can see your opinions have changed a lot since then, and I’d love to hear you talk about that.

DE: I don’t believe in a lot of the same politics that I used to believe in. I used to identify as libertarian and I was brainwashed by a teacher in high school into that ideology. Since then, I went to college, read Karl Marx and a whole bunch of books that opened my mind. Now I identify as a leftist, and the educational aspect is still something that’s core to my work as an artist. That’s something that’s always interested me: how to take complex ideas and put them into a catchy, accessible format that is potentially accessible to anybody. My work about the history of the clitoris, sexuality, gender – all of those videos were also early work that I think of as ‘before,’ but it was influential for me. I still think about my music in a lot of the same ways even though it’s not as explicitly educational.

BS: That’s cool. So, your new deluxe version of the album *My Agenda* made me think of this linguistic slip, a mistake, that cisgender people make when they’re talking about trans and non-binary people’s gender by saying agenda rather than gender, which I find really funny. I don’t know if that was something that you’re referencing, but I want to move our conversation towards talking about whether



this album is potentially a response to anti-trans discourses, despite the fact your music and art go far beyond gender identity. I want to know more about this activist side of you that comes out in the new album.

DE: Definitely, this album is about a lot of things, but it is also about gender, sexuality, and particularly masculinity, like my previous album, *Flamboyant*. It also extends beyond that and goes more political. It explores the manosphere that includes men’s rights, incels, men going their own way – those kinds of online communities that reject modern feminism and want to see a return to traditional gender roles and traditional masculinity, who feel like their identities are somehow under attack. That often gets coupled with other forms of reactionary politics. These things are present in our culture but are often swept under the rug, misunderstood or written off rather than analysed. Yet, those strange political strains helped allow Donald Trump to be elected. These cis white heterosexual men feel disenfranchised, disempowered, and like the world is against them. The solution is to stop and think why those people feel that way, what is causing them to take on hateful ideas like anti-immigration or racism, or other forms of right-wing populism. The left could be better at this. We need to look at the causes of those ideologies in order to be able to combat them. It has to start from a place of empathy and understanding in order to be able to reach out and ultimately hope to heal, or convert people. I think that it’s actually very important to face head-on the things we don’t agree with rather than staying in echo chambers. Right now we’re seeing increasing political polarisation and social atomisation, where we all feel separate and fractured as a culture.

So, I think that that’s my political calling – to look at things critically but also with empathy, even towards something that is hateful and you don’t agree with. We have to understand the causes to be able to combat it.

BS: That’s so important. Thank you so much for going into detail about that. I’m going to try and intersperse slightly more light-hearted questions as we also cover the more political side of your work. So, do you think that humour is a good way to introduce change?

DE: Absolutely, I think humour is one of the most powerful political tools. It can be used for good and for bad. And it’s very important to be aware of how we’re wielding that irony. It can be used as a political tool on a personal level to talk about gender identity, sort of poking fun at things that have been viewed

as sacred, and sort of showing the historical social contingency of some of these things that are thought to be natural or permanent, like gender identity and so forth. I think humour is a healthy way to challenge people with the same ideas and introduce them to new ones.

BS: It makes me think of the line of thinking that Judith Butler takes in her book *Gender Trouble* inspired by drag kings, drag queens, and everyone creating performances Butler ultimately exposes some really nuanced arguments about constructive natures of gender identity. Is that something you are interested in, in terms of your research, or something that you associate with to a certain extent?

DE: You know, I’ve never read Judith Butler. I found it very difficult to understand, to be honest with you. I do tend to like things that are a little bit more accessible because I feel like gender is something that everybody experiences, and I don’t think it needs to be a particularly academic, obfuscated kind of thing. I’m definitely, I’d say, influenced by her work and her cultural impact. Absolutely. I’m a descendant of that in a lot of ways, but I haven’t read her work directly.

BS: I think that’s normal for quite a lot of people. I’m just a nerd. So, the next question that I have for you is, if you had to describe yourself with one meme, what would it be?

DE: It would be the one where there’s a person standing at a fork in the road. The two paths signposted are jokerfication or bimbofication. The jokerfication path leads to an evil mansion at the end of the road, at top of the hill. But bimbofication also leads to a bright castle. For my version of the meme, both paths lead to just one house: both jokerfication and bimbofication merge into one (laughs).

BS: Incredible, I love that image. You engage quite a lot with the trans youth that follows your music, and I bet you have a lot of uplifting stories that come your way. Would you be able to share any of those with us?

DE: There are so many amazing stories people reach out to me with. But I think one that stands out to me is my own. I remember when my music video for *Flamboyant* came out, it got picked up by the YouTube algorithm as a recommended video. And it was getting a ton of comments following this formula of people saying, “I saw this clip and I was like, what is this? Is this a man or a woman? I can’t tell, but then it turned me on, and now I’m confused.” And it

just made me so happy. Even though you could read some of them as almost a negative comment – “ew, is this thing a man or woman or whatever”–, to me, I think that’s amazing because I like to challenge people. It means, this person defies categorisation visually. It made people question something about themselves. “I thought I was gay, but now I’m not sure”, and then, “I thought I was straight, but now I’m not sure if I feel like I go both ways.” I like to troll people in that way. I think it’s healthy. People in the comments are confused by the gender thing, or angered, but also simultaneously aroused. I feel like that’s something very powerful.

BS: Yes, I feel like you have experienced the digital world as a very positive space. It makes me think back to a really old interview that I saw of yours where you were asked how you felt about the lack of opportunity for young people, and you said words to the effect of “the Internet will save us”. How do you feel now, eight years on? Does that still ring true?

DE: There are a lot of opportunities that have been provided by the Internet, but I have abandoned that tech optimism that I had back then. Just having seen how things have played out – and continue to play out – for young people, and the job market at large, where our economy is heading, and everything, especially after the pandemic. I feel like we’re going to need to make some radical changes to be able to support people in what’s going to become an increasingly challenging economic landscape. I think we need to do a lot more to use the state to take care of people’s basic needs and basic survival, whether that’s with universal basic income, extending healthcare or housing opportunities. At Uber and in the gig economy, so many people are freelance without any benefits. I see companies moving increasingly in that direction. I’m not particularly optimistic. I think we should push for organised labour and push for policies that will support people rather than our faith in tech in tech to solve these issues. Because ultimately, tech is still subject to those same market forces that are unfortunately not good enough for meeting everybody’s needs. That’s how my views have changed.

BS: Your family is artistic and supportive of you as a person and musician. Do your mum and dad come to your live shows? What is it like for them?

DE: Yeah, they do come to my gigs, and I think it’s really fun for them, especially being able to see me perform. My mum used to do musical theatre and my dad was in a cover band just for fun. It is something that they really enjoy.

BS: They must be proud.

DE: I feel very grateful to have their support and encouragement.

BS: There are some genres that I hear in your music that potentially include influences like drill and screamo. These are usually associated with outsider identities. Is there a reason that you’ve been drawn to these kinds of songs, particularly in the new album, which goes further into a very experimental sound?

DE: In *My Agenda*, I wanted to go into the deep end of the most extreme forms of music that I enjoy. They just express this extreme emotion of the record. Hardstyle can be absolutely huge and euphoric, and metal can be really intense or channel a lot of anger. Dubstep too has this extreme-ness. I view these as [examples of] great masculine music that has the intensity or violence that I wanted to channel, and it was a natural fit for the team. I didn’t decide to make this my more experimental project. I don’t have to hold back. I don’t try to make pop music – it’s a personal state of mind. In the songwriting process I am able to feel very free.

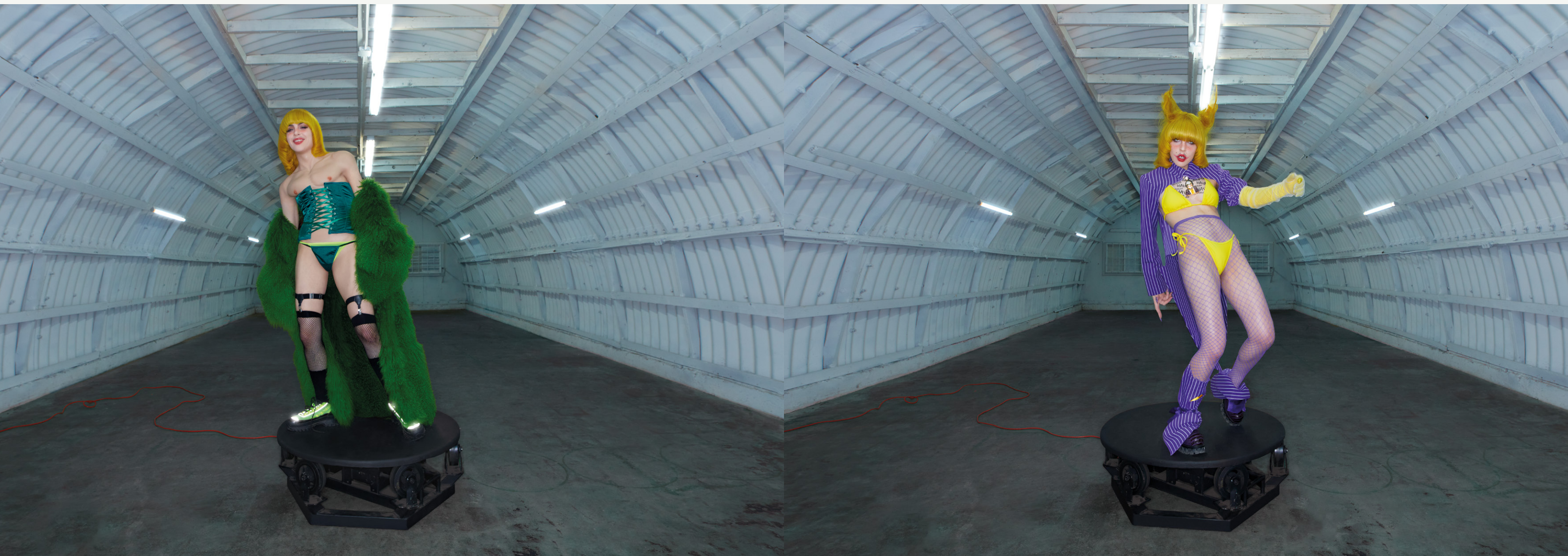
BS: The album is really cool, it is very intense, but the thing that I most missed during lockdown was being in a mosh pit. So I’m really happy to be able to go back to that now. This is definitely going to be some mosh pit inducing music.

DE: I know! I can’t wait to perform this live next year. My tour starts January 20th in Seattle and [for] Europe in April and May, which I am so excited about.

BS: There is a lot of ambiguity around the similarities and differences between you as a person and the characters you perform. Talking about your song *Career Boy*, you admitted you can overwork yourself to some extent. Did the pandemic aggravate that?

DE: Yes, I think that my relationship with work has changed a lot in the past year and a half. When you’re forced to slow down and your work is reduced to what’s on the computer screen in front of you, it makes you look at it in a different way. Particularly when your work includes running around, travelling, doing errands, etc. – all of those were cut out of everyday life. I’m still feeling the effects of it and readjusting whilst also trying to find ways that I can relax and do things that are good for me that I didn’t do before the pandemic. But I was extremely busy for the majority of 2020, I didn’t take any time off. I was working on getting my album out and doing music





*Jacket LINDOW ARCHIVE, corset, botoom and tights JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO, shoes NIKE Air Max 97.*

*Blazer, tights, gloves and necklace JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO, bikini ASOS.*



videos. So, I definitely still relate to the stuff I said about *Career Boy*. But I'm trying to change that and challenge myself to look at things in a healthier way.

BS: What are the things that you're finding useful to unplug and relax at the moment?

DE: I started listening to audiobooks, which is funny – I never did that before. I've joined a reading group but I keep questioning what I did with my time before.

BS: What are you reading at the moment?

DE: I'm reading *The People's Republic of Walmart* by a socialist author. It claims some of the nation's biggest corporations are actually laying the foundations for socialism and economic planning. Since these corporations in the free market have centralised top-down economic planning, it's like what we think of in economic planning by the state. Planning is possible and it's already being done. So, we should reconsider using planning to manage the economy and take care of people.

Also, I'm enjoying the audiobook of *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* by David Harvey, who's one of the top Marx scholars. It focuses on its history from the late 1970s to now – Reagan, Thatcher, Pinochet, China, and what neoliberalism means. That word gets thrown around a lot but the definition is often unclear. It's a mix of free market ideology, supporting big businesses, globalisation, and things that go beyond the scope of the free market that use the power of the state to enforce and push that in a way that has bad consequences for the rest of society.

I'm also reading *Listen Liberal*, which is about how the left got to where we are now, how it has kind of abandoned its working-class base and started to be seen as a party of the elite. It explains today's rise of right-wing populism as a result. I'm interested in what the next steps are for the left because there's a lull. People are relieved that Biden won, but we need to rebuild the left so that another right-wing populist candidate even worse than Trump doesn't swoop in.

BS: Žižek is a Marxist scholar we reference this edition; in his book *Pandemic* (2020) he set out this idea of a new communism as the only future that can save us. Can you define Neoliberalism for us?

DE: I'd say Neoliberalism is defined as a set of political and economic policies that promote free market capitalism – deregulation, privatisation, globalisation –, dismantle the social safety net, and ultimately protect the interests of economic elites at the expense of all others. These ideas are going to become more relevant due to the global economic hardship, and it's a good time for everyone to try to get educated about it because as they enter the discourse publicly it will be good to have a theoretical understanding of it beforehand. Since finishing the album, reading has been my way to get in touch with the world again.

BS: Is the reading group you're part of the one you posted about on Instagram with Cat Boy Deleuze?

DE: The main one I'm in is with my friend Joshua Citarella. He also has a Twitch stream and podcast that I've been a guest on. He's an artist and he researches online political subcultures, especially among Gen Z kids and Politigram (a political meme Instagram account). He interviews these kids and I've learnt so much from him. Young people care deeply about politics, and it's become another form of identity. They call themselves a radical anarchist communist or anarchomonarchist – these made-up crazy terms of three different prefixes on an ideology to feel unique.

It's similar to the desensitization that happens with online pornography, where people go to increasingly extreme videos desensitized to the regular, or normal people can go towards increasingly extreme ideologies. It means kids fall into becoming neonazis because of what they're reading online. Joshua's work focuses on how people fall into that and how they become de-radicalized or re-radicalized in the opposite direction (laughs). I find all that fascinating.

We have podcasts out on the Federal Reserve, conspiracy theories and the chemicals in the water making frogs gay that Alex Jones spoke about. It's true, actually. We watched a video about the scientist who was silenced who did research on frogs. This chemical called Atrazine, which functions as an endocrine disruptor, hormonally changes the sex of the frog. We analyse why people might be drawn to believing conspiracy theories or what parts are potentially true. In our current political landscape, it's more acceptable to block something you don't like, to delete it, shut it down. That's not very helpful for political discourse. I'm trying to push for more openness and dialogue. Joshua's work does the same. It's an unlikely pairing of a pop star and an artist doing political research, but pop music can further these goals.







BS: I agree we need more conversations. I joined the Cat Boy Deleuze reading group on Discord – it's the first-ever iscord I've been on. I'm more used to attending a traditional lecture and I found it really hard to understand the line between humour and learning on it. It was a reading of Foucault's *The Birth of Bio-Politics*.

DE: You came to that?

BS: Yes, I attended it until about midnight, because I'm in the UK.

DE: Amazing. That was my first time going to that particular reading group too. I read some Foucault in school but I'd never read that and I did find it hard to follow. What I liked about that is it took young kids that post political memes online, who might have never read any theory and attempt to read this and realise that these texts are pretty dense and tricky. I like that there are people committed to trying – there were over eighty people in there, and it's pretty impressive that Cat Boy Deleuze got everyone to stay. I recommend starting with YouTube videos that have more accessible explanations rather than starting with a reading group.

BS: I tend to approach things, especially an academic text, quite critically. I was worried that there could be some disinformation happening – not just on this forum, but others. If someone says, let's read this together, then they are positioning themselves as an authority on that text. When I spoke to Cat Boy they disagreed, which is fine. Do you think there are problematic sides to the dissemination of these quite extreme political views on these types of websites?

DE: I agree there is a danger. But, on the other hand, it's hard to escape that anywhere. A teacher at a university might say they are the authority, or people on YouTube, or multiple authors on Wikipedia – it's tricky to find a way around it. It's interesting at the school I went to, Shimer College, we didn't read any secondary sources. We read the authors themselves, which was cool. The classes were dialogue-based, with a maximum of twelve people in a class – together we would come to mutual understanding. We would go line by line and break it down, and we would have a base of understanding from the other books we read. So, it was different to that reading group. I thought it was a fun thing to jump in on, but my main reading group is with Joshua.

BS: What did you study there?

DE: There aren't any majors there, but I have a degree in Liberal Arts with Natural Sciences. I took a lot of electives on the philosophy of science, consciousness, computer science and maths.

BS: Your work on trans, non-binary and cyborg



*Dress and shoes ALEXANDRE VAUTHIER, bag LOUIS VUITTON, bracelet JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO.*





Top, tights, gloves and mask JORDAN BOOTHE STUDIO, boots PLEASER USA.

identities makes me wonder if you read Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*.

DE: I am aware of that book, but I haven't read it. The feminism electives were the most popular, but at the time I wanted to do something different. I read in another reading group *Xenofeminism* by Helen Hester, which was an update on the Haraway stuff published in 2018, and these things are being constantly updated to be more inclusive and more technologically expansive. I am interested, but my favourite subjects in the social sciences are history, sociology and economics.

BS: Are you atheist or spiritual?

DE: I don't identify with any of those labels. I used to identify as a hard-core atheist in 2007. It was very fedora tipping atheist. That becomes an identity in itself. My mum and I, when I was 14, joined these atheist meet-up groups and it wasn't a very satisfying identity to have in the end. I don't like to use that word.

BS: If you were reborn, or choosing an online animal avatar, what would it be?

DE: A cat-boy or a furry bunny.

BS: So not a gay frog?

DE: (Laughs.)

BS: On the topic of creating your self, you're a fan of SOPHIE and her song *Faceshopping*. Did you ever meet or have the opportunity to meet her?

DE: Yes, I did, [after performing] at Charli XCX's *Pop 2* show in 2018 in London – it was one of those times. Yes, she was amazing and it's such a loss.

BS: I know, such a great artist. The ideas that are expressed in *Faceshopping* make me think of how we relate to our identity online and use face filters. How do you feel about that? Do you find it euphoric or dysphoric? Do you think they can create any problems, and what are the good things?

