System beauty

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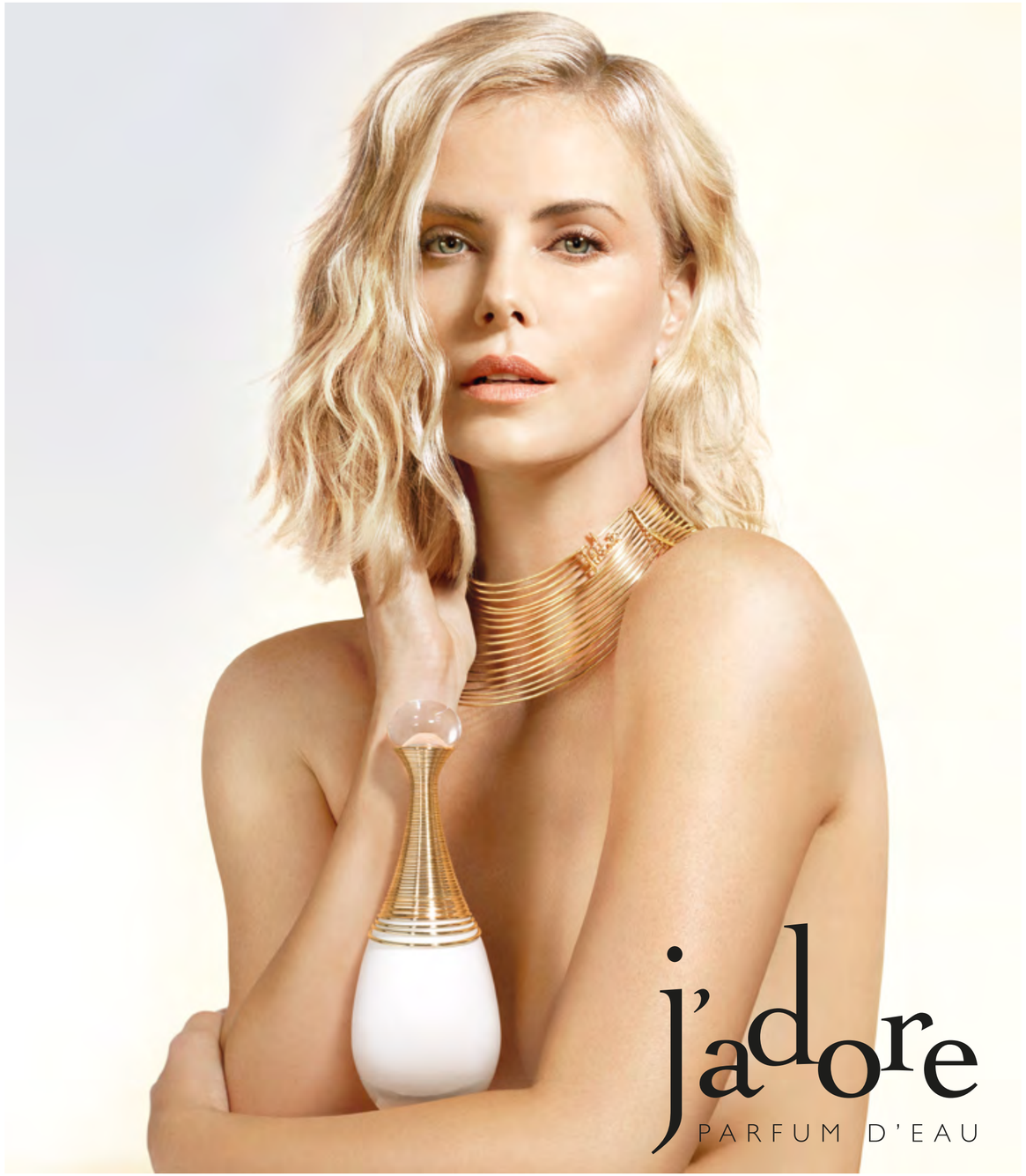

