

FASHION ON THE RISE

CHRISTIAN WIJNANTS

Interview by LYNN FURGE Photography by MIKE HEMY

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The Belgian designers from the Royal College, I am naturally drawn to them... there is something about their use of space in relation to the human body that is both sculptural as well as realistically wearable. Almost a look at positive and negative space. Which is why when showroom hunting in Manhattan, I was immediately attracted to the knitwear of Christian Wijnants.

Casually selling his collection to the likes of Colette and Henri Bendel, after buyers had seen his work at Festival de Year immediately after graduation put Wijnants on the international fashion map. Honing his craft to evolve into a true label has been his focus ever since.

Wijnant’s influences have been strong. Schooled at the Royal College in Antwerp, where he also still teaches today, he was able to learn to stick to his instinct and experiment with the newness of fashion.

“Designers who study in Paris or Milan have a different aesthetic. The history of fashion in those cities is so strong and so heavy that there seems to be so many rules. The tradition is so old and has been around forever, therefore designers that come out of those universities have to abide, where as in Belgium it is quite new, there is a sense of freedom and people doing things the way they want it. I don’t think it is one style that we have, I feel the link is that they all stick to their own identity,” explains Wijnants from his Antwerp studio.

Dries Van Noten served as both an internship experience as well as a mentor. Being such a big fan it was the reason Christian got into fashion in the first place. Under his tutelage he learned about textiles from knitwear to leather as well as making your own prints and how shapes don’t come together until they go through the fittings.

From that the Christian Wijnants aesthetic was

born. He works around the body like Christo, draping and really allowing the form to move. It is all about the shape and the body, not a current trend or mimicking a decade.

“I start from scratch with fabric and the body. I work with what fits the best and what I want to say and express with the clothes. Fashion is not art. Fashion is something that needs to be worn. I want to make something that people will use. I am not necessarily focusing on being commercial, I don’t like clothes which have too many restrictions to the body, for example corsets because it limits the movement. I don’t want women to change themselves in my fashion, it should accentuate their beauty. I am creating very new silhouettes that are still realistic for the modern women.”

Even though shape plays a large part in the end result, it is the textile that initiates the process. The fabric itself inspires and gives the garment its shape, therefore evolving the collection.

“Normally in the beginning of the season I have a very abstract idea. It is more like a dream, it is not clear, it is more like a feeling, for example I want something like a cocoon, something very thick, something warm, something like a blanket, then I think of what textiles could express that feeling, then I really think in detail about the shapes. I have an idea of silhouette before even the textile process starts,” Wijnants explains further.

The prints are created by hand and for Fall 2011 the one that specifically caught my eye was almost windowpane tiles but textured in a three dimensional form. It was half Moroccan portal and half 1960’s mod, a trend, which whether he pays attention to them or not, is right on target for this current season.

“This season I made a layering of different prints that existed, worked with transfer to see one layer come through, it is a little bit like recycling taking prints from previous collections and taking a new element and putting something on top of it making something more new and abstract. To achieve this we worked digitally. In previous seasons we died the fabric or paintings or stains on fabrics, we would then scan the images and then turned them into prints. I like to work with prints and inspirations not in obvious ways,” Wijnants muses.

And because he works minute by minute to create an ever evolving look in both shape and textile it is almost as if he is designing for the woman of the future.

“When you try to work on something new that doesn’t exist yet, you are technically creating something for a woman that doesn’t exist yet either. If you have a person in mind, it challenges the innovation of the entire process. I like the idea of a mysterious woman that doesn’t exist yet,” explains Wijnants on the intangibility of inspiration. “Anything can give you inspiration, the shape of a bottle, the shape of a glass, artists, countries, experiences, the way two objects interact is a big inspiration for me. Sometimes you just get a feeling and don’t know where it is even coming from. When I am trying to fall asleep I have the best ideas, or when I am dreaming at night.”

For Autumn/Winter 2011 he started bringing in the summer ideas from his previous season. Summer was an African based collection with Morocco and abstract animal prints. He for the current collection he started with the animal prints, and deconstructed it to make them less recognizable, tribal, and African through the layering process. Prints were extended to knitwear, where texture played a large key such as

working with stitches that also reflect that idea of layering ethic and animal together.

I ask him if it is important to him to have the fashion community see him as a true artist as well as a designer with all of the original prints he creates.

“I love when people don’t take it [fashion] too seriously. I want it to be wearable and therefore also don’t want it to be boring, therefore poetry or humor is important in fashion. For instance, I like the humor in Martin Margiella, he used really simple little details of life and uses them in his collection. Fashion can be light and enjoyable. Plus the spirit of the students that I teach, their excitement and newness makes me happy and inspired as well.”

It is not that he is flippant or cavalier when it comes to how people perceive his vision. It is just that his strengths lie in the building of a brand, not just the rolling out of another collection. He will launch a pre-fall collection this year as well as a capsule collection for the popular knitwear. Each grouping will be an extension on the print and texture themes.

And when I question him about further plans he smiles with assurance.

“It is not easy as a young designer to express what you really want to do with your collection, and I am very satisfied with where we are going. It is nice to have a certain type of mystery and something that people won’t necessarily understand. Sometimes it is great to not know everything.”



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