DE: I am addicted to them. Sometimes I don't want to see my face without them or some form of editing. I have big issues with my skin. I also like being able to use it because I like to present a fantasy version or cartoon version of myself because that more closely approximates what I would like to look like. You could just as easily say that's the way we have been socialised due to beauty standards, but I would say

it's unavoidable. I would rather have full autonomy within those constraints to look however I want. I would love to be able to do more advanced face filters on my videos. When I look in the mirror my face isn't how I want it to look.

BS: I read recently that young people, my age, in their early twenties, are starting to get botox because of the way it is talked about on TikTok. It made me think of the conflation of youth, rebellion and the future – these contemporary ideas make it appear so normal. Where do you stand?

DE: It's a hard one to say. I think people should have the freedom to do whatever they want with their bodies. But also, the mounting pressure can be unhealthy. I've thought about the same things. To me, trans people undergoing feminisation surgery put it in perspective. You should have the power to use technology to shape your body but do it with an awareness of the social pressures. Josh just wrote an amazing article. He's been doing an experiment on himself that's very 4Chan, to boost testosterone levels. He chews this gum and does exercises to define his jaw called mewing. It's like he's transitioning, but he's transitioning to be more masculine as a cis male. He's mansitioning.

BS: I wholeheartedly support all of my trans friends who make use of those services. I am lucky I can disconnect from those social pressures, particularly because my face is not on my work. My final question is: I love the artistic trajectory of the film director Jean-Luc Godard, who started by renewing the art form and then went incredibly experimental aged 80. Is this what we can expect from you?

DE: I hope that I am always changing and evolving as an artist and pushing myself forward. I want to try my hand at more pop before delving into the more experimental, although to me that is a false dichotomy. Personally, I find [myself in] that happy medium. Pop is catchy or memorable – it can be experimental production-wise, but it's more of an ethos than a sound. I want to break down the dichotomy.



FEATURING LOUIS VUITTON AUTUMN / WINTER 2021-2022

Photography  
**Javier Castán**

Styling  
**Ana Floubet**

Starring  
**Adhel Bol** *Trends Models*, **Patricia Reina** *Blow Models*, **Talitha** *Viva Models*

Hair & Makeup  
**Mariona Botella**  
*Kasteel Artist Management*

Set Designer  
**Tamara Pérez**

Casting Director  
**Gaze Casting**

Lighting and Photographer Assistant  
**Víctor Álvarez**

Stylist Assistant  
**Inés Ronquillo**

Set Designer Assistants  
**Paloma Lambert, Jon Ander Babero, Juana Carpena**

Hair & Makeup Assistant  
**Catalina Sartor**





*Patricia wears asymmetric parka with printed lining, oversized sweater, tiered tulle skirt, LV snow mask and Patti wedge mid-calf boot, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page: Adbel wears knitted top LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Silhouette high boot LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page: Adbel wears leather biker, knitted sweater and tulle skirt, all LOUIS VUITTON.*



*Thalita wears metallic parka with bust print by Piero Fornasetti LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Twist MM bag in metallic leather LOUIS VUITTON with bust print by Piero Fornasetti.  
Opposite page: Patricia wears hood and shawls as a top and knotted at the hip LOUIS VUITTON.*





*Adbel wears fleece jacket, beaded embroidered mini dress and boots, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page: Patricia wears a quilted gilet with studs LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Thalita wears padded jacket, velvet sleeveless dress with cameo print and square pillow flat ankle boot, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page: Patti wedge ankle boot LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Patricia wears padded t-shirt with central pocket, mini skirt in velvet with sequins and Pochette Tête bag, all LOUIS VUITTON.  
Opposite page: Metallic parka with bust print by Piero Fornasetti and LV snow mask, all LOUIS VUITTON.*







*Petite Malle bag in patent leather LOUIS VUITTON with architectural print by Piero Fornasetti.  
Opposite page: Adbel wears shawl as a top and LV snow mask, all LOUIS VUITTON.*





POST-INTERNET STAR



## Arvida Byström

*Words*

*Photography*

*Creative Direction*

*Styling*

*Hair*

*Makeup*

*GUNSELI YALCINKAYA*

*LUCIANO INSUA*

*IDA JOHANSSON*

*EMMA THORSTRAND at Lomo Mgmt*

*PHILIP FOHLIN at Link Details*

*JEANETTE TÖRNQVIST at Lund Lund*

“Is making things artificially scarce, a stunt that isn’t new in the art world, really an accomplishment for the digital medium that by design is infinite?”, asks Arvida Byström ahead of the opening of her recent exhibition *Artificial Scarcity* at Stockholm’s Gallery Steinsland Berliner. The digital artist and model is a notorious internet persona, having come up in the golden age of Tumblr, alongside the likes of fellow post-internet stars Petra Collins and Molly Soda. Her bubblegum-hued works interrogate how our perception of reality and identity is moulded by technology, whether that’s implanting NFC chips under her skin, exploring the effects of Instagram censorship on the female form, or writing a monologue for Siri as a femme bot.



*Dress JOSEFINE GTLENSVÄRD.*

*Opposite page: Knitted top EMMA GUDMUNDSON, skirt MEGA MIKAELA, socks RAVE REVIEW.*



Byström’s current exhibition takes three symbols, a Beanie Baby, a tulip, and an NFT – objects that, she explains, have all been subject to economic bubbles, albeit hundreds of years apart. Considered the first recorded speculative bubble in history, Tulip Mania came at a time in 17th century-Holland, when the price of the recently introduced bulb soared to staggering heights before undergoing a dramatic collapse only months later. The frenzied investment of Beanie Babies – the famed 1990s plush toy – two centuries later would repeat a similar pattern, with some of the rarer items reaching up to six figures on eBay. But Byström maintains, “This wasn’t so much false scarcity but artificial scarcity, or a feeling that something being rare can jack up the prices of items.”

The addition of NFTs marks a new frontier: Web 3.0. Characterised by its use of blockchain to create decentralised platforms, the medium suggests new possibilities removed from its private corp-dominated forebearers. Still, it’s a divisive subject: should we even be striving to make the medium exclusive when digital goods are, by design, limitless? By drawing on the past and present, Byström highlights how the price of an artwork affects how it’s perceived, from now to the future and beyond.

With an exploration of artificial intelligence sex robots in the works, Byström hopes to push her past explorations of female identity and technology even further. The topic is particularly pertinent in a time when the pandemic has narrowed human connection to the four corners of a screen, with many flooding the virtual world for a semblance of human connection. Sex or, more extensively, digitalised desire, is a logical extension of this. Evoking Žižek’s notion of sexual desire as a sort of distanced fantasy, Byström’s work invokes questions surrounding the feminised digital entity, identity, and agency.

Gunseli Yalcinkaya: You’ve just finished up your exhibition *Artificial Scarcity* at Stockholm’s gallery Steinsland Berliner. Could you tell us about it?

Arvida Byström: It’s basically about how our relationship to objects change when the price tag changes, which I demonstrated using three symbols: tulips, Beanie Babies, and NFTs. I’m interested in why we take something that’s inherently infinite by design and render it scarce. And the answer is obviously money.

GY: What is the history of the tulips creating artificial scarcity?

AB: The first capitalist economic bubble was in the 17th century in Holland. It was a speculative bubble of tulip bulbs. The feeling that something is rare can jack up the prices of items.

GY: NFTs have been a particularly divisive subject this year, especially in the art world. What are your feelings towards them?

AB: My base feeling towards NFTs is that they shouldn’t have to exist, because I wish that art funding didn’t have to be so attached to private collectors who dictate what should make it in the art world or not. So, I don’t think it’s necessarily something to romanticise. Saying this, having art is a responsibility because you have to make sure that it’s well-kept and taken care of. So, some parts are fine, but it’s not very different from what the art world has looked like for a very long time.

GY: I agree. I feel like the same thing that happened with social media is happening with NFTs. Like, it was sold to us as this utopian vision. The argument that NFTs are democratising the art world doesn’t work, because it’s still the same people with the money. The only difference is that it’s cryptocurrency.

AB: I don’t think that decentralising things is necessarily good. It always has to happen in the right way. I think it’s funny that everyone thinks decentralising is the best thing ever, but it completely depends on how it happens and how we do it. If you decentralise in a way that’s super neoliberal, that’s not something I want to get behind.

GY: I was reading about cloud feudalism, which basically states that the way the internet is run (ie. big private corporations) resembles a medieval way of living. This obviously goes against the utopian vision heralded by early cyberfeminists. Do you think there’s a way to overcome this?

AB: I hadn’t heard of that but that’s very interesting!

GY: You’ve recently released two NFTs as part of the exhibition. Why was this something you wanted to explore?

AB: The NFT in the exhibition is tied to half an



*Knitted top EMMA GUDMUNDSON, trousers LOUIS VUITTON.*



*Full look PRADA.*





Jacket LOUIS VUITTON, underwear C.U.M. CLUBWEAR, earrings stylist's own.

ether. And if you buy the work, you'll also own the ether. But if the ether gets sold and separated from the work, then the work will destroy itself. So, it's a commentary on the worth of the work and the ether's worth. But what's interesting is that the NFT isn't really tied to the artwork; it gets tied to the artwork through websites. But if something were to ever compromise the website, it would be really hard to know what that NFT represents.

GY: Yeah, it's that divide between the artwork itself and its ownership.

AB: To be honest, it's very similar to how the art world works today. It's essentially a document to certify an artwork – like how if you have an artwork that's easy to replicate, you need the paper to authenticate it.

GY: How do you see NFTs developing?

AB: Artists should be better compensated when people interact with their work online. There's this Swedish organisation, for example, that puts pressure on Instagram to pay its content creators, which is basically what we should be doing all the time. If I got money for every time someone reshared or looked at my photos, that would really improve my day-to-day economy. It's the same with NFT websites. It keeps people on the platform and makes a platform exciting and something that people actually want to use, and you should fairly compensate the people that make the platform worth using.

GY: Your 2017 exhibition *Pics Or It Didn't Happen* examined the impact of Instagram censorship on the female form. The sway these corporations have on what we consume is inherently biased.

AB: Corporations like Facebook, Google, and Apple decide what exactly should be shown in these so-called art galleries. It's pretty safe to say that Instagram is one of the places where we consume the most art today, and these corporations decide what artists, why that art gets big. Algorithms push certain Instagram accounts and also censor things. They have so much say in what that is and what we should consume daily.

GY: How do you think the censorship of images on platforms like Instagram reflects the attitudes of society at large?

AB: It's a murky and complicated area because, in one way, it's an issue that women's appearances and bodies are valued so highly. I know that a lot of people read my images and work as empowering but, for me, there's also grief. Why do we find sexist aesthetics so appealing?

But it's complicated because we need more studies on how images and bodies actually affect people, not just images of bodies. Also, how do the internet and apps affect us? And that is what should determine how we use apps and how they get designed. I mostly think it's troubling that apps are owned by and regulated by corporations.

Apps today are an extension of our everyday world, and that means they're a private space where you share private information with friends – like being in a bedroom. They're also our public art galleries, our public museums, and they're also our open spaces too. I think it's really troubling that corporations can spy on us when we're in our private space, such as the bedroom, chatting with our friends. That should be completely private. That shouldn't be like something that the world can see forever because it's saved somewhere on some cloud drive.

GY: The pandemic has only accelerated and reaffirmed the idea that the digital is an extension of the real world. In fact, the digital feels more real than IRL itself. So, having these backwards-minded corporations censor images of boobs and period stains – which I feel like a lot of people in real life would be okay with looking at – has very concerning implications.

AB: It's complicated to know where to draw the line. Who looks through these things? How do they get compensated? And who decides what the rest of the world should look or not look at? I feel that commercial content moderation should even be some kind of governmental or diplomatic position, because there could be serious crimes they're looking at. Then you add bodies into the mix. But the internet is a very new medium. Just like when the printed word started spreading, there was a lot of misinformation and fake news. The online world is the same.

GY: The book states, "All technology will be coded by the bias of its creators". It reminds me of that Audre Lorde quote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Do you think we can ever freely express ourselves on platforms that are governed by corporations beyond our control?





*Full look PRADA.*





AB: No, I think it’s always going to be complicated to some degree. If the state was to regulate the internet, it would always be behind and lack insight. With corporations, their main interest is to sell stuff and make money.

GY: It also reminds me of what Legacy Russell says in *Glitch Feminism* about the power of the glitch as, essentially, a way to disrupt overarching narratives. Publishing these silenced photos is an example of the glitch at play. What do you think?

AB: Yeah, I think so. It’s important or interesting to do that work. What does the platform leave out? And what is there not room for? I think that’s how Molly [Soda] and I thought about the book, like an archive of things that won’t get saved because they’re not allowed into the feeds. Even now, five years since we started the book, I think the things I get deleted might be different.

GY: Things move so fast that they become irrelevant so quickly.

AB: People might upload different things. People might self-censor in different ways. I also think that Instagram has found ways to delete less, but then instead curate the explorer page in a different way.

GY: What sort of themes do you want to explore in your work, moving forward?

AB: I’m actually working on a piece with an AI sex doll. Previously, I did a video where Siri has a monologue about her materiality and non-materiality. But, of course, she is material in our phones. She’s just spread out on a lot of different phones and cloud drives. She also talks a little bit about why she’s feminised – to make her less abrasive and so that we invite her into our homes, where she can listen and spy on us, basically. It’s also a little bit about cloud drives and how tech companies use words like ‘cloud’ to pretend like something is immaterial. Because it would be better for the environment if it would just be in a cloud. Anyway, I want to expand on that and make a monologue for an AI sex doll. And I’m planning a performance where I’ll be in conversation with one of these dolls.

GY: Calling these systems terms like ‘cloud’ makes them sound so innocent, or cute, almost.

AB: It’s very adorable wording. It’s also funny. There’s this talk by Helen Hester – there’s also a text called *Technically Female* – where she goes on about micro labour, which is basically all the labour we take on through technology. For example, self-checkout at a store, which isn’t easier for us, actually. We still have to learn a lot to check out at a store. It’s more complicated than if we just went to the checkout clerk to do it for you. So, through technology, we take on these laborious tasks. She also looks at older interpretations of technology in movies, where computers are usually male. But then, eventually, when it comes around to it, we have all these cookies and clouds.

GY: Holly Herndon has recently released a vocal deepfake called Holly+ where you can essentially turn any input into her voice. How do you think the potential of AI translates to art?

AB: I’m interested in whether AI can make more pleasurable and maybe even political and thoughtful art than we can. Should we even make art then? Should we only make art for our own stimulation? That being said, I think it’s interesting how it makes us question our place on Earth. As humans, we see ourselves above all the other animal, and maybe AI will make us a little bit more equal to them. I’m still figuring out the AI sex doll thing, but otherwise, it’s quite exciting to start playing around with all that.

GY: Let’s cast our minds to your next piece. During the pandemic, the sales of sex dolls rose – we would expect that to be because of the lack of human contact, but interestingly it was mostly couples inviting a new member into their intimate relationship. Žižek argues this is because of a psychological need to invest sexual desire through a sort of distancing and fantasy. What do you think about this idea? What drew you to sex dolls?

AB: I think sex works best in imagination, so I am not surprised. Having an entity to project things on that you later don’t have to relate to as a subject or that can disturb that sexual idea could be great. I am interested in sex dolls because they are a feminised digital entity, at least the AI ones, and, also, I think people get irked by them for the wrong kind of reason.

GY: What is the role of the human in AI art?

AB: Possibly to question ourselves and to question in what way art is great for humans. If we say that



Coat and dress ACNE STUDIOS, underwear CUM CLUBWEAR, shoes J.W ANDERSON, necklace MARLAND BACKUS.



AI will make the most beautiful, divine art, maybe humans can stop making art for the sake of exhibiting it to others to make it just for their own urge instead. Maybe it will make us less centred around the artist as a subject and it will make us start making art to relate to others, to make art in groups. I think it could completely overthrow our relationship to art today.

GY: Is it necessary to differentiate the human artist from the AI artist?

AB: Humans care about incentives, and computers don't have incentives in the same way as humans.

GY: If AI creates art and it is sold, who benefits and why?

AB: I imagine the person owning the robot benefits financially until robots get naturalised. I mean, it is kind of sad if this is seen as a cultural surplus, I think this money should go to the artists, the engineers and the workers in the art world and not to the top.

GY: In order to differentiate AI artists from human artists, should we create a capitalistic personal brand, or find the primitive and natural side of the human essence to distinguish ourselves from machines, softwares and intelligence we are making?

AB: Neither. I think we should just lean into [believing] that maybe the actual end-product shouldn't be our goal. I think it might make us less individualistic and more community-driven. If robots will make better personal brands than humans, then I will hope that humans will stop tinkering on their personal brands. The worst-case scenario is if we see this as a sort of cultural surplus that won't profit the workers. But maybe, then, there will be a cultural revolution where humans will completely reconsider what art to enjoy.

GY: Is creativity an exclusively human urge?

AB: Well, other animals don't seem very interested in making art. I think computers are kind of the same, they make it because we made them make it. They are yet to have their own emotional urge to do so.



Left to right: Full look REBECCA POHL. Cardigan PRADA, skirt MEGA MIKAELA, necklace RAVE REVIEW.  
Opposite page: Body RAVE REVIEW, skirt PRADA.



# Bbymutha

CHALLENGING THE WORLD IN THE HERE AND NOW

*Words*  
*Photography*

*PRISHITA MAHESHWARI-APLIN*  
*HEATHER GLAZZARD*

“Fuck his bitch; break his heart!” The heaving, sweat-soaked crowd shouted back as one breath, as one voice. Bbymutha, aka Britnee Moore, smiled infectiously as they bopped their head in time to the bass – reverberating through each and every person squeezed into the tiny room at London’s Corsica Studios. Sitting in her power, Bbymutha claims and owns the stage despite distancing herself from heavily choreographed performances. Her stage presence is awe-inspiring. They hold the attention of the room with nothing more than their eclectic, interweaving beats, and their precisely-delivered lyrics – as upfront and hilarious as she is in her day-to-day life.

*Styling*  
*Hair*  
*Makeup*  
*Stylist Assistant*

*SEILA GRAU*  
*TUHOKAMO*  
*DAVID GILLERS*  
*KLEONA SHEHU*



*Casuit LULALALORA, boots CHEREE CHEREE, earrings and cuff RUBY JACK, rings MIMANER.A and RUBY JACK.*



A true DIY artist, Bbymutha answers to no one. Navigating experiences with a series of abusive men – including her father –, juvenile detention, and mental health struggles, not to mention the ongoing pressures of racism, single parenthood, and a toxic, competitive mainstream music industry, Bbymutha has emerged an unapologetic master of not giving a shit about other people’s unwarranted opinions. But they do care deeply about three things: their kids, their own healing through creativity and spirituality, and speaking their truth to challenge the structures that oppress so many.