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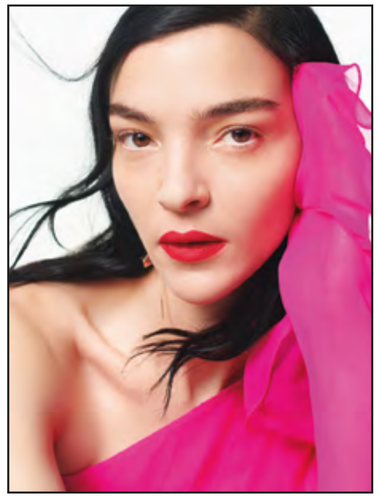
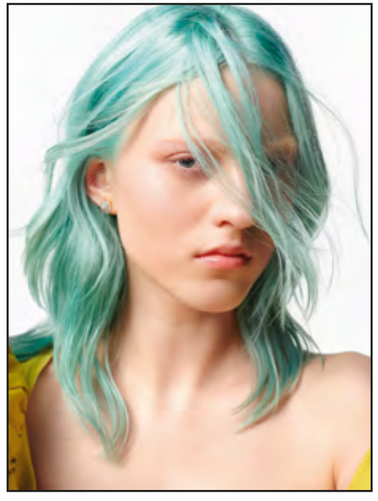
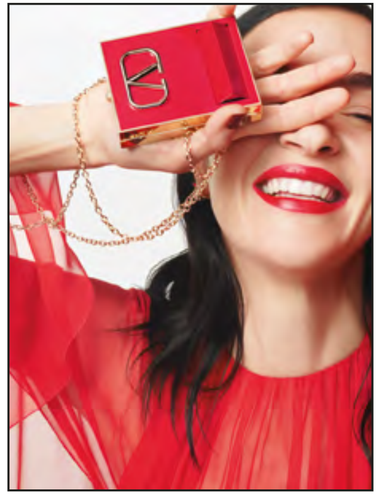
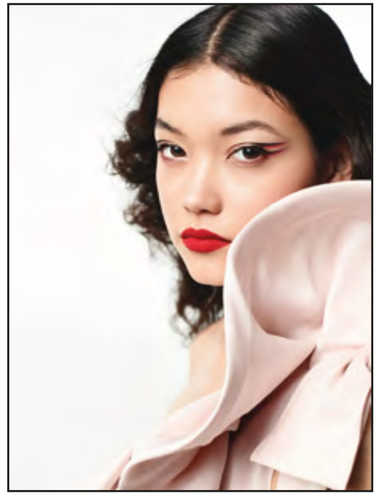
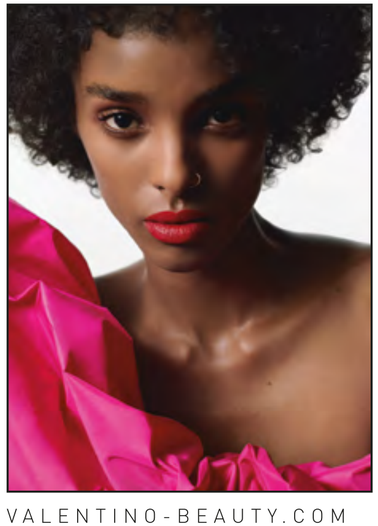
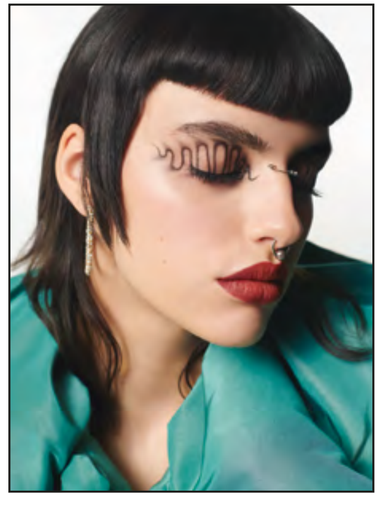


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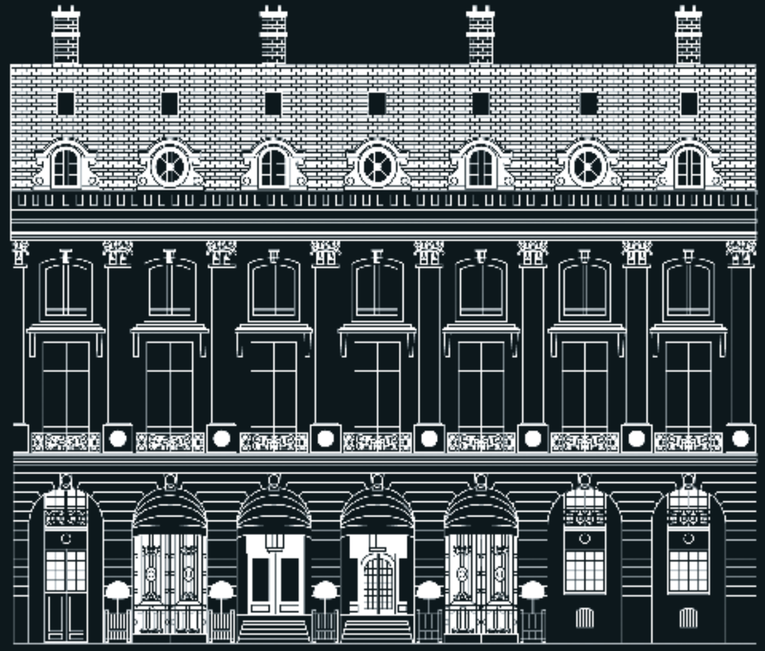