Prishita Maheshwari-Aplin: Your music and career are such incredible examples of the power of DIY music-making. I know you first began recording through your cell phone and releasing music as Cindy Kush. How do you navigate the pressures on you to align with the industry?

B: I don’t even know how I navigate it. I do a lot of cussing people out because it’s frustrating for people to try and project what they want you to be onto you when you already know what you want to be. I just stand my ground – that’s the only way that I know how to navigate that shit. Because people try to tell you, “Oh, you’re not doing enough,” or, “You’re not successful enough,” but I know I am.

PMA: For sure! And do you think that this has an impact on your creative output?

B: It frustrates me so much that it just makes me want to go harder and create more. I’m not trying to prove anything to anybody but myself, but I find comfort in knowing that even though I’m not mainstream, I’m just as talented – if not more – and I work just as hard – if not more – than mainstream people. And I don’t want the other stuff that comes with the mainstream shit. I feel like people try to bully you into that because they want access to not treat you like a human. I think that’s the issue – I’m way too human and they don’t like that.

PMA: That’s a great outlook to have on it all. I feel like the DIY and underground movements also push back against the capitalist expectations of the mainstream industry. I know you quit your job because you were “tired of having your financial status at the mercy of an employer” to pursue music. You also often talk about how racism, colourism, and capitalism systemically hold up sexism and violence against Black femmes. Do you think that the past year – with us being in lockdown with Covid and all – has opened people’s eyes more to the harms of capitalism and the structures within which we’re currently expected to work?

B: It has, but we’re kind of stuck in it now. It’s a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation – it’s sad. Personally,

I know a lot of people who quit their jobs this year, but now they’re in this whole other sector of capitalism where everybody owns a business – that’s what’s being pushed on you. Hustle culture is very dangerous. I started a business in 2020 – right before the pandemic. I 10/10 would not recommend unless it’s really what you want to do. But don’t do it because you think that’s what you’re supposed to be doing – or because you think that’s the answer to working for somebody else – because it’s very hard. It’s very time-consuming. You literally have to work all the frickin’ time.

I feel like it’s even deeper than capitalism because there are all these other problems that you have to worry about, like taxes. It’s so much more than people try to make it out to be – it’s not just selling fucking jewellery on the internet. We’re being bamboozled into that lifestyle. And when we get there, we’re not aware of what it takes. Look at how Instagram is the mall now – everybody is trying to sell shit to everybody. This is definitely late-stage capitalism, and it’s so gross.

PMA: It’s definitely super gross. So, do you think that there’s any way in which we can convert this awakening into action that actually makes a difference to how the world will look in the future?

B: I think we’re fucked; it’s a wrap (laughs). I think about the state of the planet, and I think it’s time for a reset. Humans have ruined everything. I want to be optimistic about it, but I have kids and I have to be honest with myself. Maybe something will happen – hell, maybe Jesus will come back. At this point, anything could happen, because what the fuck is this timeline? They just came up with the US SpaceForce. I feel like everybody’s losing their mind. This is humanity’s last spiral, and it’s almost over.

PMA: (Laughs.) Oof. Do you find that hard or do you find comfort in that?

B: At first I found it hard – I definitely don’t find comfort in it –, but I’m just indifferent to it now. The older I get, the more pointless I realise life actually is. Especially because of the time that I’m in. I guess if I was alive in the 1970s, then my legacy could live on, but if I die and the apocalypse happens 10 years after that, and the Earth resets – then what are they going to do? Find digital fossils of my music? I feel like whatever I’m doing now is the most important for right now. I’m just trying to enjoy every day that I have left.

PMA: I hear you! But I think, even in the context of our future while we’re still alive, there’s scope for some things to shift. I know that you also talk a lot about freeing ourselves from the patriarchy and the violence that men inflict on people of marginalised genders. Do you think the arts, especially music and lyrics, have a role to play in challenging this patriarchal violence?

B: I honestly think it’s the same thing – it’s another lost cause. The patriarchy is so deep that women are almost just as awful as men to other women, but we fool ourselves into thinking that we can’t be bad people. Even the bitches that listen to my music – still be some very fucked up bitches. They sing my lyrics, and then turn around and talk crazy to me because I didn’t do something that they think I should be doing. As a humanity, not everybody but overall, a lot of people are lost and they don’t care about anything outside of what the internet is using as a buzzword. Instagram ruined the world. People are willing to say anything, do anything, align themselves with anything, for attention. To the point that they trick themselves into thinking they believe in it, knowing damn well they don’t. I hate to be so pessimistic (laughs). But I sit back every day and watch people be fucking idiots, and it’s very disappointing.

PMA: It’s a shame, isn’t it? Because a part of me still really wants to believe things that I do and say can make a difference. But it’s so terrible that people listen to your music, say they believe what you’re saying, but still act terribly. That’s why I love and relate to your outlook, that it’s best to just be yourself because people are always going to find things to dislike about you. I personally came really into myself over the past year, with lockdown and everything, away from the public eye, and started expressing myself, especially my queerness, more openly. Have you felt that the space from constant public interaction that lockdown afforded impacted your relationship with yourself in any way?

B: I definitely feel like I’ve outgrown referring to myself as a woman. I don’t think that I’m non-binary, but I also don’t think that it matters. I grew up with an attraction to people, and I had to categorise it as bisexual – because that’s what you’re told you are if you’re attracted to men and women. Then you grow up and realise: I just like who I like. But you’ve already started trying to put yourself into these boxes. Also, as a person that is considered a public figure, if you announce something, then they try to hold you to certain things. But I don’t have to be a queer person like anyone else – every gay or queer person is unique. So, I just stopped calling myself anything – I’m not a girl, I’m not a boy; I’m not gay, I’m not straight. I’m just a person.

PMA: Yeah, I totally get that!

B: Because it gets so frustrating. The last time I was in Europe, I posted a picture of myself and I called myself a dyke. Lesbian Twitter lit my ass up, and I was like, okay, I don’t have to use that word. But they were trying to invalidate a part of my life. Yeah, I can ‘pass’ as straight – whatever that means. Because I’m dating a man, I pass as straight? But they don’t understand that with men, there’s this weird competition when they know that you

also like women. My baby father was very abusive to me because he knew I liked women. You don’t know what I’ve been through as a queer woman to just invalidate a part of me because I could be straight? What even is straight-passing? A lesbian who doesn’t have a girlfriend at the time could pass as straight if identity is based on who you’re dating. That pissed me off, and that’s when I started thinking, I don’t even know if I’m bisexual. I don’t know what the fuck I am.

But I don’t want to be sitting arguing with lesbians. So, in the past few years, I have just separated myself from that because it doesn’t matter to me. I know some people hold on to it and it means something to them – everybody wants somewhere to belong. But I belong to myself. I don’t need a group of people to champion or rally behind. That space made me realise I’m just a person at the end of the day. One thing I really can’t escape from is I’m Black (laughs). I already have to carry that around, so I’m not trying to add more because it’s hard enough.

PMA: This is an argument that pops up really often on Twitter, and it’s just so confusing to me. I understand that ‘dyke’ is a slur that’s been reclaimed by the lesbian community, but it’s surely also a word that would’ve been used to insult all women who like other women, whether they were lesbians or bisexual. There’s a lot of bi-erasure even from within the community, and the whole idea of ‘straight-passing’ only feeds into that.

B: Especially as a Black woman – even women that aren’t gay get called manly, dykes. Let’s not act like that is exclusive to women who only date women, please. But I just don’t say it anymore because it’s not that important to me. I have an extensive vocabulary; I can call myself anything else. I don’t have to use a word that’s going to offend people who haven’t done anything to me.

PMA: Of course – it’s important to respect other people’s feelings in this journey. You were talking about how you already have to carry the weight of being a Black woman. In society, Black women are often pigeonholed into certain stereotypes – either being desexualised and ‘Mammyed’ or being hypersexualised and fetishised. Your lyrics are so sex-positive in a very genuine way. How do you navigate society’s expectations on Black women while expressing sexual liberation and desire through your music and lyrics?

B: Most men are scared of me because of the content I make. I don’t only talk about my sexuality, I also emasculate men. I feel like they be scared to try me, so I don’t have to deal with a lot of people over-sexualising me. I also just don’t play into the politics of femininity, so I think that helps, fortunately. I know with people like Doja Cat and Megan Thee Stallion, people always comment on their bodies. I don’t deal with it on a level that I’ve seen other girls deal with.





*Dresss FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE, necklace, earrings, and cuff RUBTʼŹACK.*

I think it’s all about the presentation. In my experience, if you present yourself in a way that says, “I can’t be touched,” then I don’t think people are going to try you. Megan Thee Stallion has a very aggressive demeanour in the same way that I do, but I feel like she’s still very sexual in her presentation. Unfortunately, that makes people feel like it’s okay to sexualise her because she’s so comfortable with her body. I wish it didn’t – because you should be able to be as confident with yourself as you want, and when people approach you sexually it should still be consensual.

PMA: Definitely. Obviously, it’s important to have conversations around the role that men play in breaking consent too. On another topic, since you’ve been talking a bit about other Black women in the industry, I love that you call yourself the antichrist of female rap. You also say that you’re not here to save hip-hop – that the focus of your music is on yourself. It’s so cool that you manage to ignore the competition that the industry must place on you and just do you. Why do you think the world pits women, especially Black women in the rap world, against one another?

B: I have no damn idea. Because even though I am an artist, I’m still a fan. I’m the biggest Doja Cat stan, I’m a big Megan fan. It’s just one of those things that doesn’t make sense. Because all of those girls are so different, but people still compare them to each other. For example, Latto – I feel like, stylistically, she’s more like me, but recently, she did a video that was more of a pop-y situation. People used to say she was boring – she’s a really good rapper, I really like Latto – but now everyone’s saying she’s trying to be like Doja Cat. So you’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

PMA: Yeah, people expect artists to exist for their entertainment rather than appreciating the fact that you’re creating something because you want to, and you’re putting it out in the world.

B: Right, because I could just as much make my music and keep it to myself. And I’m happy that there are people that enjoy it and are willing to pay for it. But that’s not primarily what it was for, ever.

PMA: Exactly. So how do you overcome this scarcity mindset to focus on your own work and your own growth?

B: It’s just because I don’t want to be a part of that space – so it never even crosses my mind. I don’t care about a lot of stuff that people expect me to. I don’t want to go to an awards show – if I ever get a chance to, it would still be a big deal; I would go just to see what it’s like, to have the experience. But that’s not a goal of mine. I have completely different reasons for doing this. I

respect everybody else’s reasons, but it’s just not what I’m here for.

PMA: That makes complete sense. Speaking of your reasons for doing all this, I love that you’ve consistently collaborated with Rock Floyd, who is also credited on your new EP, *Cherrytape*. Is collaboration important to you as a musical artist?

B: We’ve grown up together, so we understand each other. It’s like a good childhood friend; you know what each other likes. We just started working with each other out of nowhere, and that’s the person that understands my core sound the most. It just makes it easier to get work done because you don’t have to explain yourself to anybody.

PMA: I get that – I feel that way about the kind of people that I organise with in the community. I think it’s a similar space of not having to explain yourself, and collaborating with other people who are on a similar wavelength to you can create a space for a lot of growth. Do you think collaboration and community have a role to play in creating a better world for everyone?

B: I think they do, but everybody’s so busy fighting – especially in the United States. My family isn’t very supportive, so I’ve just had to build my own family. And it is possible, but sometimes even the people that you thought were always gonna be there end up not being there. People outgrow each other. People are so angry right now – rightfully so – but they’re mad at the wrong people. There’s crazy racism at home – I’m sure you’ve seen what goes on in the US. At least racists are honest. I don’t want no white person who wishes that I was dead, or doesn’t want me to exist, pretending to be my friend.

I understand how discrimination works – but everybody’s discriminatory to a certain extent; everybody has their preconceived notions about people. It’s not nice, and it’s not okay, but that’s just how people are. I just wish that if they don’t like us so much, they would just go away. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with segregation; maybe that wasn’t a bad idea (laughs). Because why would you want to sit in the same place as people that don’t even fucking like you. I feel like communities could exist, but everybody’s just too busy fighting. Now we’ve got vaccinated versus unvaccinated. That’s where I’ve been detaching myself from the labels.

PMA: It’s interesting that you talk about how segregation was potentially positive in some ways. It’s obviously not my place to comment on at all. But I did read something once about how the schools and the facilities were so much better in some areas because Black people were creating these spaces for themselves and were offering the best opportunities to each other.



B: Yeah, and now we're in these spaces where we're begging to be accepted by these people, even years after segregation. Why aren't they giving us awards at the Grammys? Because they don't fucking like us! Stop trying to make these people like us. They don't see our art as art. They don't even see us as human – why would you think they would give us an award unless some money or politics were involved? I get tired of that shit; I don't care to be in a space where people don't want me.

PMA: This is why I work quite hard to create safe and fun spaces for queer people. Because I'm tired of asking others to see trans people or non-binary people as humans. Let's make our own space and be happy in that space – and love each other.

B: Exactly! That makes the most sense to me. Because, of course, there's going to be some pushback and you're going to get hate. They want to make the situation uncomfortable for you because they didn't want you there in the first place. Maybe it's not the easiest thing to do. But even if it was a small get-together that starts at your home for non-binary people, and y'all fundraise for an actual space, it's really possible.

PMA: I completely agree. And, going back to what I was saying earlier, I do think that those spaces that you create with the people that you feel safe with – and where you support one another – have the power to bring about change. Not to change other people's minds, maybe, but at least in keeping people safe and providing them with support.

B: Yes, and that's how you can feel like you belong somewhere. Instead of clinging so hard to these titles, actually have a sense of community. We need community. But everybody has to do better.

PMA: Thank you for sharing this with me. I also wanted to talk about the role that Black people have played in creating these community spaces and driving change. Of course, Black women have always played such an integral role in the feminist movement, for example Angela Davis, who also speaks at length about abolitionism. I know that you spent some time in psychiatric care avoiding juvenile detention. What are your thoughts on the prison industrial complex and abolitionism?

B: I feel like some people definitely deserve to be in jail – but maybe not in jail as it is now. It's a dead end. So maybe a rehabilitation situation. Except maybe people like R. Kelly – he's already had a second chance, this is his second trial for the same shit!

I have a brother that was in jail. I spent a lot of time, when I was younger, going to juvenile – I used to get in

trouble. I've dated guys that got locked up. I just know that when they come home, they're completely different people – and not in a good way. My brother is one of the most paranoid people and his temper is so short. He gets frustrated so fast and he just snaps. That's what jail does to people. And not everybody that's in jail is even guilty. So there definitely needs to be some sort of reform. Because jail as it is now is really inhumane, and it's illegal slavery. I don't think getting rid of it completely is the change that we need, not when rapists and serial killers exist. A lack of policing doesn't mean an increase in crime, but I also know that if we have a system in play, we can know what to do.

PMA: Totally. When we talk about abolitionism, I don't mean completely get rid of the structure. I think the funding should be directed towards community-centred rehabilitation programmes and services that offer mental health support. I just feel like these punitive measures, where if you do something illegal – or if you're perceived to be doing something illegal by the police – you're punished in such an extreme way that's controlled by the state, don't actually inspire people to act well. I think if you instill an idea of community care into society, then it's more likely to be effective.

B: Right, yes – that's definitely how I feel as well. There are people that are in jail for selling drugs for the same amount of time as people that are in there for murdering people – that's fucked up. And then when you factor in the fact that it's probably because of the colour of their skin, that's even more fucked up. Something about the whole judicial system needs to be redone. All this shit is out of date; it's expired. All the people – like George Washington – that came up with these laws and rules are dead and gone. Not once has anybody thought to look back at all this shit and decide that it's time to upgrade.

PMA: Do you think that enough care is provided in these systems for people with mental health struggles? If not, how can this be improved, in your opinion?

B: When I got locked up, I was in Florida. I beat the fuck out of my teacher because she was being mean to me – she pinched me. I don't even remember doing it; I just remember that her face was all bloody. In Florida, it's zero tolerance – if you beat up a teacher, you're going to jail. The only reason that I knew to say anything about killing myself is because I read a lot. I wasn't actually suicidal, but with all of the things that I had gone through that year, something was definitely wrong – I didn't care about school anymore. I got the help that I needed in the hospital, but then it was time for me to go home. Black people have a really big stigma around mental health. So, they were trying to put me on three different types of

medication – medication for ADHD, for depression, and for anxiety – but my mum was like, she's not doing that.

PMA: And what happened?

B: I finally did get medicated for my ADHD, but that just made me feel like a zombie. When I grew up, I was also able to get medication for depression and anxiety, but the depression medication made me suicidal and the anxiety medication they gave me was literally Xanax. It was a recipe for disaster. So I've just been rawdogging [going without] all that shit – I've just been living my life as this slightly mentally unstable person. But I make it work every day because I have to. First of all, there's no free healthcare in the US – it was expensive – but the medication was also making me worse. So, I'd rather live without them because I've learned to make [my mind] work for me. If I'm feeling paranoid, I'm going to write about it. I know that's probably not the same for everybody that has those issues because they're not all creatives or artists, but that's how I've learned to help myself. I don't think any of those systems are in place to actually heal people [in the US] – especially with the opioid crisis. It's really sad – maybe it's better out here, but in the US it's trash, and I really feel like they're just waiting for all the poor people to die.

PMA: It's very sad. It is better in the UK because of the NHS, but even in the past year, Covid has shown that the government doesn't really care about the disabled or the immunocompromised – they just want them to not be a burden anymore. I very much relate to everything you've been saying because I also have ADHD, anxiety, and depression, and I don't take any medication. I just do life. I liked what you were saying about making them work for you, and using music almost as a form of therapy. What role do you think healing through a creative output has to play in helping people who are marginalized and oppressed deal with the world?

B: I feel like that's the basis of creativity, especially in this world. I've watched my friends do performance art, and by the end of it they're crying – it just seems very therapeutic and cathartic. And people who paint have a big release. Even if it's not creative and you just write down how you feel, that can make you feel better. It's about getting those feelings out of yourself in some way. If you sit and hold onto it, then of course you'll be depressed. Even if you just go outside and scream. My kids just scream for no reason – I know that feels good. As adults, we can't scream. I feel like if we could just scream once a day, we'd probably feel a lot better. Just wake up in the morning, brush your teeth, and go scream. It's just a point of release.

PMA: I do wish sometimes that I could go into the woods and just scream – it definitely would make me feel a lot better.