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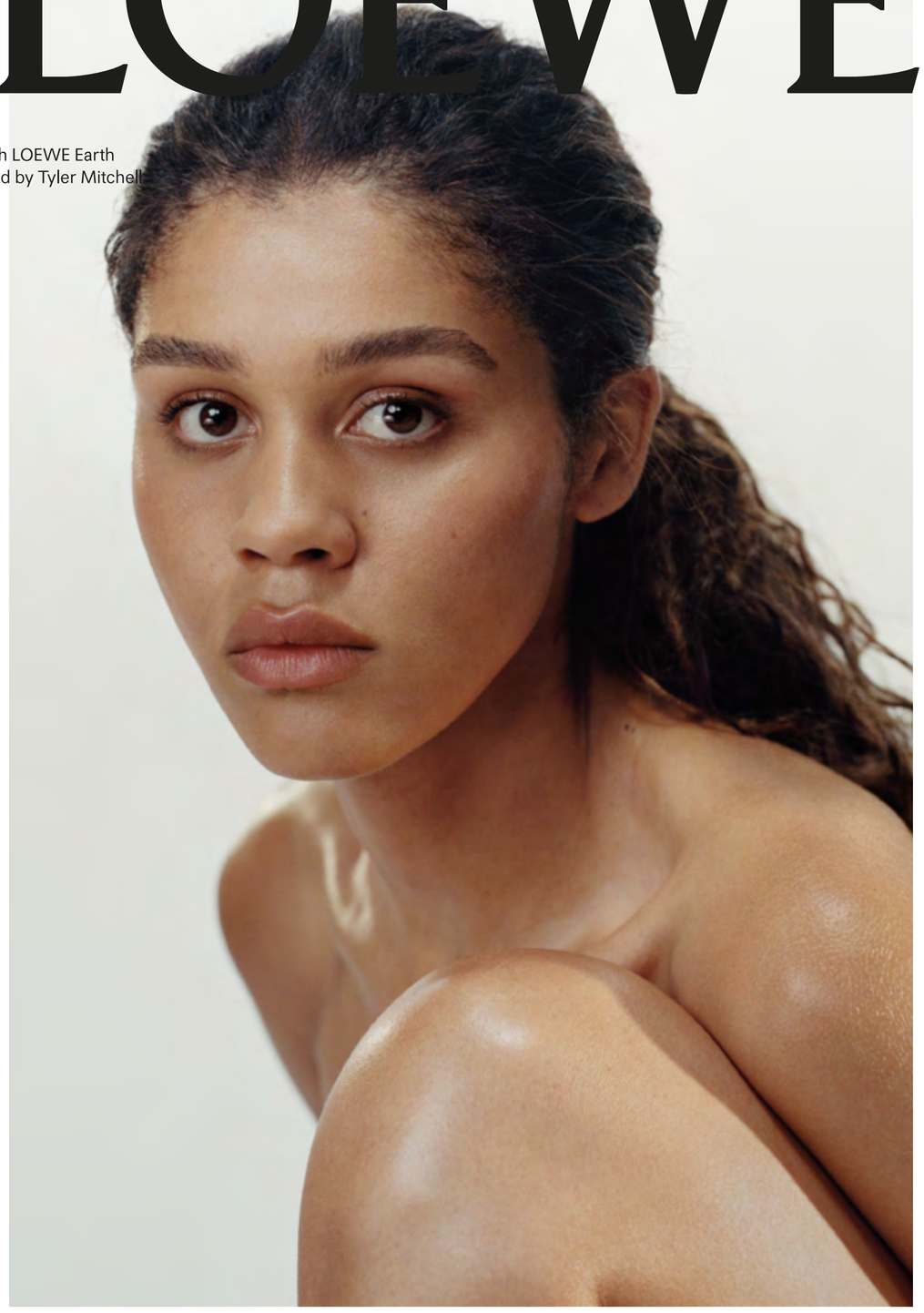

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Jeanne Cadieu with LOEWE Solo Ella
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HERMÈS
PARIS

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"'Beauty" has become an almost impossible concept,' states Pierre Hardy. 'Ugliness too emanates from sets of norms,' notes Donatien Grau. 'Do we still have the classic opposition of beautiful and ugly?' asks Chris Dercon. 'For me, "beauty" is making somebody light up,' says Sam Visser. 'I just wanted limitless creativity,' declares Isamaya Ffrench. 'I wanted to do everything in my power,' notes Valentina Li. 'It's about pure instinct,' asserts Cyndia Harvey. 'Let's get facials soon,' suggests Kim Kardashian.

No longer constrained by monolithic ideas and norms, the landscape of beauty has shifted and exploded into a myriad of singular beauties, each different, each unique. *System beauty* aims to decipher the 'almost impossible concept' by bringing together the most inspiring creative minds in the beauty industry, offering them a forum to express their distinctive perspectives, and in the process, perhaps reveal new ways of seeing.

For our inaugural issue, we could think of no one who better embodies beauty as uncompromising personal invention than Michèle Lamy. *System beauty* gave her free rein to share her vision of beauty, and the result is a stunning series of images and viewpoints, shot by Juergen Teller, and featuring art legend Anselm Kiefer, rising duo Fecal Matter, and the stellar Kim Kardashian.

Elsewhere in the issue, Alberto Morillas and Jérôme Epinette discuss fragrance and collaboration, Pierre Hardy reflects on designing Hermès beauty packaging, while Isamaya Ffrench and Cyndia Harvey talk about founding their own beauty brands. Meanwhile, in our visual stories, Carlijn Jacobs, Katie Burnett and Thomas de Kluyver, Ethan James Green and Sam Visser, Eugene Souleiman, Joe McKenna and Julien Martinez Leclerc, and Valentina Li and Zhong Lin join forces to turn beauty into an exuberant collection of singular pluralities.

Miracles and Monsters

By Donatien Grau

The Winckelmannian notion of classical beauty as 'noble simplicity and calm greatness' belongs to a specific political, cultural and moral time and place in history. André Breton's convulsive beauty takes apart this hierarchical conception and introduces an element of energy and violence into what had been until then considered fixed – as an architecture. Convulsive beauty broke the norm, but it also somehow became a norm of its own – an equivalent to Lautréamont's famed 'fortuitous encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella'.