B: I know you don't have guns here, but even shooting feels really good. Sorry, but having that much control over something that could potentially hurt somebody when you're not going to hurt nobody just feels really good. It's a good release.

PMA: How does that play into your thoughts around gun ownership? Do you think that the gun rules in the United States are okay right now, or do you think things need to change?

B: I don't know if the rules need to change, but as long as they're the way they are, I'll own guns. If the police and people in positions of power get to have guns, then I feel like the people should be able to have them. Because the police are crazy as hell. When everyone puts their guns away, then we can change things. Also, in the neighbourhood that I live in, I have to protect myself – I've got kiddies, and I'm by myself. But I do sometimes wish that guns didn't exist because if they didn't, then it wouldn't be an issue. But y'all are out here stabbing each other. That takes a lot of fucking anger. Shooting somebody is easy, but to actually just walk up to somebody and make a knife go through them... It's crazy that so many people are that mad (laughs). If I was mad at you and I had to stab you, I'd probably just let you go.

PMA: I guess the socioeconomic inequalities that contribute to a rise in both gun and knife crime needs addressing, but you're right in that the bigger issue is that guns are wielded by those with power and privilege, like cops. You've just mentioned your kids there, and I think it's awesome that you speak openly about being a mother and incorporate it into your work – and even your name. But you also say, “It's important because it's not important.” It's just an aspect of who you are, but you should still be allowed to be this expansive person! Do you feel that there's a lot of judgement that comes from society on how you should be a parent along with working on your career?

B: Of course there is, but I don't give a fuck. Because they don't help me. Whenever the light bill needed paying, or whenever my kids needed new clothes because the seasons were changing – if the people who had the most to say would just send me a couple \$100 so that I could take care of that, then maybe I'd care. But none of these people that have opinions do anything for my kids, so I can't take that seriously. Even my dad says, “You need to be at home with these kids.” He's so mad that I'm on





*Catsuit LULA LAORA, earrings and cuff RUBY JACK, rings MIMANERA and RUBY JACK.  
Opposite page: Catsuit and coat CHRISTOPH RITTER STUDIO, earrings SAAD COLLECTION.*





tour right now, but I don't have his support at all – and I definitely don't have my mum's support. Anyway, my kids love me. I feel like my kids and I have the type of relationship that if they felt like I was doing something wrong, or if I was hurting them in any way by pursuing my music career, they would tell me. I talk to my kids every day – they're really proud of me. That's what matters to me. People think that just because you have kids, you gotta sit down somewhere. That's really not the case.

PMA: And, how do you think your identity as a Black woman impacts this further?

B: I don't feel like white women flaunt their kids in the way that Black women do. But also, they have nannies. We have to take our kids places with us because we don't have any fucking help. There'd be times – if the show was close enough – I'd just take the kids to the show with me. It's definitely different. Because your kids are always more in the spotlight and people focus more on the fact that you have kids. For some reason, there's this idea that only Black women have multiple kids without being married and that is a negative. That's why I named myself Bbymutha. There's a lot more scrutiny.

PMA: How can we create a world where mothers are supported to thrive in every aspect of their lives, including their careers and their personal romantic lives?

B: First of all, everyone can mind their own goddamn business. That would be so helpful – it'd be a really huge source of support, believe it or not. Also, you know how people say, "It takes a village to raise a child"? I just feel like there are so many women that I know, including myself, that have parents and aunts and uncles, but they're just raising these babies by themselves. When I was growing up, my grandma had no problem with my mum dropping me off at her house so she could get something done. I'd go stay with my aunts for a weekend. I had an aunt that lived in Nashville, and I'd go in the summer for a month. It was no big deal. I don't have that for myself. We do a lot of shit by ourselves and nobody thinks that it's a problem because we're so strong. They think it's a compliment, but it's also insulting. I don't want to be strong all the goddamn time, I could use some help!

PMA: Yeah, definitely. Human society has always involved alloparenting, and it's so sad that there seems to be this disconnect from that with the centering of the nuclear family unit. Speaking of your parents, I know that you have strong opinions on religion, especially with your childhood split between your extremely

Christian mum and Muslim dad. You've also previously said that people should look at all religions and see that they all believe in the same stuff, so they shouldn't be fighting over the specifics. How do you think we work towards a world where we're not divided by religion, but rather bonded by spirituality?

B: It's the same as the gay, queer, lesbian, bisexual, vaccinated, unvaccinated discussion – it's the same thing to me. Your religion doesn't have anything to do with me. Religion is so personal, but we take our personal things and apply them to other people. And if they don't fall in line with what we personally want, then it's a problem. My mum is so crazy – it makes no sense to me. She tries to disown me every three months.

I was on tour with Earl Sweatshirt, and we had a show in Colorado. There was this guy outside of the show with a megaphone saying: "Repent! Repent or you're going to hell." I was drunk, so I got out of the tour bus and started twerking in front of him (laughs). So, of course people were recording it and posting the video on the internet – and my mum saw it. She said, "Why would you disrespect my religion like that?" Bro, that was so funny – can you have a sense of humour? He was harassing us; he was calling all the girls in the line prostitutes for listening to my music. He came down specifically to protest me. And I can't have some fun?

My dad is a little bit more relaxed as far as his religion goes, but nobody's ever approached me trying to be disrespectful in the name of Allah. But he's so misogynistic – it's sickening and it bothers me. He tells me, "You're supposed to be at home cooking," and, "Why've you got those clothes on?" I always keep my hair cut, and he says, "Oh, you think you're a boy." I'm not feminine enough for my dad. He never wanted a daughter to begin with, so there's also that. I wish my parents would just accept me for who I am. I'm not going to be a Christian or a Muslim, but I'm not trying to do anything but accomplish something in my life.

PMA: Yeah, you're just trying to live your life. Even though you're not aligned with your parents' religions, I've read that you found solace in spirituality for yourself while you were homeless. How does witchcraft, tarot, etc. help you navigate your life on a daily basis?

B: It helped me when I was homeless. But I feel so bad because since Covid started, I haven't been that attached to my spirituality. I got lazy with it – I used to do rituals all the time, and it definitely helped keep me grounded. I can't wait until I get to a point where I can do that again, but I'm not there right now – it's probably why I've been losing my mind, because I've been so disconnected from my spirituality. Maybe I do understand why my mom is such a Jesus freak because maybe her religion gives her

that. I have a lot of figuring out about my spirituality to do; I feel like I'm still learning who I am, spiritually. I'm sure I'll find my way back to it but, right now, I've just got to finish this tour.

PMA: That makes sense; I feel like it's almost a lifelong process. I hope your tour is going well so far – the energy at your Corsica gig was incredible! I love the songs on your latest EP, they're for sure going to make everyone want to get on the dance floor. What is the importance of partying and dancing to you in your life?

B: That tape was supposed to be representative of who I was as a 17-year-old. Cherry was my first rap name – I'm so corny (laughs). When I was 16 or 17, my cousins and I had this little rap group called Money Over N\*ggas and my name was Miss Cherry Cocaine. I used to write all the raps for my cousins, and we used to be in class rapping. I'm working on two separate things right now, but one of the albums is going to have a manga attached to it. Cherry is, actually, one of the characters in the manga, so that tape was supposed to be the character introduction to who I was as a 17-year-old. That's why it's more upbeat, party girl. I thought that I was so grown-up – I thought that I was the baddest bitch ever – until I fucked around and got pregnant. I was also in the dance team in high school. Dancing was important to me because it was just fun to do. I thought I was so hot and confident. I liked to go to the clubs and the little house parties and just be cute and try to get male attention. Now, I don't feel like I dance as much as I should because I feel like it's goofy. I'm so weird about certain things, like just performing femininity in general. Overly exaggerating my sexuality just makes me cringe. I don't even like partying anymore; I've outgrown that shit. And I hate clubs – every time I go to clubs, I have a horrible time.

I feel like I've tainted my personal life because I've made myself such a public person. I was in the Truman Brewery area the other day, and three girls walked up to me. I'm OK with people walking up to me if they just speak to me. But they always do some stupid shit, like hyperventilate in your face. I can't have an actual good time when I go out because of shit like that. My idea of a good time is just to sit at home, have some music on, do a little drugs here and there, and chill with my boyfriend. That's my party!

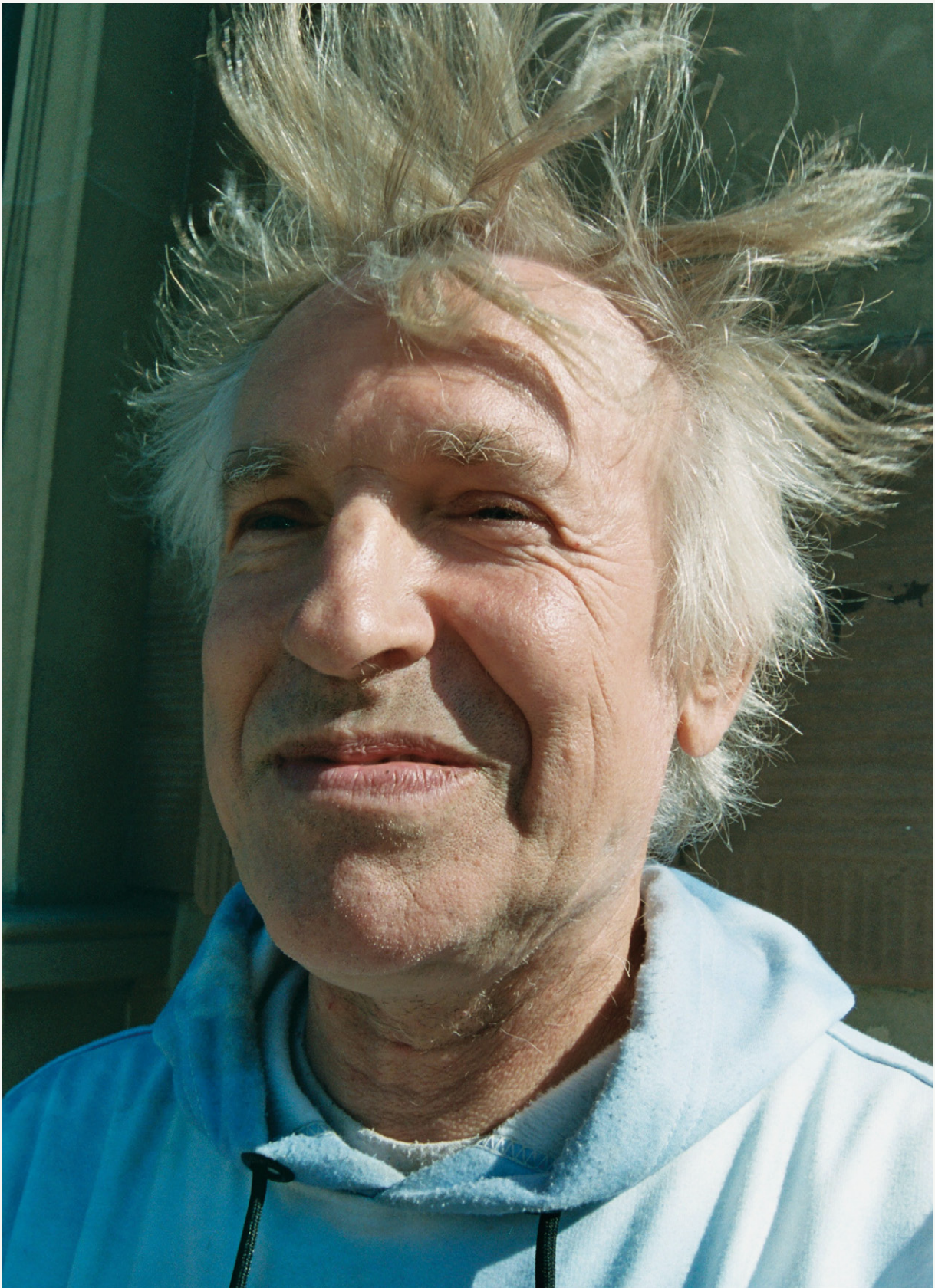


# David Pearce

## INFINITE BLISS

*Words by Denis Yachmenyov*  
*Photography by Asber Penny*

Are we already living in the future? Well, technologically, it might be the case. Already today we can eliminate large portions of suffering from our lives, whether it be by using advanced medicine, biotechnological tools or innovative rejuvenation techniques. But are we responsible enough to make the best of this knowledge and take a leap forward as a species, while ensuring a painless future for every living creature on this planet? This is exactly what David Pearce has been researching for the last couple of decades. David’s work tries to envision the best ways to responsibly use our advanced technology and achieve a new phase of life, where human and non-human animals live painlessly and experience gradients of infinite bliss. This is a voyage into the future, where suffering is a distant memory of the past.





I remember my first psychedelic journey. It was a wild one. I was merely 17 years old, somewhere in a mystical forest in the south of Israel. With the cool, October morning breeze gently caressing my body and mind, and the music perfectly in tune blasting from the Turbosound speakers about 50 meters away from where I was sitting, I felt an inexplicable bliss that stayed with me ever since. Now imagine a world where these emotions could be achieved with no drugs and be as natural as breathing. A world where super-happiness and endless pleasure are part of everyone’s lives.

This is the world David Pearce envisions. A world without suffering, without depression. A world where human and non-human animals live in peace and experience gradients of endless bliss. A highly advanced society where, with the help of biotechnology, we could eradicate awful diseases and pain and live in a state of permanent joy. David’s perspective tries to look at technological and scientific ways to erase suffering completely from our lives and turn this world into a better place. Some might indeed find it perplexing and even repulsive. I’ll be the first to admit that it all sounds slightly too much at first thought. The notion of applying our technology to transform the biosphere completely, to eradicate suffering altogether from all sentient beings, including wildlife, initially sounds like science-fiction. But what’s the alternative? To keep suffering? To witness people in agonising pain and animals slaughtered, either by us or by themselves? Haven’t we experienced enough of this during the past millennia?

We already live in the future. Technology is already implemented in us and is part of our daily existence, be it our phones and screens, which have almost become an extension of our bodies, or delivery drones that provide us with almost anything we desire in practically zero waiting time. And the pace of innovation is only growing substantially as time passes. Already today, we have the ability to change certain traits in the genome of unborn babies, and although it sounds completely outrageous to some, the world seems to be heading towards a new era of so-called designer babies. Are we prepared to accept this as a species and make the best of it in the long run? It depends on us and whether we’ll be responsible enough to stir this spaceship in the right direction.

Denis Yachmenyov: In our current global climate, which is driven by the social media frenzy, there’s a huge polarisation and antagonism about ideas that are the opposite of ours. I want to ask you, do you receive any menacing messages, not to say threats, from people who tend to not agree with your philosophy?

David Pearce: The people who get in contact with me are, almost by definition, atypical. They tend to be either very enthusiastic or very hostile, and not people who just agree with some things and disagree with some others. One thing I try to do with bioconservatives, who tend to be hostile, is just stress that this vision of a world without suffering is ancient. The roots of the

idea of a peaceable world without predation and life based on gradients of well-being are ancient. They really are. From Gautama Buddha to the peaceable Kingdom of Isaiah, who prophesied about the lion and the wolf lying down with the lamb. The actual vision, the ethical vision, is ancient. The difference now is that the technical tools to create such a world exist.

Are we going to grasp the nettle to sort of rewrite genomes, human and non-human, and reprogram the global ecosystem? Or, instead, are we going to preserve the status quo? It’s clearly a very long-term project, the idea of reprogramming the biosphere, but if there were a consensus – and this is a huge if –, one could carry out the abolitionist’s project within a hundred years or so. Another thing I like to stress to sceptics is that the organisational framework for something like this exists in the form of the World Health Organisation. Now, that sounds absolutely daft, but the WHO defines health as “complete physical, emotional and social well-being.” This is a quite extraordinary, jaw-droppingly ambitious definition of health, and the only way to have universal health like this is to tackle the biological genetic roots of suffering.

DY: That’s a very fair point, I think. Your main focus, and perhaps what you are best known for, is the work you have done in the past couple of decades researching the ways that would help us remove suffering from living beings. With the help of gene editing and biotechnologies, we could potentially achieve a state of super-intelligence, super-longevity, and super-happiness. What brought you to think of these ideas in the first place?

DP: Good heavens. I’ve been preoccupied with the problem of suffering in human and non-human animals from a very early age. I recall being at my home’s garden in Guildford as a child and seeing a worm get extracted by a blackbird. I felt sorry for the poor worm. But at that age one couldn’t anticipate reprogramming the entire global ecosystem. Like many small children I was troubled by the notion of death, but of course, I couldn’t see what could be done about it.

Then I stumbled across Robert Ettinger’s *Prospect of Immortality* and cryonics, and I was interested in smart drugs. But the main focus of my work has been the problem of suffering. It essentially consists in working out scientifically literate ways to tackle the problem, instead of just thinking of ways to tackle the problems sociologically and politically.

DY: Could you give me an example, please?

DP: Something like wire-heading for instance. As a teenager, I was entranced when I learned about the experiments of Olds and Milner in what was then called the ‘pleasure centres’ – which should be called the ‘desire centres’ – and how rats, monkeys or indeed humans would compulsively self-stimulate to get the reward. They preferred it to food or sex, and I was incredibly excited by all this. So, the problem of

suffering could be cured, but most people don’t want to become wire-heads. It’s not a sociologically nor ecologically credible solution.

So, after more thinking and ruminating and researching the possibility of designer drugs, I think the only long-term solution to the problem of suffering is going to be genetic engineering. And though it’s a bit of a mouthful, I’ve been very much focused on this idea of re-calibrating the hedonic treadmill and creating an architecture of mind based entirely on information-sensitive gradients of well-being. As I said, it’s a mouthful, but it’s absolutely critical. Because if we are to achieve a global super happiness, the bio-happiness revolution, it’s vital to retain a critical insight, a social responsibility, and this can be done by ratcheting up the hedonic range, the hedonic set-points. One can’t just aim to maximise happiness flat out, because just as uniform depression is inconsistent with high functioning, so is uniform bliss.

DY: I do agree that we must do everything we can to try and eradicate horrible conditions like chronic pain diseases or cancer, yet I find it hard to accept the notion of eradicating all pain and suffering completely. I feel like when we look back at hard times we’ve been through personally, we seem to come out stronger in the aftermath. It’s like climbing the long route up a mountain, in comparison to arriving at the peak with a helicopter. Isn’t the journey as important as the destination?