Ugliness too emanates from sets of norms. At the time of Rubens, skinny women were considered ugly, while those Rubens painted were the ultimate beauty. Criteria shift across space, and they are evidently not the same in Tokyo, Mexico, London, Los Angeles or Athens, or across centuries and even decades. Every culture, every instant even, has constructed its notions of beauty and ugliness. They reflect on each other, draw from one another, are entirely interdependent – the 'anxiety of influence'. Every time owes to its predecessors. Nonetheless, there is a sheer specificity and imperative for every moment to live its own beauty. The aesthetic experience is entirely conditioned by the political, social circumstances of the time. Who holds power defines beauty. As we all know, the very premise of a structure of power is to establish norms. *This is beautiful. This is ugly.* By saying that, you judge. By judging, you are exerting power. Therefore, you belong to a political structure of control.

Monsters do not belong to any structure of control. They break the order of things and do not abide to the easy division between ugly and beautiful. What is monstrous stands beyond ugliness, and may eventually come across as beautiful. The etymology of the Latin word *monstrum* signifies a 'manifestation', a 'prodigy' that opens another state of existence – one that would not be conditioned by social life. In Ancient times, civic life was a fragment of what we would today call 'life'. It pertained to a very small number of individuals in a very limited part of time and space. Cities were small and security was minimal. As a consequence, danger and otherness were everywhere. Politics were the fact of a minority that desperately needed to uphold its power. Monsters were the antidote to this need for order: they brought in magic in the profane or in civic religion. They brought in the power of the elements against everything that was accomplished to limit them. Monsters broke the norm and rendered the system of normativity irrelevant. They created their own space, turning the place – *topos* – into a heterotopia of sorts.

Drawing from this etymological root may appear useful when addressing the aesthetic power of monstrosity, for it induces that this aesthetic power is by nature moral and political. It moves away from the normative approach – beauty and ugliness in the profane and civically controlled world – to create a non-normative space. This non-normative space was, in ancient times, that of the demons and the gods. Today, it may well be the space of the psyche, of the individual, that refuses the boundaries of culture to enter an entirely different space where the norms society imposes upon you – those very norms that find in beauty and ugliness one of their chief utterances – are rendered irrelevant. The use of the substantives beauty and ugliness and of the relevant adjectives is often conditioned by adverbs that intensify the description: *this is quite beautiful, that is very ugly.* For beauty and ugliness rarely exist in their full power. The polarities of beauty and ugliness manifest the importance of the norm as a structure of power. A norm is never defined to be a mere absolute; it is a set of rules that can be followed, altered, moved.

A monster is an absolute. Its appearance is an event, something that breaks the flow of the world as it goes. Beauty and ugliness can be encountered many times, from the moment we are ready to feel. Monsters are far rarer, and encountering one is by nature a life-changing experience. There is no anecdote, no psychology in encountering a monster. It is something so pure, so raw that one is forced to react to it. In encountering a monster, we step out of the realm of normativity to enter the unknown, while remaining in our very lives. The word 'monster' is often charged with negative connotations, but it could equally carry positive ones. A monster is a prodigy, a break from regular law and order. As such, it is the other name of 'miracle'. For what is a miracle, if not the introduction into life of the sacred? Those two words – which serendipitously both start with the same letter – are two sides of the same coin. One person's monster may well be another person's miracle.

One could then argue that those two words would play the same role as beauty and ugliness – miracle being the equivalent of beauty, and monster of ugliness. However, the existential space that each notion inhabits is radically different. Miracles and monsters are not limited to the aesthetic space: they participate in a realm that is far greater than that. They belong to a mythological construction of the world. Miracles and monsters give meaning to the world. They state that we should be paying attention to this moment of life, to this entity that we encounter.

Miracles and monsters often imply narratives. Their characteristics are not gratuitous; they each tell us a lesson about how and why we should live. They break away from their surroundings but signify something of those very surroundings. Monsters crystallize what has been happening before and what will happen after them, and condense both into one form of absolute presence that gives the world a greater depth than may have been previously thought. Beauty and ugliness are an architecture of order – and therefore of disorder. Monsters offer another paradigm: what matters is not the set of norms any more, but a manifestation that erases and encapsulates multiple conceptions of the world into one moment that is life-defining.

Monsters entertain a different relation to individuality from other, more normative denominations. They are radical individualities: a monster will not be like another monster, and the definition of each of them comes with their appearance. Being a monster signifies standing outside of the rule of the norm, and therefore being an individuality – the obvious opposite to norms, which are built to contradict the existence of particularity. They are separated from the world, and yet they are connected to it, for they mirror the regulations that make norms. This mirroring is only made possible by the distance and by the separation from the normative space of humankind.

Monsters seem to be separate from the sets of rules and laws that govern our lives. The original, Latin etymology of monsters signified 'prodigies', things that were singled out from their individualities to warn us that something was about to happen. Their individualities signified their freedom opposing the flow of social and religious oppression. As Kant famously wrote, beauty is a universal without concept, while monsters do not abide by the rules of universality – quite the opposite. Asserting oneself as an individual, against the grain, was a radical decision to make then. If you made it, you were seen as having to deal with witchcraft, with monstrosity. Today, the assertion of individuality has become the norm. Therefore, one may have to raise the question: do monsters still exist?

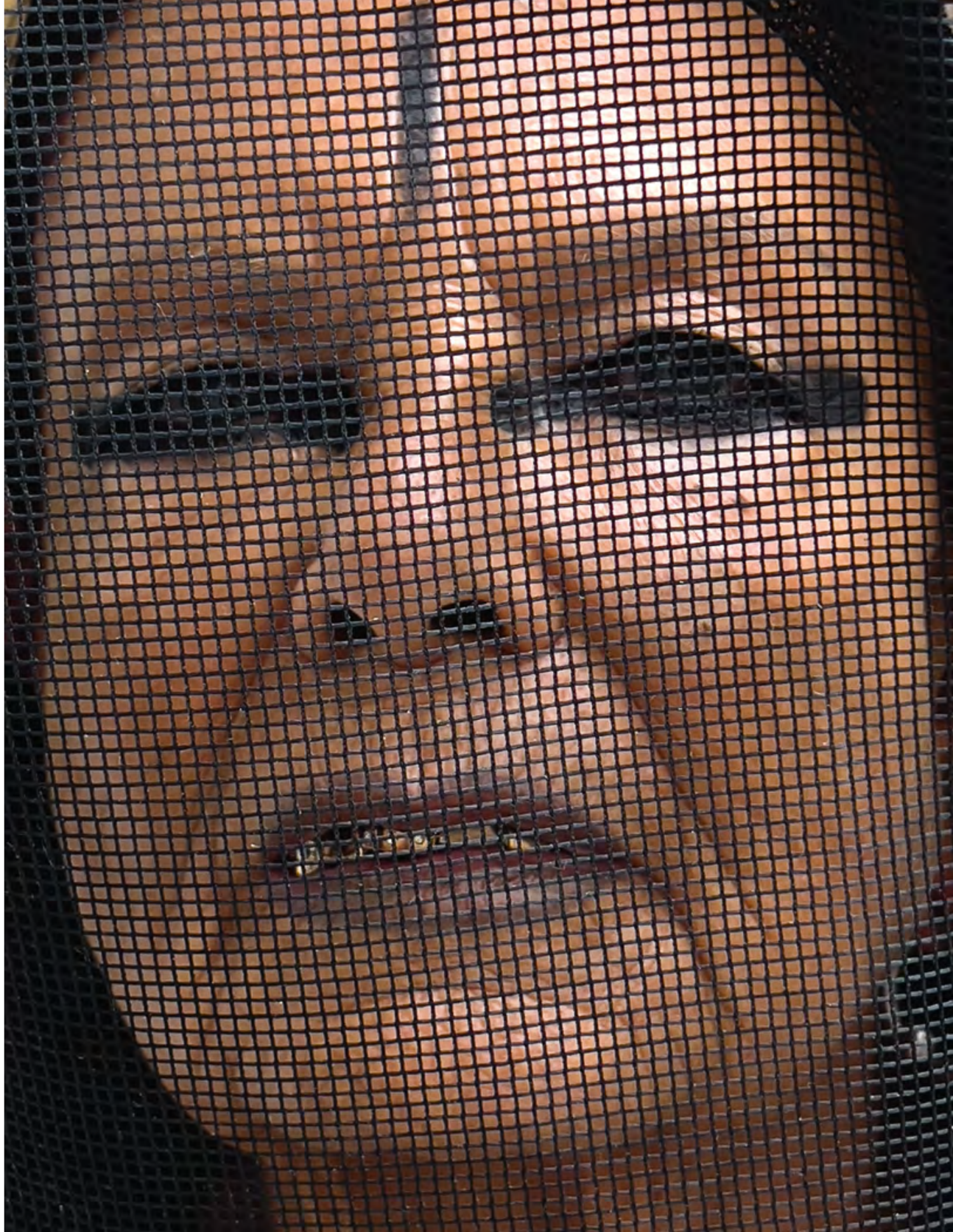
It may in fact be argued that there is, perhaps now more than ever, a need for constructed, freely lived monstrosity: one that is not imposed upon individuals by what they refuse. The monsters who accept and assert that they are prodigies and set themselves against the grain of ready-made individuality pave the way for a more conscious way of living. With great bravery, they take the existential and social risks of exposing the intensity and therefore the meaning of life.

When we see them, we understand that other rules are possible, that what we have described as beauty, ugly, is a way of looking at the world, and that there are others. We may not follow them, but by understanding the very fact that the truth we are taught is not the only one, we set ourselves free. We do not know where this freedom will take us –perhaps to the monsters and miracles of life, for they may well be the same after all.

‘It needs to be black, a dense black – to go with my blue eyes.’

Michèle Lamy’s world of beauty.

Photographs and layout by Juergen Teller
Creative partner Dovile Drizyte




Eurostar
Départs

Post production: Lucas Ríos Palazzesi at Quick Fix.

‘Beauty is a journey.’