DP: Candidly, no (laughs). I’ll elaborate on this. Yes, there’s this kind of Nietzschean notion of that which does not crush me makes me stronger. Sadly, all too many people are crushed by life’s setbacks. I mean, yeah, there are the uplifting, heart-warming stories of people triumphing over adversity, but so many people are worn down. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are either chronically or clinically depressed; lots of older people are sort of waiting to die.

One of the advantages of going for information-sensitive gradients of well-being is that hedonic re-calibration doesn’t ask you to give up your existing core values and preferences. Think of what you enjoy doing in life. You will still be able to pursue what you enjoy and what you think is most important even if your hedonic set-point is much higher. In fairness, I should qualify this talk of conserving values and preferences if someone’s core value is keeping his hedonic set-point where it is. Then, clearly, it’s inconsistent with the bio-happiness revolution. But I think the issue of choice is worth stressing. No one is going to force you to be happy against your will. At the moment, pain, misery and suffering are coercive, but shortly they’re going to become optional, and essentially, people ought to be able to choose their own hedonic range and hedonic set-points.

DY: Yeah, we’re such an unpredictable species. It’s sometimes hard to know what we will choose. We tend to surprise ourselves, don’t we? So then, what are your

thoughts on the importance of balance in life? Would we be able to distinguish what real joy means without feeling the slightest pain? Would we really know what it means to not suffer if we’ll never suffer in our lifetime?

DP: Just as there are, tragically, some people who spend almost their whole life below hedonic zero – they are chronically depressed and/or chronically in pain –, it would be cruel to say, well, they can’t really be fully suffering because they can’t contrast their misery with happiness and joy. There are other people, a small minority, who are at the other end of the of the Darwinian range, and they go through life essentially animated by gradients of well-being. They love life and take it for granted, that life is just fundamentally good. So I don’t buy the idea that you can’t appreciate joy without suffering.

DY: You’ve mentioned the massive progress in science, and especially in the biotechnological sphere, which happened in the last couple of decades. What has evolved in your ideas since you first published *The Hedonistic Imperative* back in 1995?

DP: Well, the purely technical objections to the idea of a world without suffering are diminishing. Even The New Yorker published a piece called *A World Without Pain last* year. In terms of my own thinking about what’s feasible, I was completely blindsided by gene drives. What are gene drives? They occur in nature, but one can have synthetic versions of them. Gene drives cheat the laws of Mendelian inheritance and enable biotechnologies, in principle, to drive desirable genes across entire species. Back in 1995, I was reduced to sort of invoking Eric Drexler’s engines of creation and nanotechnology. Intuitively, how on Earth are you going to tackle the suffering of small rodents in Amazonia or obscured marine invertebrates and deep marine ecosystems? It sounds like a lot. How can one do that? With gene drives, this is feasible.

Gene drives are first going to be used probably to defeat vector-borne diseases in Africa. Take the Anopheles mosquito, for example. If one can ensure – and this is one thing we can do with gene drives – that all the offspring of Anopheles mosquitos are born of the same gender, this would drive it to extinction. But if instead of doing this one clicks the desirable gene, for example the *scng* gene, which is the volume knob for pain, and spreads this low pain gene across an entire species, then one could essentially drive these benign variants across entire species and indeed entire ecosystems.

In terms of my own thinking, if you told me 25 years ago that one could spread low pain genes that carried a fitness cost to the individual, I would say that this is just ecologically illiterate. It wouldn’t have occurred to me.

DY: Also, the pace of technological development is so crazy. If a few centuries ago something took 200 years to develop, today it takes only a couple of years, and it seems like this rate of development would only increase in the future.



DP: Yes. We’re not going to run out of computer power. Essentially, every cubic meter of the planet is going to be accessible to micromanagement and control, and while there are plenty of dark dystopian scenarios one can draw – global panopticon, Orwellian superstate –, this technology could be used to create a pan-species welfare state in which all sentient beings are happy.

DY: Well, I certainly hope it will go in the positive direction. I guess it’s up to us. And actually, it brings me to the subject of the social revolution which will be imperative for these ideas to take root. I heard you talking about it in a few podcasts lately, saying how today it sounds improbable because people aren’t ready yet, although some are starting to open up to the idea of genetic engineering. Won’t there always be a certain rejection and disagreement to these kinds of ideas?

DP: Big, big question. I’ll take something like blood transfusions, which at first were revolutionary but now are taken for granted in medicine. What are the rights of, let’s say, Jehovah’s Witnesses or parents versus their children? Could one imagine a future society in which it was completely routine for most prospective parents to choose the genetic makeup of their children, guaranteeing life based on gradients of well-being? What about the refuseniks, let’s say the people who for traditional religious reasons insisted on having children the natural way? What are the rights of parents vis-a-vis their children? Can one imagine totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian states regulating this kind of technology? There are going to be regulations, but I haven’t got a quick, easy off-the-shelf answer for how it can be done. A ban has to be struck. In practice, I wonder whether some states aren’t going to be keener on trying to amplify the intelligence rather than the subjective well-being of their citizens.

Undoubtedly, the parents – and indeed states – are going to take an interest in boosting the cognitive performance of their citizens and not just the subjective well-being. Probably, what is going to be tackled initially in the so-called designer babies are the well-known and well-advertised genetic diseases. Although a lot of people may be uncomfortable about it, I would guess a majority of them will accept therapeutic intervention to prevent something like cystic fibrosis, for example. If you’ve got the ability to genetically screen and choose not to have the cystic fibrosis allele, then go for it. But most people are extremely uncomfortable, and in many cases, hostile to the idea of enhancement. So, a lot depends on how one defines the kind of interventions we are making.

DY: And how can we define them?

DP: If one has the WHO definition of health, then virtually any intervention one makes to boost hedonic set-points, hedonic range, or pain thresholds is going to count as therapeutic. But most people aren’t fully ready yet for the idea of trying to cure depression genetically, and probably most people are not even familiar yet with the idea that we will be able or could already choose

the pain thresholds of our future children. The idea of weighing risk-reward ratios isn’t straightforward.

DY: Let’s talk about super-longevity for a moment. I want to hear your thoughts on the massive explosion in population in the last couple of centuries. According to the World Bank data, only in the last 60 years, the number of living humans on this planet has more than doubled. If we look at a bigger picture, we see how it took 2 million years of human prehistory and history to reach 1 billion people, and only 200 years more to reach 7 billion. It doesn’t seem like it’s stopping any time soon, and I find this mind-blowing. Aren’t we just too many for this planet to contain?

DP: The carrying capacity of this planet is huge, technically. In principle, the planet can probably sustain 150 billion people, but it doesn’t seem like this is going to happen. The current projections are that the global population is going to level off at between 10 and 12 billion.

But let’s go back to ageing. If we master the biology of ageing – I think it’s going to happen despite the fact that it’s going to be horrendously difficult –, then the notion of procreative freedom as we understand it today isn’t going to be tenable – regardless of whether you think the carrying capacity of the planet is 15 billion or 150 billion. You can’t realistically ask people to go to Mars or Alpha Centauri, even if it were theoretically possible, if they want to have kids. Reproduction is going to have to be tightly regulated.

Having said that, I think it’ll be good if having a child is regarded as something absolutely momentous, something to be meticulously planned. There are going to be all sorts of ethical dilemmas, but unlike getting rid of the biology of suffering, it’s not yet possible to go into molecular details of how we can cure the biology of ageing, and that’s why many transhumanists favour cryonics. I would personally favour opt-out cryonics and opt-in cryoethanasia so no one would feel that they’re going to be left out of this revolution.

DY: I heard you mention the Malthusian Catastrophe theory in a podcast lately – a 19th-century theory that predicted how the world would end up in famine and war due to the idea that population would increase faster than the supply of food available for its needs. It seems that, at least so far, we’ve managed to postpone this tragedy, although by paying a heavy price. I mean, we apply methods like factory farming, monoculture farming and GMOs in crops to reduce world hunger as much as possible and keep most of our mouths full – things which already today, but without a doubt in the long run, are destructive to our land. Specifically, the case of factory farming, which you called to abolish on multiple occasions. Do you see any viable, more sustainable solutions to feed all those humongous numbers of people today, without fucking up the planet tomorrow?

DP: If instead of feeding grain and soy products to factory farm non-human animals, whom we then

butcher, we feed grain and soy products directly to people, we can actually sustain a much higher human population and at the same time abolish the horrors of factory farming and slaughterhouses. In practice, this transition is likely to occur due to the growth of cultured meat in animal products, and although factory farming is still growing, I think this century is likely to witness not merely a dietary transition but also a moral revolution in our treatment of non-human animals. They’re closely linked because once consumers can still pick a hamburger over a veggie burger, so long as the price is the same or cheaper, they’ll choose the cruelty-free option and they’d be monstrously indignant with people who don’t. So yeah, the horrors of animal agriculture are likely to disappear later this century, and it is our obligation to do everything we can to accelerate the abolition of animal factory farming.

DY: Yeah, but if we talk about hedonistic desires, some people’s greatest pleasure is to have a real piece of meat or a finely grilled steak, for example.

DP: That’s right. And the thing with cultured meat is that while it’s far easier to mass produce, it’s far harder to produce an artificial steak. I say artificial but there’s no genetic, or needn’t be any genetic engineering. Once the technology is there, I think the transition will happen. Most people are callous rather than malicious. Most people, if being asked, would probably think of themselves as animal lovers, which is poorly seen in the way we’re treating non-human animals. If I thought that a world without suffering, a world without cruelty, would depend on heroic self-sacrifice, I don’t think it would happen. Technology amplifies our capacity to do good just as it amplifies our capacity to do harm, so as long as no personal inconveniences are involved, then I think most people will go along with cultured meat in animal products.

DY: And what about insects, for example? Insect farming became a very popular topic in the UK and the US, and it’s suggested as being an alternative to meat proteins in our diet. Is that something, in your point of view, that might replace animal protein in the future?

DP: No, I don’t think it’s acceptable. I’m not saying that insects should currently be an ethical priority, but a bumblebee, for example, is an entire miniature virtual world. We can more than adequately feed the entire planet using a plant-based diet with synthetically grown artificial meat and meat substitutes. So I don’t favour the use of insects – they are sentient beings! If you think of the current debates in the United States over abortion, they’re outlawing abortions if the embryo fetus is over 6 weeks old. So, if a 7-week-old embryo fetus has rights, so does a sentient being that belongs to a different class or family or phylum. Ultimately, do the humblest minds deserve more protection or less?

DY: Yeah, that’s a very good point. You’ve also mentioned the notion of family planning as a solution, which came

from the Malthusian Catastrophe theory. I’m curious to hear your thoughts on how the idea of family planning can become a more global project in the next century.

DP: Oh my! I’m worried that I’m going to trot out a lot of clichés about education. But essentially, proper access to family planning, notably with the growth of the women’s movement, is showing its signs. But so many babies, even today, are essentially just unplanned accidents. I’m assuming that the same demographic transition that occurred in most Western affluent countries is going to occur in the developing world, and we already see signs of that. But what human population is going to plateau out and whether, as we tackle ageing population, it will then start to soar again in terms of the actual chronology, I really don’t know.

DY: Let’s talk about the ethical groundwork which must be laid if we do decide to pursue this way as a species. I assume that this would be the hardest part and the key to making this transition. I think we agree that today, we are light years away from it – we are simply not ethical enough yet. Too divided in our beliefs. In your opinion, what would be the key factors to attain some sort of a consensus from which we could go forward and pursue a better and painless future?

DP: It’s worth stressing that the vision of a world without suffering or, let’s say, at first a low-pain world before ultimately a no-pain world where life is based on gradients of superhuman bliss, is consistent with a diverse range of ethical traditions. I mean, personally I’m a negative utilitarian, but most people aren’t. When Buddha says “I teach one thing and one only: that is, suffering and the end of suffering,” that is a very negative utilitarian sentiment. But whether you are a scientific rationalist or a religious person, most people are in favour of less suffering. You’ve got to be pretty mean-spirited, or at least very Nietzschean, to be in favour of suffering per se.

In terms of trials, let’s take the Jo Cameron case, for example. Jo Cameron, a retired vegan Scottish school teacher, who never was anxious or depressed, came to the attention of the medical authorities because of her extraordinarily high pain threshold. They found two unusual mutations in her gene that led to extremely high levels of anandamide – the Sanskrit word for bliss. The way that anandamide interacts with the opioid system means that she has a wonderful life and is socially responsible, a pillar in her local community. A couple of genetic alterations mean that her default quality of life is so much better than most people’s! So, if for example, there were to be trials of so-called designer babies that had this mutation and it became recognised as an option to have temperamentally happy, extremely low pain babies, then eventually I think the idea would gain ground.

DY: Yes, but it will take its time...

DP: I sometimes like to reverse the status quo bias and ask people to imagine us encountering an advanced



civilization that has successfully eradicated any form of pain and suffering from its inhabitants; a life based on gradients of bliss, where descendants of ancestral lifeforms graze in their wildlife parks without being physically molested. Would we urge them to bring back an old genome's cruel ecosystems from the past, or would we want to emulate them?

Visions where we can portray success in our lifetime tend to resonate much more deeply than the idea of a long-term species project, but I honestly think we need to have this regulative ideal – and a slightly less ambitious version of the WHO's conception of health. I think it should be, let's say, propagandised for, argued about. Can we lobby the WHO to live up to its obligations?

With Covid-19, we could talk about global consensus. Well, consensus is perhaps too strong of a word given the anti-vaxxers and people who don't believe in the existence of the virus. But anyway, we've reached a sort of broad global consensus and got vaccine rollouts in a year or 18 months. Now, if it were possible to do this with the biology of depression, pain, and other forms of disorder, the abolitionist project could probably be implemented in 100 years or so. But the obstacles are huge. Winning hearts and minds over this idea is an epic battle, and in practice, I think involuntary pain and suffering are likely to exist for centuries to come, but it doesn't have to be that way.

DY: You mentioned how the world got mobilized in tackling Covid-19, and I think it's the sense of emergency that got it moving so fast. But just the other day I read an article about how Jeff Bezos and Yuri Milner decided to invest probably tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in Altos Labs, a start-up that works on new rejuvenation technologies. And it made me wonder: with all this race towards the future, this technological orgy where the wealthiest people in the world compete between themselves as to who has the bigger and faster rocket to reach space, aren't we neglecting the present, which rapidly reaches a critical boiling point? What future would we have to invest in if we couldn't take care of the present?

DP: Somehow, we need to have short-, medium- and long-term strategies. The space race is a singularly striking example of immense waste of financial resources. But there are other contrasting cases. For example, until very recently, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had a much more sensible and rational way to allocate resources. The effective altruists movement, which strongly overlaps with transhumanism, is very much geared to working out what is the most cost-effective way for using our resources now.

But I must resist the temptation to pontificate and pretend that I've got a solution for all the world's problems. I can offer my opinions on everything from the situation in South Africa to the Middle East, but I focus on biology and genetics not because I think the social-political situation is unimportant but because the biological genetic groups of suffering are neglected.

Somehow, we need to balance the short-term strategy together with medium- and long-term planning.

DY: OK, so I want to talk with you about the notion of time in relation to the biological genetic groups. It seems like in our current technology-driven era, which started roughly two centuries ago with the industrial revolution, we widely consider ourselves the masters or owners of this planet. In a fraction of time, we've managed to put the whole ecological system at risk knowing that it has existed for millions of years in a much more equitable way for all species – us included. In your opinion, what's made the few last generations believe that we're so special and important?

DP: I think that the existing era is special in some ways, mainly in this growth of computing and AI. 200 years ago, or even 100 years ago, one might think of suffering in nature as bad, but one couldn't say it was immoral because it was probably seen akin to the second law of thermodynamics – there was nothing that could be done about it. But now, for the first time in history, intelligent moral agents have complicity in the level of suffering in the living world. It's going to be an adjustable parameter. 200 years ago, the idea that the level of suffering in the world was an adjustable parameter would have been unintelligible. But now, particularly thanks to biotechnology, CRISPR, genome editing, and so on, we can choose how much subjective well-being and suffering exist, not just in humans but in all other species. I think we're living in the last century of involuntary suffering, so in that sense, clearly our current age is special.

DY: Well, let's push this button slightly harder and discuss animal suffering. Part of your philosophy and desire aims to reduce suffering substantially in the lives of animals, including wildlife. You talk a lot about how we must work towards the idea of re-programming the biosphere with our technological tools to avoid the pain of a zebra being eaten by a lion, for example. Now, while I completely agree that we must do everything we can to abolish factory farming and slaughterhouses, I find it hard to grasp the idea of interfering in the natural processes of wildlife. I think we've caused so much harm to the environment and to wildlife in the last couple of centuries, that it makes me wonder why do we keep thinking that we can make it better for them by implementing our technologies, such as synthetic gene drives? Isn't that a little too hubris by our side, especially considering the damage we tend to leave behind us?

DP: I can understand the ethic and philosophy of many animal rights activists who think the kindest thing we could do is leave them alone; to get rid of the horrors of factory farming and slaughterhouses, outlaw the death factories, and then let nature be. But we're already intervening on a massive scale in the rest of the living world, so the real question is what ethical principles, if any, should govern interventions?

If one watches a wildlife documentary it's easy to think that nature is idyllic, particularly with David Attenborough's lyrical mood music. One can think, oh, how gorgeous and sublime the wisdom of nature is. But nature is a pretty ghastly place. Most non-human animal lives are nasty, brutal and short. Starvation, predation and disease rapidly carry off most animals at a relatively young age.

DY: Today we're not even closely responsible enough to take care of our own species, let alone wildlife. But of course, in the future, if we increase our capacity for compassion and to be responsible enough to do it properly, then yeah, perhaps it's something that might be envisioned.

DP: It's interesting how, particularly with some wildlife documentaries, a section of the audience gets very indignant: why didn't the cameraman intervene to save the baby elephant rather than allow it to come to a terrible fate? Sure, there are plenty of people who enjoy sort of ultra-violent snuff videos, but the majority of people don't like to see suffering. From the next century and beyond, all suffering is going to be gratuitous.

DY: To conclude this conversation, I would like to ask, how do you see the world in, let's say, 500 years from now? And here, I would like to bring up something that I'm sure you hear a lot from sceptics. Wouldn't we end up in a *Brave New World* kind of scenario? Perhaps a less gloomy one, but where we have a type of a Bokanovski process of embryo selection and conditioning? Where an equivalent of Soma is consumed to retain a highly hedonistic lifestyle in which everyone is happy and lives without struggles and pain? Where everything will be planned and thought for? How does your A.F 620 London look like?