Michèle Lamy meets art legend Anselm Kiefer to talk Sappho and New Age dentists. Interview by Chris Dercon

I first introduced Michèle Lamy to Anselm Kiefer in December 2021. We met in Anselm’s studio in Croissy-Beaubourg, near Paris. During her first visit there, Michèle, dressed and adorned in perfect black as always, was immediately intrigued by Anselm’s *Women of the Antiquity* series, sculptures cast in white plaster, as well as his huge collection of bird-like white garments arranged on metal racks. A few months later, we sat down for a conversation for *System beauty* about appearances, beauty, and the beauty of the ugly.

Michèle Lamy: Anselm, I realized that the black on my fingers is because of you. I saw this show with the lead books, in 1984 or 1985.
Chris Dercon: In Los Angeles?
Anselm Kiefer: It’s always frustrating to show books because people cannot turn the pages. So, I made one book accessible so the pages could be turned. It was *Siegfried’s Difficult Way to Brünnhilde*.
Michèle: It was on a very long rectangular table and I was flabbergasted by the books, and then I heard that you were working with lead so much that it was going to make you sick. I think that made me start painting my fingers.
Chris: That was your first time seeing Anselm’s work, Michèle – when was the second time?
Michèle: It was at the Bibliothèque Nationale and then at the Grand Palais.
Chris: But the first time you met him was here in Croissy? You were flabbergasted when you entered the space and saw all these white dresses of female sculptures.
Michèle: Yes, because I was not expecting them.
Chris: Very few people know how deeply Anselm is interested in these stories of strong women – from ancient times to today.
Anselm: Women played the most important roles in history, politics, and art, but it was not known for a long time. For example, I found out that Sappho, the famous poet, is only known because she is quoted by male poets. Who are your favourite female artists, Michèle?
Michèle: It is difficult to say anyone other than Louise Bourgeois. I cannot think about anybody else that strong, that incredible.
Anselm: She is the most important. What about Camille Claudel? Who else?
Michèle: Yes, Camille Claudel. Lee Bontecou, I love her work. I see something in her work that is like Louise Bourgeois, except Bourgeois is so Freudian and Lee is more abstract.
Chris: When you saw all these sculptures of headless women, and knowing your preference for black, did you wonder why they are all white?
Michèle: I should have asked: ‘Why did you kill them all with a guillotine?’
Anselm: I did not kill them; I just questioned the male urge to prevent women from voicing their thoughts throughout history.
Chris: Why are they all white?
Anselm: I made them in plaster and didn’t want to paint them. Later, they were cast in bronze, but I painted them white because they were originally plaster.
Chris: Anselm, did you ever ask Michèle why she is always dressed in black?
Anselm: No, because it is completely normal. It couldn’t be any other way. She couldn’t be dressed in strange colours; it’s impossible.
Michèle: I just never finished with being a goth, but I like that I am a Halloween figure. Beauty is just a way to express ourselves. Sometimes you see something and you understand there is a beauty that is not conventional.
Anselm: Michèle is beautiful because she fits into any circumstance. There is no corner you wouldn’t fit in; you are the truth that works everywhere.
Chris: Has the concept of beauty changed radically?
Michèle: Yes, if you look at portraits – rococo, baroque, Renaissance – I wouldn’t say they are beautiful people. They sometimes have a beautiful face, but there is nothing beautiful because it is conventional. It is more about class.
Anselm: We have to distinguish ‘beautiful’ from ‘sexy’. Marilyn Monroe, is she beautiful?
Michèle: That is where we differ, if you think beauty is some kind of aesthetic. I think she was very beautiful because she was expressing herself without thinking she was going to be ridiculous or she was going to be this or that – she was just doing it.
Chris: The concept of beauty changes all the time, almost overnight or even faster…
Anselm: Not for me. I am a professional – I know what is beautiful and what beauty means to me.
Michèle: My story with beauty starts when I understood what I thought was beautiful – it was the first time I went to North Africa at the age of 16 and I saw some Berber women with tattoos on their faces. I’m sure I recognized it in my subconscious from somewhere in my past; my father’s side came from the Moors eight or ten generations ago.
Anselm: That is so interesting because the first time I saw you in real life, I thought I had seen you in all these photos of Berber women. That crucial meeting with Berber women also influenced your looks.
Chris: Do we still have the classic opposition of beautiful and ugly?
Anselm: It’s still there, so many things are ugly. Go outside and look at architecture; most of it is ugly.
Chris: Can we not find beauty in ugliness? The Elephant Man was ugly, but he also has an incredible beauty. The monsters in *Star Wars* are ugly, but we want to cuddle them.
Anselm: Yes, that is what I said. You want to investigate things.
Chris: Let’s speak about Michèle’s teeth.
Michèle: I started doing it when we had to change the mercury fillings and I met this New Age dentist in Los Angeles. He wanted to replace them all and mix it with gold to make an alloy. But nothing I wear is jewellery; it is all an accessory.
Anselm: I like this, because it is a sign of a catastrophe.
Michèle: Then I am safe.
Anselm: Distance is good for beauty, too, because it keeps us longing. The ambiguous tension, yet unity of attraction and distance is an essential aspect of beauty.
Chris: We see people on TikTok or Instagram acting out these funny scenes and I call that the grotesque. It is a recognition that we cannot live in the world as we want to, and that we have failed. It is like a weapon to say we want to survive.
Anselm: There has been a long line of beauty through the centuries and I wouldn’t say that there will be another. There is only one beauty for me.
Chris: Which one? That is incredibly Catholic.
Anselm: Yes, but without dogmatism and oppression.
Chris: They put up with so many ugly images because they had one concept of beauty and it took over, lighting up all the others and neutralizing them.
Michèle: For me, beauty is a journey. Things can come and go, but it is all going in the same direction, so I am very persistent in my pursuit of beauty.

‘Let’s get facials soon’

Creams, wrinkles and bedroom furniture with Kim and Michèle.

From: Michèle

Hi Kim morning

I’m getting ready to come to your Happy Hill

Last touch of cream on my eyes!!!!

I already have my favorites SKKN
And it’s serum and serum …

I’m almost afraid to plonge my
‘black fingers’ in your immaculate
creams
Ah ah ... but I do not resist a bit .

Now will you tell me what
Hyaluronic means

Is that going to iron my wrinkles?

Will talk about your fab packaging
In a bit as you should tell me all
About …

See you in a couple of hours SKKN
Kim Beauty!

From: Kim

So fun seeing you today!
So happy you like SKKN

Haha your black fingers in the
cream

Try the exfoliator, You will DIEEEEEE
it’s so good!!!!

From: Michèle

Exfoliator yes …
Will take some buckets to clear my face. Ahah ..

Your creams in their great round
balls yes...

but it’s all your liquids that are so
special toner serum and the
exfoliator…… 💥💥💥💥💥💥💥

Next please …💕

From: Kim

💕🕺
Thank you!!! I will send you
whatever you want! Let’s get facials
soon

From: Kim

[Image of a stainless-steel stool]

OMG a must!!!! NEED

From: Michèle

Yes…
That’s the one to put in Bedroom
Right!
On the list!

From: Kim

Yesss

Make-up: Fecal Matter. Hair: Gabriel de Fries and Beth Shanefelter.

Michèle Lamy

‘I love you, you love me, and we don’t judge each other.’

Fecal Matter on the freedom and frights of revealing their inner selves.

In the background of many of Fecal Matter’s images, you can spot the same sight: a rubber-necking member of the public with their face contorted in horror and disgust, or fear and confusion at what they’re seeing.

In the foreground, eliciting such a visceral reaction is one, or both, of the eyebrow-raisingly-named duo that is Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran. Usually with demonic black sclera and ghostly white faces, their limbs often sprouting alienesque horns, they might appear horrifying to many, but they themselves have never felt more beautiful.

While scaring locals in cities around the world and on Instagram – where they’re somewhat more poetically known as @matieresfecales – the pair have amassed a community of fans who feel a kinship with being othered simply for daring to look different. It’s a familiar feeling for queer people or those existing outside of the binary.

‘The common thread is that they’re scared and they don’t know how to be confident,’ Bhaskaran says. ‘We help them to understand that there’s nothing to be afraid of. Feeling gender dysphoria or that you don’t belong in your environment isn’t wrong – it’s normal.’

The pair were each on their own journey to self-acceptance before becoming Fecal Matter, and have since used the platform – which traverses art, music, and fashion – as a way of exploring their identities and pushing the boundaries of what ‘beauty’ can be. With a mission to ‘provoke society’ since they started back in 2016, they have gone from outsiders to finding a place in the worlds of Rick Owens and Balenciaga.

System beauty spoke with the pair about using beauty as a tool to live authentically, their journey to self-acceptance, and the impact their platform has on people like them.

Dominic Cadogan: You recently moved to Paris. How do you find people respond to you there, compared to Montreal where you are from originally?
Steven Raj Bhaskaran: There’s a polarizing effect in Paris; there’s so much freedom on one end, but so much conservatism on the other. We definitely face it and it’s dangerous, but for us, since the beginning of our journey, it’s been the case that there’s no safety anywhere in general. That’s a big part of why we share so much of what we do on Instagram and social-media platforms, because it gives people a sense of ‘if they can do it, so can I’. The centre of our work is obviously the looks and the aesthetic, but our vulnerability is what’s really important to share.

How do the tools of beauty and fashion lend themselves to crafting your identity and help you live more authentically?
Hannah Rose Dalton: I went to a private all-girls school with a uniform for 12 years; you weren’t allowed to wear make-up, so I really grew up thinking that nail polish was a sin. Beauty was a very interesting development in my life because I wanted to be a good girl and thought that I would never wear make-up. I hated how make-up was used to cover up or as a disguise to look younger; I thought it was diminishing rather than adding anything. Meeting Steven was when I was able to see that make-up could be used as an addition to the human form.
Steven: We both helped each other go into this courageous space where we do what we want to. I love you, you love me, and we don’t judge each other. We just started doing it on each other and having fun and it became this organic development of what it is today. Make-up isn’t a tool to cover anything up. It’s a tool to reveal our inner selves; it gives us a sense of freedom. It’s a cliché but the most important thing is to be yourself and that’s how we use beauty. In the beginning, we rejected beauty and didn’t understand it, but wearing make-up is something where you just need the courage to try it out, and now I love it and feel so much more confident with it.