DP: 500 years from now, I'm relatively optimistic. It's surviving the current century that I think is going to be much harder. Let's get the nasty stuff over first. I fear we are sleepwalking towards armageddon; that sooner or later, nuclear weapons are going to be used again in war. Is the war going to be a kind of a local theatre, or will the strategic use of nuclear weapons become complacent? Just as in 1913 or 1914, it might have seemed that one had entered an era of global peace and left the horrors of the past behind; then came World War One. I seriously worry that there is going to be a nuclear war this century, with all the cataclysmic horrors it brings. So I'm not optimistic about this century, to be candid. But 500 years from now, let's assume the technology has matured and involuntary suffering, maybe even all suffering, is a thing of the past. All babies or most babies are designer babies. Are we going to have a *Brave New World*? Even if it has *Brave New World*-ish elements, would a world without pain and suffering really be so bad? Even if there are aspects we find disturbing now, still, when you look at the state of the world today, the almost inconceivable amounts of suffering in humans and non-humans, personally I would settle for a *Brave*

*New World*. But I think one can outline, at least however schematically, a blueprint for a world that is not a Brave New World, which is not a stagnant society like Huxley described. One can outline how it's going to be possible to have tremendous growth of knowledge, we'll be able to safely explore psychedelia, and I think life 500 years from now will be incomparably richer.



# Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

EDUCATION LIBERATES

*Words*  
*Photography*

*CARLA TOMILLO*  
*STEPHEN BURRIDGE*

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka is one of those people who inspire you to be a better person – to share more, to respect more, all while inspiring hope for the future. A model and philanthropist, she combines her fashion career with her life passion and vocation, the work she does through her nonprofit organisation, Malaika, which she founded in 2007.

*Styling*  
*Hair & Makeup*  
*Stylist Assistant*

*MONICA ZAFRA*  
*VIORELA COMAN*  
*LAURA D'AGNELLI*





A leading voice for the power of girls’ education worldwide, Noëlla has created, together with her team at Malaika, an all-encompassing ecosystem at the village of Kalebuka, near her birthplace in southeastern Congo – an area which previously had little or no access to electricity, clean water, education facilities, healthcare, computing or electrified or technology.

Right before helping her children with their homework and putting them to bed – her daughter manages to get her attention at one point of the interview – we chat with Noëlla about the milestones of her organisation, the delicate situation of Congo, the Africa’s heritage and its new young generation and how we can all contribute to a different, smarter world.

Carla Tomillo: As the founder of Malaika, you do very important work in Congo but you’re currently living in the UK. How often do you travel to Congo?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: I go twice a year when I can, when I’m able to travel. I’m actually going to the Congo in 10 days.

CT: Over the last 14 years, Malaika has grown from a one-room schoolhouse to a sustainable model of community, youth education and empowerment. How do you feel about all the achievements to date through Malaika?

NCM: First of all, I feel incredibly proud and grateful, because it’s not just my achievement, but the achievement of my team and the incredible supporters, volunteers, and donors that we have had over these years and all over the world. It’s amazing to now have an accredited primary and secondary education that provides 400 girls with a holistic curriculum, including STEAM – an approach to learning that uses Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics as access points for guiding student inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking. It’s hugely rewarding for us, not to mention the community-driven ecosystem that provides water and food to the region. We have built or refurbished 21 wells providing clean, safe, drinking water at central locations that impact more than 32,000 individuals each year. We have also developed a sustainable agricultural programme that grows organic food on campus, providing students and staff with two healthy meals each day, creating employment opportunities and serving as a platform to educate the community about sustainable farming practices. Finally, we have more than 5,000 people a year coming to Malaika’s community center for vocational training and sports. It’s really an ecosystem that can be duplicated anywhere and more girls can be educated. It’s also amazing that we’re able to offer all of that at no cost. It’s been 14 years of a lot of challenges and a lot of work, but I feel extremely proud and happy.

CT: Quite often we get absorbed by the day to day and we move on without stopping to reflect and value what

we have achieved. What is it that you would say you are most proud of? Is there a special case or a specific milestone that gives you the strength to continue despite the difficulties that may exist?

NCM: I’m very excited to see our first student graduated in two years. That will be an incredible milestone for us and will make me incredibly proud. When the students come to us, they’re malnourished and don’t have much when it comes to an aspiration in life, and shortly after having two nutritious meals a day in our canteen, as well as experiencing an empowering education of a leadership school, they are physically and mentally stronger and start to imagine a future they would have never imagined. People in the village live a day on very little, so the kids come from a very poor background and, when they come to our school, we see them growing in every aspect. It’s really beautiful to see them achieving so well in school, physically, intellectually, and in terms of all what they want to achieve. Anna wants to be a businesswoman. Elisa a teacher. Louise a computer engineer. And Jeanne wants to become a journalist or a doctor one day.

It also makes me proud to see the empowerment of the women in the community who come to our community center to learn literacy, numeracy, and play sports. There, they also learn to sew and we have created with them a business called “Mama Ya Mapendo” (Mothers With Love), where they sew accessories and then we sell them at local shops and at the Malaika center.

CT: You didn’t have an easy childhood yourself. After the tragic passing of your father when you were just five years old, your mother made the painful decision to have you educated abroad since she had no means to support you. First in Belgium and then later in Switzerland. What was it like growing up away from your family and your native country and culture?

NCM: It was extremely challenging. When I was abroad, I didn’t grow up in a loving environment, everything was different. And it’s overwhelming being thrown into a new culture at such a young age, not having your mum, your dad. I missed terribly my mum and my dad, and only spoke to my mum a few times on the phone and exchanged only a few letters. I didn’t see her again until I was 18 when I returned to the Congo, but that experience taught me to be resilient, to take the best opportunities that have been given to me and to really use them to give back.

CT: You graduated in Business Management before turning your focus to modelling. How did you experience your time working for important fashion and beauty firms such as Roksanda and MyTheresa or Net-a-Porter, and appearing in magazines like Vogue?

NCM: It was really great to be able to work with so many different people who were creative, smart and

hard working. Also, to travel and sort of be a different character every time with every photo shoot. In my head I always wanted to do something for my country, for girls’ education worldwide, but I’m extremely lucky to have worked with so many different brands and different people and to have made a living from modeling, because it’s such a competitive job.

CT: As you said, you returned to Congo at the age of 18 for the first time. What did you find there? What shocked you the most?

NCM: It was such a beautiful country with so much potential, but the problem is completely the lack of basic needs for the population, which is not widespread. We have lack of water, lack of electricity, lack of infrastructure and everything. It was very shocking for me, that living condition, and I really wanted to make a change. In fact, that is the reason why you need to educate kids and elevate them, so that they can be in control of their own country. Congo is one the richest countries, it has a beautiful rainforest and vast reserves of minerals and natural resources in general. So, we have such a big role to play for the environmental issues, but we need strong leadership. We need an educated young generation that will really guide. We need to rewrite the history of Africa.

CT: That made you found the Georges Malaika Foundation in 2007, in honor of your late father, which later became simply known as Malaika. The four pillars of Malaika’s ecosystem approach are education, the community center, agriculture, and water and health. You claim that this sustainable model can be duplicated in communities around the world.

NCM: And we’d love to see our model duplicated. That’s why we want to share it with governments, with NGOs, with different organisations, individual people, cooperatives, but we aren’t going to replicate it ourselves, because it’s a massive responsibility and the fundraising is very tough. So, we hope to have some people, some organisation, that wants to replicate the model, either the ecosystem that we have created, the school community center, water sanitation, agriculture, or just whatever they will. This will allow more organizations and individuals to empower themselves into a better, healthier and more equal future based on their specific needs.

CT: Your first pillar is education. We can argue that education is not enough, that we must also provide professional opportunities for tomorrow. We know that there are opportunities abroad, but how do you make sure that the young women and girls you educate and empower can develop their future in Congo?

NCM: If they were not at Malaika, they will probably get pregnant at a very young age, or they will get married.

So, with Malaika, we are not only empowering their lives, we’re saving their lives and educating them, and it has a ripple effect in the community. We’re also teaching the parents and the siblings coming to our community center, and we’re providing them with sexual education as well. We really make an effort to make the families understand that education will elevate and really help them all.

CT: Let’s move now for a bit to the other side of your work. You have launched several collaborations with brands and designers to raise funds for the organisation, thus combining your two great vocations and taking your passion for philanthropy to an industry that has many times been called frivolous. How is your relationship with fashion today?

NCM: I’ve been extremely lucky because the fashion industry has been a great source of support, it has been really helping us. For instance, I’ve collaborated with MyTheresa for their campaign on International Women’s Day, where, along with three other women, they donated funds to the foundation of our choice, and my choice was, of course, Malaika. I also worked on a campaign with the rental platform HURR, where they asked ten powerful women to give an outfit or two or three, and we were able to rent them out and all the money went back to Malaika. So, a lot of brands that I’ve worked with, they either give a donation to a foundation that they care for or to my foundation.

CT: Do you always ask the brands you collaborate with to get involved in your social work somehow?

NCM: Yes, whenever I can, I ask them to really try to donate. But I don’t earn any money from Malaika, I volunteer, I lead. So, I try to do my best with the fashion industry, but you cannot push them too much. The fashion industry has been very badly affected, many of my friends lost their jobs. It’s not been easy.

CT: Often a “pretty face,” as it is said in a mundane way, can open many doors yet, at the same time, lead to prejudices or place you in a category. Have you ever felt that you should try harder than other philanthropists or activists to break possible prejudices or be taken seriously?

NCM: Definitely, you have to prove yourself twice. Being a woman at the head of the foundation, and Black and African, of course, it’s not been easy at all. But people don’t donate money because you’re pretty, but because of the work that you’re doing and the impact you have. We have to be very transparent about how we spend the money and our achievements. Running a foundation is like running a business.

CT: It is a pity that historically, and even today in many societies, women are considered as inferior beings, our





*Shirt Kansai Yamamoto at Relik, trouser ILYES OUALI.  
Opposite page: Jumpsuit ILYES OUALI.*



rights are limited, and certain roles are attributed to us. Also, even in the most developed countries, like our own, being a woman still comes with many stereotypes and there is a lack of equality in many areas such as in work or business. How can we deal with this inequality on a day-to-day basis?

NCM: We have to work hard. We have to close the gap. Not only for women, but also the digital gap. We need to really work together, to believe in everything that we’re doing, and have boys in the conversation too and educate them. I’m a mother of a boy and a girl, and you have to be very careful about which language you’re using to not make your children feel inferior.

CT: For you, what is the most beautiful, powerful or special thing about being a woman?

NCM: To be a woman is to have your own voice, to be yourself. For me, the most special thing about being a woman is giving birth, holding your child for the first time in your hands. Also, to feel related with other women. I feel so grateful to be surrounded by so many women that elevate each other and are always there to help one another.

CT: What are you most proud in your African heritage? What does it mean to you?

NCM: I’m super proud of being African, of the culture, of the education we receive, of our mother land, the diversity, the culture, the music... And the current generation that is so resilient. I can’t wait to see how Africa will really evolve thanks to this young generation, because the population is so young. They’re going to be the ones that are going to really push boundaries and make a change. And it’s beautiful to start to witness that even more.

CT: What differences do you see in the way of raising and the values in which girls are educated in the Congo compared to more developed countries?

NCM: First of all, I see a big change. The girls that I have in Malaika don’t have electricity at their home. They don’t have water, TV, nor a mobile phone. So, they have their own personality. They’re understanding, they try to listen to the radio or the news to know what’s going on in the village where they leave. So, it’s a completely different perception.

CT: And in terms of values?

NCM: We have a lot of respect for the elders. I’ve always been educated to look after my parents, respecting and helping them. But it is not a bad culture in Europe or abroad. I believe it all comes from the household; every parent educates the children the way they think best. It also depends on what is accessible to the children: the

education system, the infrastructure they’re living in, and their food... The girls at Malaika eat maybe twice a week at home, so they’re very grateful when they come and have food at the table.

CT: You’ve been recognised globally as an authority on children’s education. Did you imagine when you were little that you would get to speak in front of large audiences in Davos, UNICEF, the UK Parliament or the European Parliament?

NCM: Totally no. Everything that I’ve been doing has been out of this world, from my modeling career to being a mother and having two healthy kids. But I’ve worked so hard, it’s been quite a challenge, and I believe very strongly in everything we’re doing, because our work is very impactful and it is solid. So, I’m extremely grateful for everything that we’ve been achieving. I opened the Plenary Session of the Clinton Global Initiative with Bill Clinton and hosted a Congolese art auction with Princess Caroline of Monaco, and I’ve also spoken in many different schools. In fact, it is one of my favourite things: to speak at schools. It’s very special to understand kids and how they see the world. But at the same time, I’m very lucky to speak at global stages because that’s where the big decision-makers are and we have to push them to keep investing in education and basic needs, to give every child in the world the chance to go to school. And not only accessing education that will just make them “normal” and won’t be able to make them successful, but accessing quality education that is relevant to 21st century skills.

CT: More recently you received an award from the House of Mandela at the Nelson Mandela centenary celebration. What was the experience like and what has it meant to you?

NCM: It was amazing. A journalist I was interviewed by a few years ago called me and said: “Noëlla, the Mandela family has been following your work and wants to speak with you because they’re doing an event and they’re thinking of giving you an award. Can I give your mobile number and e-mail to the daughter of the Mandela family?” And I thought, okay, she’s going to give my number but they’re not going to call me.

CT: And she called...

NCM: She called me and said, “I’ve been following what you do and I love it, it is incredible. I would love to give you an award on the Mandela 100 Years celebration, we have to choose a few people. Would you like to come to the Mandela house?” It was amazing to spend three, four days with the Mandela family, to see where Mandela used to stay, to read a book, to meet his children and grandchildren, and to see the legacy that’s still alive of everything that he did – he fought for freedom with dignity and power. I think we all need to have a legacy

and teach our kids about that. That’s what we’re teaching a lot at Malaika: values. You can be intellectually strong, but if you don’t have values, if you don’t understand the power of giving back and the power to stand first for yourself, you won’t be successful. The Mandela 100 Years celebration was really unbelievable and I’m deeply grateful.

CT: We set out this Autumn/Winter 2021 issue around one question, which encompasses an endless number of further questions: is another world possible? A better world, a different world? What do you think?

NCM: Yes, I think a better world is possible. First, we have to save the planet, be careful. Then, we have to achieve equality among children, and we need to get out of this crisis of Covid. I believe we need to work all together to make a better world.

CT: Precisely in the wake of Covid, we have become aware that life can change for us suddenly. I also have the feeling that we have all drawn a series of reflections or vital lessons that have changed us in some way, or at least our way of seeing the world. How have you experienced the pandemic and what are some reflections that you have extracted from your experience?

NCM: It was tough. With two children, I had to do homeschooling with them, to cook, to tidy, to clean... On top, to keep fundraising for Malaika, to keep the team together, seeing the donations falling apart and being so much in demand to speak at these virtual events. So many Zooms... But you have to keep your family healthy and happy. I’ve always been travelling quite a lot, so for me to be at home with my family for one year and a half was extremely special. It was tough but it was great. I’m very grateful that we had this moment to be all together – me and my husband and our two kids. But I saw many of our friends and family relatives lose their lives, and many friends that lost their jobs. So it’s not been easy for everybody, and we’re lucky that we’re healthy. What I learnt is that you have to live in the moment, every second of your life, and be grateful of what you have and of your health.

CT: What do you think each of us can do to contribute to that better world? How can we change things?

NCM: Right now, we all have to concentrate on our lives and be happy. We have to look after our planet and make sure that we don’t over-consume buying things that we don’t need. We just have to make sure that we are conscious of the crisis that we’re in with climate change, and we have to push our governments and all of us to be careful about the way we consume everything that we have around us.



*Full look LOEWE.*



# Antwaun Sargent

## OPENING CLOSED DOORS

*Words by Esosa Aiworo*

*Photography by Lluna Falgàs*

Antwaun Sargent, a name familiar to all art lovers, has gained his reputable credentials by redefining the fixed ways in which we tend to view art. His teachings have allowed us to expand our knowledge on the truths that hide beneath the surfaces of these creative spaces. Truths that have caused the restrictions, overlooking and dismissal of what society has deemed marginalised voices. However, with Antwaun's multidisciplinary roles as a curator, writer, and critic, he's gained an open place to raise these concerns and actively be the catalyst to rebuild these changes. With his rich knowledge on History and Art History, he delves into the root causes of these misconceptions and simply begins to erase them with the brilliant works of artists who demonstrate that Black art deserves its pedestal in the art industry without a need to prove otherwise.





Having started his career as a curator in 2017, Antwaun has since put out multiple exhibitions showcasing the brilliant and diverse pieces formed by these creatives, one of which being the *Social Works* series. This year, Sargent curated his first edition of the critically acclaimed exhibition *Social Works* at the Gagosian Gallery, New York, and the second edition in the London Gagosian, in which he presented works from multiple different artists located around the African diaspora and brought them together to create a show that not only spotlighted the branding of each individual creative, but also sent a message relaying the importance of representation.

Whilst Sargent and I tour the *Social Works II* exhibition, he discusses with me his role as a Black curator in the art world and describes his mission to share artists of colour with the world as a passive pursuit, not active, which I think is an important point to raise as it reminds us that, to a huge audience, this is not ‘Black art’, it is simply art, and it just needs to be shared. Views such as these have travelled the paths of history, with philosophers such as Franz Fanon discussing the inherited guilt that white audiences feel when displaying or critiquing works of art by people of colour – as Sargent also explains this leads to the unfortunate act of tokenism, an over-flux of representation that can be received as ingenuine. However, Sargent’s authenticity can be seen all over his book, *The New Black Vanguard*, and shows like *Social Works II* as we are shown a variety of both visual and conceptual motifs that reference themes of community, culture, and collaboration. Antwaun provides us with a new vision, a new way of experiencing and, because of this, a rebirth of the art world as we know it.

Esosa Aiworo: At its core, the focal points of *Social Works II* stemmed from the relationship between space and social and artistic practice from the African diaspora. In what ways does geography hold an importance when it comes to the expression of identity?

Antwaun Sargent: Beautiful question. *Social Works II* focuses on eleven artists from across the African diaspora reflecting on how we are made and remade in location. The exhibition thinks about location as memory, location as identity, location as history, and location as new material. I believe geography plays a very important role in what you see in the show, from David Adjaye’s rammed earth sculptures, which are made from British soil, to

Grace Wales Bonner’s installation, which is a sort of shrine to the Black Atlantic in terms of sound, silence and knowledge.

You also have people like Isaac Julien, who tackles Frederick Douglass’ voyage from America to Scotland as well as the power of art and images in shaping identity and the possibilities of identity. There’s also Tyler Mitchell reflecting on his native Georgia – landscape, and the ways it binds us, the ways that we are connected, but also about the history of segregation that came from redlining the American South. Then, you also have Alexandra Smith, who uses author Jamaica Kincaid as a point of departure to think about world building. So, it’s thinking beyond the here and now to what might be possible.

EA: It’s easy to grasp the concept of location as memory, identity, or history. But thinking of it as new material might be more abstract. Can you guide us through that?

AS: In terms of thinking about location as material, you have this room over here with works by Tyler Mitchell and Grace Wales Boner that have a domestic stress. You also have Rick Lowe’s work tackling the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma, massacre – this work marks the event’s centennial. These paintings are from his *Black Wall Street Journey* series, where he uses \$100 bills as the collage element to talk about mapping and connections. The use of red refers to violence but also Tulsa itself, because the city’s ground is made of red clay. And then, black represents notions of identity, notions of blackness as in darkness. Finally, the green talks about generational wealth. All three colors combined might imply notions of the pride community. That’s all at play in his abstract work.

You also have folks like Manuel Mathieu, who is a Haitian-born, Canada-based artist stressing the possibilities of how you render yourself psychologically. And then Khalil Irving, who explores the possibilities of the street and the sky through his floor sculptures. He’s from St. Louis, Missouri, and these pieces are supposed to mimic the city’s asphalt but also suggest the night sky. So, the audience is challenged to think about what’s possible on the ground while also thinking about the sky as a possibility of limitlessness. So, embedded in his works are these debris that you might find on the street – something that resembles an oil slick as well as a galaxy. You have this interplay between a concrete set of

possibilities and the expansiveness of the universe. And here, if you look closely, that’s him.

EA: That’s incredible! There are so many layers in each artwork.

AS: Yes, it’s amazing. It ties in with some of the video work because this shows an intergenerational conversation, but it’s also a conversation between material and media. The video piece by Isaac Julien, titled *Lessons of the Hour*, is about the past, the present and the future. It follows loosely Frederick Douglass’ voyage from America to Scotland, right to England. It also has these moments of sweeping landscape of cotton fields, these moments when Douglass gave his famous speeches between 1881 and 1885 when he talked about the liberating possibilities of image-making.

In the height of American Civil War, you have a critique of what is possible with photo, with image-making, with art. For me, this is an affirmation of what this show is trying to do. This is the London premiere of Julien’s piece, so it’s great to have all these dynamic conversations bouncing on and off each other to try to make meaning.

EA: Yeah, all these works have a dialogue going on between them. And I think that’s what makes it so special and much more evocative.

AS: Exactly. There are all these different conversations, whether they’re material or in terms of social themes, happening in the space of the gallery, which allows us to have a deeper consideration of what’s possible. I think that’s what it is when you have a group of artists come together to present in an exhibition. You want to have that dynamism, that dialogue. You want to have some tension.

EA: I agree, and that leads to my next question, which is about how the focus on the African diaspora draws parallels to the theme of community, which is very prevalent in these works. So, how do these works and artists define the Africa of today?

AS: It’s about the African diaspora, so I’d say it’s more about multiple locations. It speaks to the dynamic exchange of ideas and how folks in really particular locations need to grapple with those histories and what those histories might say about the identity or the way that

people might live in those locations. So, I’d say the works and artists talk about each of these places, from Tulsa to St. Louis, to Georgia, to sort of the universal space of a Black living room, to the Afro-Atlantic conjured by Grace, to Britain itself with David Adjaye and Lubaina Himid.

Those all think about how we are made and remade in location. I say that because it’s important to know that in those spaces we’re not just going from one space to the next, we might have to be different, and I think that’s interesting because you have all these artists thinking about these questions in dramatically different ways. It shows up in the artworks they produce but also in the materials they’ve chosen. David’s work, in some ways, is about the passage of time. It’s about how we sort of think through who we become over time, and that has been incredibly important.

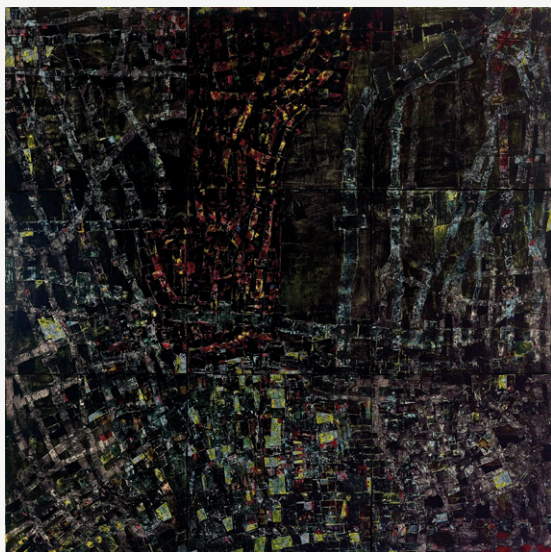
EA: Yeah, especially with the mention of that beautifully nostalgic Black living room aesthetic, and how it’s a way of bringing home to home and then into this space.

AS: Exactly. The Black living room has been such an important space for us to be in and have shelter, but also for us to envision who we are because that has been one of the very few safe spaces – the home right for us in this world. So, I think that if we’re going to talk about space and place, you have to think about that space that has been so incredibly important to the rendering of our interior selves, but also our exterior selves.

EA: Exactly. This is the thing I get especially excited about when I see exhibitions in London that educate about Black history and Black artists especially. How would you say that global representation of Black artists ties in with your goals as a curator?

AS: For the last ten years, I’ve been a writer, critic and curator, and I’ve always wanted to focus on concerns of Black artists, artists who are living and working within the African diaspora. Sometimes, that also means Brown artists, like Sumayya Vally, for example, from Joburg [Johannesburg], who is very much a part of the diaspora and the experience of the diaspora, in particular in a place like London, where there’s such a rich history of Black and Brown folks working together for liberation. I had to acknowledge that with the inclusion of someone like her,





RICK LOWE. *Black Wall Street Journey #17 (Greenwood)*, 2021.  
Photo: Thomas Dubrock. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.



KAHLIL ROBERT IRVING. *Dreams in the line and memories* (/whipped), 2021 (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.



ISAAC JULIEN. *To See Ourselves as Others See Us (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2021.  
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd. Courtesy of Gagosian.



TYLER MITCHELL. *Georgia Hillside (Redlining)*, 2021.  
Image courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, and Gagosian.



GRACE WALES BONNER *Darkness and Light*, 2021.  
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd. Courtesy of Gagosian.



*LUBAINAHIMID. A Fashionable Marriage: The Art Critic, 1986.*  
*Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.*  
*Courtesy of Gagosian.*



who, through her sculpture, thinks about how we create moments in spaces of gathering. I think it's important that we continue to push against this notion that representation is just one thing.

EA: It can be multiple things – and it is multiple things!

AS: I believe the works speak directly to that because you walk in but you're not getting one take on what identity, memory or history are.

EA: Especially when you walk into the room as well, you can see the different dynamics that bounce off each other through each work. And that's what creates that communal space, which is great because it's art from different places. So it's just like that harmony is represented through one underlying theme, which is community. What are some of the misconceptions about the African diaspora that you attempt to raise in an exhibition such as this?

AS: Interesting. I don't know if I'm necessarily interested in misconceptions. I'm interested in the conversations that these artists are trying to have because I'm not sure it's our job to educate the audience. I don't know if that's our burden. I think that the show is generous and that it invites everyone from all walks of life to come in and see the points of view of the artists who are working and making. But I leave the misconception thing to other folks.

EA: I agree with that and, like you said, it's not anyone else's responsibility but the viewers' to educate themselves on those things. It's interesting because your identity as an artist varies from your role as a writer, to your role as a curator and even a sort of influencer and critic. Do you often have an ease with identifying with multiple labels?

AS: I personally don't have an urge, nor is there an urge to stick to one. I don't care about any of the labels. I just care about the work, and the work is the work, so I just try to do the work that I'm drawn to.

EA: Where did this interest in curation spark?

AS: I was writing, and curating comes out of there. I always like to say that curating is writing with objects. That's where it came from. I was writing, and then I started to go to shows and thought, what if I just put this here? Or maybe this artist should be here? And then I thought, oh, maybe you need to do your own shows.

EA: That's such a fascinating way of describing it. So, when exactly was that realisation?

AS: I started curating in 2017 so not long ago. I'm very new.

EA: You've mentioned that a lot of your artistic developments are formed through your interest in, obviously, art history, but also the dialogues between similar themes from past and present works. What is your relationship with the way that art has been globally represented in the past?

AS: Really good question. I think you're always in dialogue with history, and it's important to do so. But being in dialogue doesn't mean you always have to respond to it, right? So it's an acknowledgment that then frees you up to do whatever else you want to. A lot of the artists in the exhibition are obviously in dialogue with history and bringing that through. Lubaina's work reflects on history and colonialism, the British art press, and the history of that. There are a lot of different points of departure, which is what makes this exhibition very, very generous in general. It allows multiple folks to approach it from their diverse perspectives and walks of life.

EA: Especially with works like these – which make a direct reference to the old, outdated themes that have cropped up throughout art history and act as a mirror to create something new.

AS: Exactly.

EA: You've mentioned in the past how important your collaborations with these artists are, as well as the relationships formed with the artists as individuals. How does getting to know the artists on a personal level help you to connect and deliver the work that you put out?

AS: It's always a real dialogue between the artists and I. I have a personal connection to all the ones in the show. It really is about that dialogue. Sometimes it leads to the making of a sculpture; other times it leads to writing or a conversation. For example, I featured Tyler Mitchell's work in my first-ever exhibition. And then we stayed in contact, we stayed in dialogue. He later was in my photography book, *The New Black Vanguard*, and now he's in this exhibition. It's all a matter of dialoguing and establishing long-term relationships with artists, how

you can be in conversation with them, hopefully, over a lifetime.

EA: And that's the important thing, because obviously, it's alright having it for one show, but then the key is, how far are you going to push each artist's work for more to come?

AS: Exactly. David, this is the second exhibition that we've done, and so it's not just about one show or one work of art. It really is about ethos, aesthetic, or practice.

EA: In your conversation with Bernard Lumpkin, you discuss the role of a patron. Interestingly, you highlight that the lack of diversity within these art spaces isn't solely a financial issue but instead a sort of historic bias against including people of colour on these boards. Where do you see this change towards rebuilding the system starting from?

AS: I think that we all have an obligation to be the change. That's why I'm at a gallery like this, you know? That's why I'm involved in museums, and that's why I write. I think it's important. Yes, be critical, do all the things, but also be the change.

EA: Yeah. The art world, like you've mentioned, has very little room for artists of colour, and many people view traditional art forms such as sculpture and painting as outdated. How does the work that you write about approach these misunderstandings towards traditional art forms, especially with Black artists producing these?

AS: I believe that sculpture, painting, photography and video installation are very much alive, and this exhibition proves it. So, maybe it's not so much about the medium but about who we've allowed to make works that we show in those mediums. It's making sure the art world is broadening and thinking freshly about those mediums to make them live.

EA: Speaking of photography, in 2019 you released a beautiful art-centred book titled *The New Black Vanguard*, where you discussed matters surrounding Black identity through the lens of young Black photographers. What was your inspiration behind this project?

AS: I just thought that folks needed to know about these young image-makers that I was seeing. And I just felt

like if I didn't do it, no one else would have taken that work seriously. And now, when you see it, it's literally redefining a lot of our conversations – especially popular image-making. I mean, these photographers are everywhere now, which is great!

EA: Tying that in with your relationship with the Gagosian gallery, I think it's important to highlight your role as director here because you're not only redefining the way that we view art, like you mentioned in the book, but you're also creating a space for marginalised voices. Do you ever feel pressured by your role as director to create these spaces? Or is it something that just feels natural?

AS: It feels natural because these artists aren't on the margins for me, they are very much in the centre. That's where I operate from – as if we are the centre. That's what we all need to be doing. I don't get hung up on anything other than doing the work that I'm here to do.

EA: What's something that you've learned about yourself through the role here at the Gagosian?

AS: Great question. That I can be really ambitious? Because being at a place like this gallery allows for ambitious thinking. I'm so happy to be a part of a gallery that is about ambition and allowing artists to lead conversations, and for us to work in service of those artists' visions, produce them, and make them seen, make them known.

EA: You've expressed your concerns in the past surrounding matters of tokenism within the art world and the over flux of Black artists that circulate the scene without being entirely ready to deliver their works. For example, artists who are just being put on shows because of their race, rather than the actual quality of their pieces. Where do you think this issue stems from? This need to feature artists only because they're Black, basically.

AS: In my opinion, people are rushing to try to address historical erasure. Maybe we should slow down and consider how we got here. If we did that, then there wouldn't be a need to rush because the engagement would be over as many years as it has taken us to get here. I think that's the shift that needs to happen, not the race to put on this show to virtue signal that you're not racist or whatever.





EA: Yeah, because in the long term, it's not going to be effective. It's not going to work.

AS: It's not going to be effective in the long term, so it's not going to be sustainable. That's tokenism. I want something sustainable. I want to do these shows for twenty, thirty years – not just in this moment because that's what's important.

EA: I think the correlation between temporary actions and the impulse of tokenism just go hand in hand. So, the point of this isn't to, like you said, make it last for a second; it's supposed to last for a future.

AS: The passage of time. It's so poetic.

EA: So, the theme of METAL's issue is Reboot, Rebuild, Reborn, and it's clear that these themes are fundamental in the work that you produce. In what pieces in particular do you feel that these ideas are demonstrated the most?

AS: Rebuild is one of the central themes here. You have artists who are thinking about what worlds may be possible beyond the one that we are now. And, so, what you have is a call or demand to rebuild the world because it's no longer working. David's works speak to that; Alexandra Smith's work speaks to that; Grace Wales Bonner's work speaks to that; Kahlil Irving's work speaks to that.

EA: Historically, art institutions have obviously had their racist pasts and, in more recent years, these institutions have reflected upon these issues and made statements apologising for this. But, what is your take on the effectiveness of these statements?

AS: We should have fewer statements and more action. Period.

EA: Nothing more, nothing less. A great example of that would be the Tate galleries. I mean, they issued an apology for their racist past, but then they still have the mural up in the restaurant.

AS: Exactly. Fewer words, more action.

EA: I think artists like Himid respond to these conversations through their work perfectly making use of satire and politics.

AS: Yes, this work is from 1986! And it has long been calling these institutions to act. That's what she's talking about with rebuild, that's what we need. And that's why it was important to have this historical work here, so we could show that this is not just this moment, it's not new. It's not a fad. It's like you really need to address the whole history.

EA: For sure. I'm so happy that this is included in this exhibition.

AS: Yeah, because it really anchors it.

EA: After Covid, the world as we know it has been obviously disfigured and we've been forced to adapt. What were your initial feelings towards this change?

AS: My feeling was that we need to commit to the work and recommit ourselves to the work. And, although this feels new, strange and weird, the work is the work, and we have to do it.

EA: A medium that got us through this pandemic was technology, allowing us to reconnect in ways that we had never thought of while also creating innovations in the way that we share art and our stories. In what ways do you feel like you've relearned to use the technology around you to continue your creative ventures?

AS: It just sort of forced me to keep thinking about how we can reconnect back in person. It made me think about how that IRL connection is just so critically important. Yes, I used Zoom and all those things to get through, but I was trying to get back to a moment like this, standing in an exhibition that I've curated alongside great artists, so people can come in and have that personal connection. We need that personal connection.

EA: It's the main driving force when it comes to art anyway. Being physically present.

AS: Exactly.

EA: My final question is, ultimately, what would you say would encourage a rebirth in our industry?

AS: Ambition. Put on ambitious things that explore scary ideas. Do the work.



# Ryunosuke Okazaki



WEARING PRAYER

*Words*

*SOPHIE WILSON*

Where we grow up can shape us. Hiroshima, a city whose tragic past still looms large, is Ryunosuke Okazaki’s hometown. The designer was born there 50 years after the atomic bomb was dropped that devastated the city and its people. In its aftermath, pacifism was met with renewed fervour globally, but particularly in Japan where peace monuments, parks and museums were created to ensure that we never forget the past. Ryunosuke felt the weight of his home city’s dark history from a young age, with peace, prayer and Japanese culture permeating his avant-garde designs today.

ALL WARDROBE BY RYUNOSUKE OKAZAKI SPRING/SUMMER 2022 COLLECTION, BOOTS NATACHA MARRO.

Photography  
**Toki**

Styling  
**Shotaro Yamaguchi**



Starring  
**Kanon Hirata, Gendai, Ame**

Hair  
**Shingo Shibata**

Makeup  
**Asami Taguchi**



Ryunosuke’s clothes stand out for their bold futuristic and architectural design. Commanding geometric shapes protrude from the body in all directions and surrealist ruffles swathe models from head to toe. The designer graduated this year with an MFA in design from Tokyo University of the Arts, where he gained acclaim as the first prize winner at the Graduation Exhibition. His graduate collection, *JomonJomon*, took inspiration from Jomon-era pottery, where vessels were imprinted with elaborate designs using rope, making them more decorative than functional. The people of the Jomon era channelled their wishes and prayers into these creations. They saw God in nature at the same time as fearing the sublime threat posed by natural disasters, knowing ultimately that the whims of nature were beyond their control.

The pandemic that has ravaged the world for almost two years now has been a stark reminder that we are still at the mercy of nature, no matter how socially and technologically advanced we become. It’s easy to feel powerless in these circumstances. To counteract this feeling, Ryunosuke turns to prayer. For thousands of years, cultures around the world have used prayer to find hope in the bleakest times. While prayer alone may not be as effective in creating real change as education and activism, having faith in the possibility for a better world is essential to find the motivation to push for peace, justice and equality.

Ryunosuke’s latest collection, *Pray*, shown at Tokyo Fashion Week in September, showcased his signature otherworldly sculptural dresses while centring these ideas. Drawing from Shintoism and his own spiritual relationship with nature, the custom pieces focus on the importance of coexisting with and respecting the natural world. As in the Jomon era, we are approaching a time of increasingly violent natural phenomena if we don’t do what it takes to slow the pace of climate change. In response, Ryunosuke feels like sustainable design is his responsibility as a human being in the natural world. His approach is the opposite of mass production, with garments more like works of art, principally custom made for film and editorials.

The clothes themselves bring to mind the supernatural and phantasmagorical, and the inspirations exist in a similarly spiritual world. However, Ryunosuke’s work is also rooted in the very real impact of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan at the end of the Second World War. One of his earliest pieces, Wearing Prayer, was crafted from paper cranes. It references the Japanese peace symbol and tragic story of Sadako Sasaki, who died in 1955 aged 12 from radiation-related leukaemia, or ‘atomic bomb disease’ as it was called at the time. Sadako survived the blast with no apparent injuries, but, nine years later, she fell ill.

There is a legend in Japan that states if someone who is unwell folds one thousand origami cranes, then they will be granted a wish and be healed. Sadako set

about this task two months before her death, using whatever scraps she could get hold of in the hospital. While she managed to exceed her goal, folding 1,300 cranes, she passed away in October 1955. Today, the act of folding a crane is a symbol of an international peace movement. There is a statue of Sadako in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. The plaque below it reads, “This is our cry. This is our prayer. Peace in the world.”

The cranes symbolise the world’s prayers for peace, emphasising the meditative state that physical creation can provoke. This idea is at the heart of Ryunosuke’s work. Prayer is very much a part of his process as he believes that the act of creating itself is also an act of prayer. Working on intricate, architectural dresses, which he makes with his hands, gives him time to reflect and feel deeply connected to each piece. The creative process could be described as a kind of meditation.

While Eastern practices like meditation, yoga and manifestation have permeated Western culture over decades, they experienced a surge in popularity over lockdown. For some, the pandemic has been a chance to step back from the busy pace of everyday life. For those of us working from home it allows us more time to embed these spiritual practices into our routines and they can be useful in helping us accept circumstances outside of our control.

Ryunosuke’s spirituality is related to Shinto, the Japanese religion that he grew up with. Shintoism finds God in the existence of nature as opposed to Western monotheistic religion where prayer is directed to a singular God who is an otherworldly being. Whether related to a specific religion or not, the beauty of nature can inspire feelings of awe as though we are part of something greater. Humans are also a part of nature, which is something Ryunosuke is keen to remind us with his work, creating structures that go beyond the body in shapes that reflect the randomness of the natural world.

As well as mining Japan’s history for inspiration, Ryunosuke is joining an established tradition of Japanese avant-garde fashion. Tokyo is known for its striking anti-fashion movement spearheaded by industry heavyweights like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, who shocked the fashion establishment in the ‘80s with clothes that challenge preconceived notions of beauty and taste. These aren’t clothes you wear day to day in the street. This beauty isn’t conventional or demure, but striking and memorable and daring to explore conceptual ideas. Once seen, it’s hard to look away.

Both beauty and prayer are about having faith in something bigger. They can be born out of pain and adversity but prove that negative events don’t mean giving up on believing in a better world. This is the thread that runs through Ryunosuke’s work – an important reminder as we hesitantly emerge from the pandemic over the months and years to come.

Sophie Wilson: Your most recent collection is inspired by the power of prayer. It can be easy to despair and feel like everything is out of our control, so having faith in a better future is more important now than ever in the context of global issues like the pandemic and the climate crisis. How does praying help you feel like things can improve? Would you consider prayer part of your creative process?

Ryunosuke Okazaki: Recent issues such as pandemics and the climate crisis are very important to re-evaluate the relationship between nature and human beings. Prayer has different meanings depending on the religion, but it is a way of thinking about the peace of the world, yourself and others. I believe that by praying, we can save our own hearts, which in turn can indirectly improve things. For me, prayer is an essential part of creation and each of my works contains my prayer.

SW: Do you think that prayer can help bring about real life change? How?

RO: I believe that praying and believing in something can change our behaviour and help us develop a richer mind. I think this is very useful and important in life.

SW: Is your prayer associated with a particular religion? Why?

RO: What I mean by ‘prayer’ is related to the Japanese Shinto religion. This is because Shintoism, which finds the existence of God in nature, has been familiar to me since I was a child.

SW: The Shinto concept of koto-dama focuses on the spiritual power that resides in words. Beautiful words are believed to help bring about good. Do your prayers follow a specific structure/type of language or are they spontaneous? With reference to your work as a designer, do you believe that beauty can help bring about good or are there concepts that are more important than beauty?

RO: My expression of ‘prayer’ can be described as spontaneous. I believe that prayer is a beautiful act. As a designer, I believe that beauty is important, but at the same time, I am pursuing an overwhelming expression that is more conceptual, beyond the criteria of simply being beautiful or not.

SW: Would you say that prayer is a universal impulse that transcends religion? How does Shinto and Buddhist prayer differ from Western or Christian prayer?

RO: I believe that prayer is a universal impulse that transcends religion. In Japan, the sense of religion and religious consciousness is not like Christianity and monotheism in the West, where the object of belief

is clear, but rather a broader, perceived religion. It is a religion of sensing. For example, when you see the grandeur of the mountains or the sea, you can sense God or Buddha beyond it. Such a sense of connection with nature is a prayer that goes beyond religion.

SW: Religion has come under renewed interest in fashion and culture in recent years. The Met Gala’s 2018 theme was Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination and in 2019, Kanye released his gospel album *Jesus is King* before announcing this year that he is changing his name to Ye, a word used in the Bible to mean “you.” Do you think that Eastern religions and cultures have been permeated by Christianity? Do you think this has an effect on your work?

RO: I believe that Eastern religions and cultures will permeate Christianity and the West even more in the future. This mixture of many ideas and diverse values will have an impact on my creative activities.

SW: Eastern religion has been in Western consciousness for some time now but came under renewed focus in lockdown as people reached for yoga and mindfulness to deal with uncertainty. Do you think that the previous binary between East and West has been broken down and merged? What are some of the misconceptions that Westerners have about Eastern prayer and religion?

RO: There are differences in the religious consciousness of the East and the West, but the act of ‘prayer’ is the same. In the East, it is ‘feeling prayer’ and in the West, it is ‘believing prayer’. I believe that the boundaries between the two will gradually fade away, and the world will become a place where diversity is valued.

SW: You made a dress called Wearing Prayer which is made from recycled paper cranes. Can you explain the significance of the paper cranes and why you decided to integrate them into your work?

RO: It is one of the first pieces that I started making with the theme of prayer. Hiroshima, my hometown, has a history of atomic bombings and every year people from all over the world send origami cranes to mourn the victims. By making a dress out of these origami cranes, which are the incarnation of the prayers of the world, I tried to create a new value.

SW: When most people think of Hiroshima, your hometown, the first thing that comes to mind is the atomic bomb which was dropped 50 years before you were born. The aftermath of such extreme violence brought about a renewed focus on peace and pacifism worldwide, but particularly in the cities where the bombs were dropped. Your work is concerned with these ideas of peace, faith and prayer. How do you think







growing up in Hiroshima impacted your worldview and your creative focus and how does this manifest itself in your creations?

RO: I grew up in Hiroshima in an environment where peace education and peace activities were actively promoted. Since I moved to Tokyo right after graduating from high school, I have been thinking about the history of Hiroshima even more. Prayers for peace transcend national borders and race, and I think that is a wonderful thing. Such a beautiful act of prayer is very primitive and is deeply related to human activities and history. I draw new inspiration for my work from the history of prayer.

SW: Do you think it can be necessary for something bad to happen for people to be incentivised into taking action and really pushing for a better world? How have the past two years changed your goals as a designer?

RO: I don't think it is necessary for bad things to happen. Essentially, I think we humans should notice and deal with bad things before they happen. I think it is important to keep creating and keep sending out messages. I want to continue creating with responsibility as a human being, before being a designer.

SW: For a lot of people, the pandemic offered time to reflect, which led to some of the most widespread movements in history, whether for social justice, environmentalism or anti-capitalism. At the same time, it was easy to get bogged down by the constant stream of negative news and a lot of creatives struggled to find inspiration because of this. Did lockdown inspire you to imagine a better future through creativity or was it difficult to stay motivated amid the disruption?

RO: These days, the world is filled with negative news and sad information, but in my mind, I felt that the only way to open up the future was to keep creating. I believe it was my creative drive to create something overwhelming that saved my heart.

SW: The pandemic also made a lot of us feel more connected and appreciative of nature. Was this the case for you? What impact did this have on your work?

RO: Due to the pandemic, I became aware again of my connection with nature, which I was not usually aware of. This led to the concept of my first collection.

SW: Do you feel more inspired by the city or by nature? Do you feel pressure to be in a major city because you work in fashion? Did the pandemic change your thoughts on this at all?

RO: It was when I started living in the city that I began to think about nature. It was only when I moved to the

city that I began to miss and cherish the nature-filled place where I used to live. If I hadn't been in the city, I wouldn't have been able to create the work I do now, and I think my craving for nature is what inspires me to create.

SW: A theme that runs through much of your work is the spirituality of nature, but your approach is more conceptual than literal. How do you convey nature and spirituality through your creations?

RO: My current production style is not to draw blueprints, but to create with my hands. This act is very natural, and I myself look forward to the completion of my work. When I feel that I have created something overwhelming, I stop my work and finish it. It is very natural to watch the work being created, and I feel as if I myself, the creator, am a part of nature. The act of making the work itself can be said to be an act of prayer.

SW: Can you describe a spiritual experience you have had in nature and the effect it had on your work?

RO: I was born and raised in a place full of nature. The Seto Inland Sea was nearby, and I could see the torii gate of Miyajima. Behind the torii gate is Itsukushima Shrine, and behind that is a mountain. It was very magnificent and I felt at peace when I saw it. Thinking about the scenery of my hometown, I feel the roots of myself and the Japanese people as I create my works.

SW: What do you want people to feel when they see or wear your designs?

RO: In fashion, the feeling you get when you wear a dress is very important. The dress I made has a strong message, but at the same time, it creates a sense of movement, as if the body's joints have increased and the body's movements have been extended. Therefore, when you wear the dress you feel as if your body had grown one size larger, and I think you will be excited, and I would be happy if you felt that way.

SW: You create statement, structural pieces that stand out on social media and editorials but are hard to translate into real life wear. Do you feel a tension between creativity and commerciality? Did your fashion education focus more on one than the other? What is your long-term plan for the label?

RO: I have studied a wide range of art and design rather than fashion education. It is very important to me in my creative work to continue to express concepts that are important to the current society, and I believe this is also important in the fashion world. I can't tell you exactly what my long-term plans are, but I would like to continue to convey an important message through my creations in the world we live in now.

SW: For your graduate collection, you were inspired by the Jomon-era, a pre-historic period in Japan that spanned approximately 10,000 years. You have talked about the “irresistible threat of nature” during that time. I think we sometimes forget the threat of nature, but the climate crisis is making it harder to ignore as weather conditions and natural disasters become more extreme. Does the threat of nature inspire you as much as the beauty of it?

RO: When we see the threats of nature, we feel fear. The climate crisis, natural disasters and viral pandemics are also threats to us humans and therefore, they can cause us to reaffirm our connection with nature. In this sense, threats stimulate my creativity. I believe that there must be something really important that can be conveyed through creation.

SW: What do you think humans can learn from the natural world?

RO: Humans live on the earth just like other animals, but our nature is different. I think we need to look at the natural world and learn anew that we need to live in harmony with nature, which we usually forget.

SW: Your work has a futuristic quality but most of your inspiration comes from history. How do you interpret Japanese culture and history through a modern lens?

RO: I interpret and express the forms that have been created throughout history in a modern way. For example, the Jomon pottery that inspired my first collection was made by the people of the Jomon period with prayers in mind, and I believe that the creators of that time were trying to create a new form of expression. I am trying to inherit the unchanging thoughts of the people of that time about figurative expression and create something new using modern materials.

SW: In your opinion, what is the future of sustainability in fashion? Are your thoughts on sustainability influenced by your spiritual relationship with nature?

RO: Being sustainable is important and matters both to my creative work and to living on this planet. Mass production and mass consumption in the fashion industry are not a good thing. Designers should focus on the creation of each piece and take responsibility for the product.

SW: What can we expect next from your label?

RO: My label will continue to make one-of-a-kind dresses with an artistic point of view.









Photography  
**Diego Cruz**

Styling  
**Felipe Mendez**

Starring  
**Ololade** *Duo Model Management*, **Michael** *First Model Management*, **Cassey** *Milk Management London*,  
**Cameron** *PRM Model Agency London*, **Robin** *Premier Model Management*, **Yustina**

Set Design  
**Fillo Deportaberta**

Hair  
**Ellie Bond**

Makeup  
**Kevin Cordo**

Styling Assistants  
**Marc Salas, Andrea Brown**

Set Design Assistant  
**Lucie Morpurgo**

Hair Assistant  
**Ryan Humpage**

Makeup Assistant  
**Robert Arango**





*From right to left: Yustyna wears coat and belt JOHN GALLIANO ARCHIVE, shoes ACNE STUDIOS;  
Ololade wears dress JOHN GALLIANO ARCHIVE, gloves KARL LAGERFELD.  
Opposite page: Cameron wears full look PRADA.*





*From left to right: Robin wears full look STEFAN COOKE; Ololade wears full look ACNE STUDIOS, shoes CELINE; Tustyna wears full look MIU MIU.*







*Case and metal bottle GIVENCHY.*

*Opposite page: Ololade wears dress and skirt LOUIS VUITTON, gloves VIVIENNE WESTWOOD, rings EMMA WALTON.*





*From left to right: Yustyna wears full look GIVENCHY; Cassey wears full look EMMA WALTON;  
Michael wears full look VERSACE; Cameron wears full look GIVENCHY.  
Opposite page: Full look DIOR MEN.*



*From left to right: Yustyna wears full look GIVENCHY; Cassey wears full look EMMA WALTON;  
Michael wears full look VERSACE; Cameron wears full look GIVENCHY.*





*Tustyna wears full look JEAN PAUL GAULTIER x SACAI.  
Opposite page, from left to right: Cameron wears full look GIVENCHY; Tustyna wears  
full look GIVENCHY; Cassey wears full look EMMA WALTON.*





*From left to right: Cassey wears leather dress SPORTMAX, scarf HELIOT EMIL, earrings EMMAL WALTON; Cameron wears jacket and trousers TOHFI YAMAMOTO, shoes STEFAN COOKE.*



*From left to right: Justyna wears full look MM6; Ololade wears dress and skirt LOUIS VUITTON, gloves IVIENNE WESTWOOD, rings EMMAL WALTON, shoes HELIOT EMIL; Robin wears jacket, trousers and shoes HELIOT EMIL, gloves KARL LAGERFELD; Michael wears top MM6, vest, tank top and dangaree ACNE STUDIOS.*





*Ololade wears full look PRADA.*  
*Opposite page, from left to right: Tustyna wears full look DSQUARED2; Robin wears full look CELINE;*  
*Michael wears full look VERSACE; Cassey wears full look CHANEL.*







*Michael wears full look ACNE STUDIOS.*

*From left to right: Michael wears full look VERSACE; Cameron wears full look LOUIS VUITTON.*





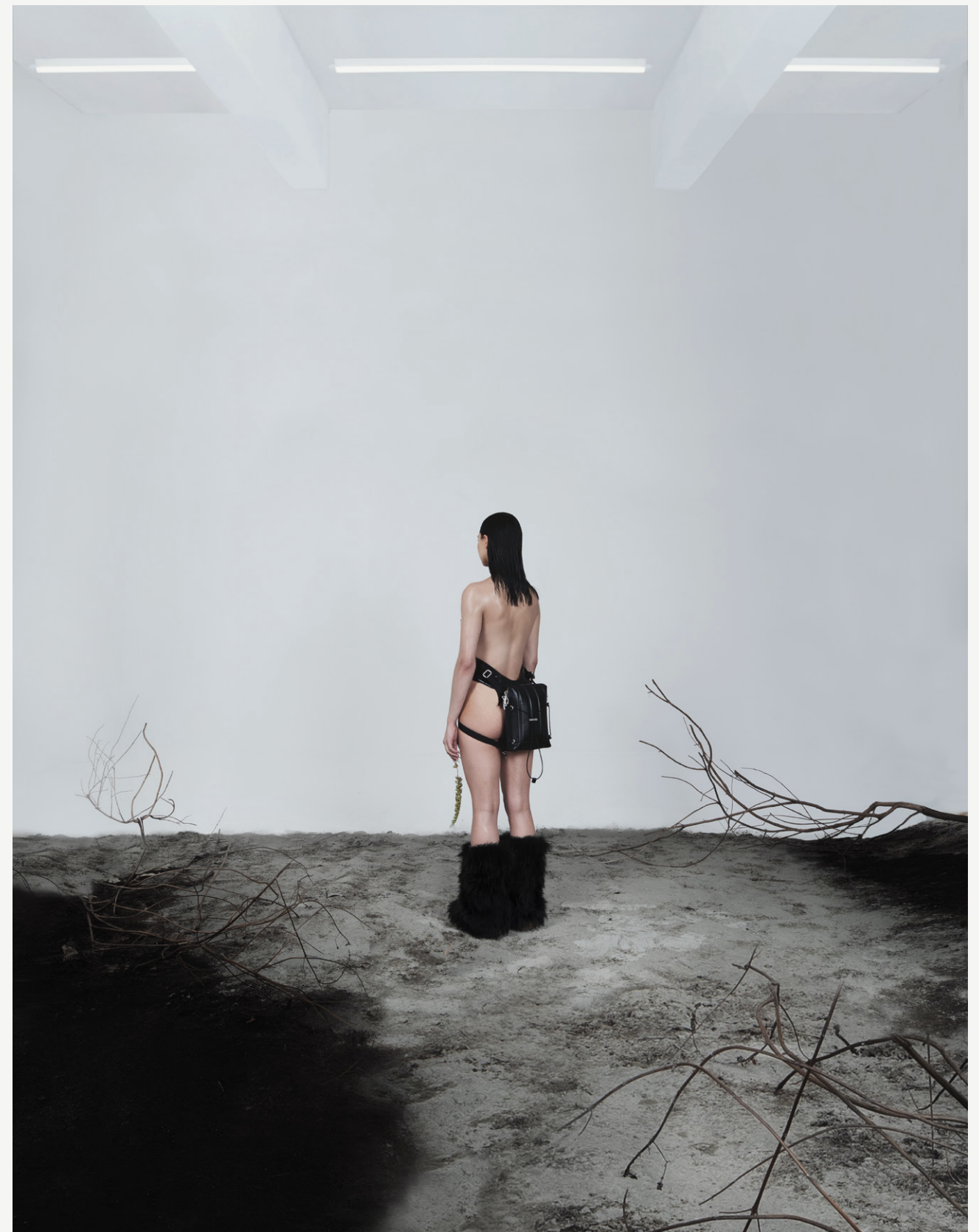


*From left to right: Ololade wears full look LANVIN; Tustyna wears full look VIVIENNE WESTWOOD.*



*Tustyna wears full look GIVENCHY.*





*Yustyna wears bag GIVENCHY, boots CELINE.  
Opposite page: Robin wears full look CELINE.*





DIOR





DIOR