I also use make-up as a way of revealing myself, but it’s complex because when you’re not wearing it, you feel like you’re not representing yourself properly.
Hannah: It should be a mirror match of what’s on the inside, on the outside. It’s almost like a dichotomy because with all three of us, we do our make-up to express our true selves, but then we have trouble taking it off to be our ‘real’ true selves, like how we wake up in the morning. It’s a weird situation, but it’s a journey and at the end of the day, what’s most important is that you have fun and love yourself.
Steven: That’s the goal really, to learn to love yourself in all forms. That’s the exciting part about when you start – you’re hooked on self-expression. It’s like a drug, and it’s so fun. We’re all going through a journey, but the key is not to use it as a mask to hide behind but rather to embrace the person behind all of it – because ultimately, the person behind the make-up is the one who created it.

How has the industry changed? Are people now more accepting of different forms of beauty?
Steven: When we started, our look was considered ugly, disgusting, revolting, monstrous, and to call it ‘fashion’ was a joke. Now, we see some of the biggest brands influenced by what we do – our visuals and presentation – and they’re reaching out to work with us. The beauty standard has definitely changed.
Hannah: There’s still such a long way to go and there always will be in this industry because it’s based on exploitation. It’s much better than eight or nine years ago when we started, but it can still be better.

What can we expect from Fecal Matter in the future?
Hannah: I always say the end goal is to do movies one day, because I think that includes all aspects of our platform: music, storytelling, photography, and visuals.
Steven: Definitely make-up, too. But if we’re going to release our own products, I want them to be truly special, authentic, and innovative. It’s in our minds and we’re exploring it. The beauty industry needs releases and products created by the people who actually wear them so that they have durability, wearability, and those little details that only the wearer understands.

‘I like strong scents, like Casablanca lilies or hot sand and camel’s piss.’

Michèle Lamy on powerful perfumes, her love of Tunisia, and Gilles Deleuze’s beauty.

Michèle Lamy is a shapeshifter. An ageless entity, she’s taken various forms: defence lawyer, cabaret dancer, political rebel, designer, and restaurateur – as the owner of two cult Los Angeles establishments, Café des Artistes and Les Deux Cafés.

In her later years, Lamy has settled on her most recognisable form – adding artist, furniture enthusiast and boxer to her repertoire. Often appearing amid a haze of cigarette smoke, her signature look is uniquely her own: smudged smoky eyes, blackened and tattooed fingers – inspired by Berber women of Morocco – with gold and diamond-encrusted teeth that glint and gleam with every raucous laugh.

An enigma, never meant to be fully understood – Lamy cements this as an avid storyteller of her own life – her past raises more questions than it answers, all part of her intangible allure. Sagacious priestess or mischievous innocent, she embodies it all, a pioneer of making ‘beauty’ your own long before the industry caught up. Who better to front the inaugural issue of *System beauty* and share her vision of the ever-complicated concept?

Thomas Lenthal: How many do you smoke a day, Michèle?
Michèle Lamy: Listen, there are no days because I smoke at night, too! I light lots of cigarettes, but I’ve done lots of tests, too. I already knew what the doctor would say and when he did the MRI, he said: ‘What am I looking for?’ It’s the same with drugs and alcohol; it’s all to do with your metabolism. There are people in their hundreds who smoke so many cigarettes.
Elizabeth von Guttman: Then you have people who have never smoked in their lives and they get cancer.
Thomas: So you think that if you haven’t had anything by, let’s say the age of 45, then it’s OK?
Michèle: There could come a time, if I felt run down or couldn’t box any more, but I only smoke a little, I don’t even inhale the smoke. I like lighting up the most. It’s because of Jean-Luc Godard that I smoke… *Breathless.*
Thomas: We all smoked because of the cinema.
Michèle: I didn’t think about it at the time, it was only afterwards that I realized.
Thomas: Did your parents smoke?
Michèle: Very little. No, they were drugged on other things. It was all completely legal.
Thomas: It was normal at the time. You could take Mogadon [a sleeping pill] and Captagon [a then-legal amphetamine] every day, no worries. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was fine. When did you start smoking?
Michèle: I started when I was 15 or 16. As soon as I stopped boarding. I was boarding near Annecy from 9 years old to 16.
Thomas: Did you have a uniform? Can you describe it?
Michèle: Like all uniforms really: a white shirt, little beret and all that. I liked boarding. The school was run by nuns, although we’re not at all Catholic in the family. My father was a Mason. Do you know the Jurassians? It’s all about free thinking, the Resistance. Not really very Catholic.
Thomas: How were the nuns dressed?
Michèle: Very nun-like, no cornettes, but they were dressed in black. Some of them were beautiful. They are incredible people.
Thomas: It’s not absurd to think there’s a connection between the nuns in your childhood and the fact you only dress in black now.
Elizabeth: Where were you born?
Michèle: Oyonnax. My mother and father families were from the Lyon region, restaurants and all that, and Jura, and they had a timber business. We were selling the last scraps of wood from the Jura, the woods that belonged to the family.

Thomas: Did you find yourself attractive when you were young? Who did you find attractive? Actors or actresses?
Michèle: Undoubtedly, there were actors, but I found lots of things beautiful; I love the mountains, the sea, people, and music. We were always travelling all over the place, so I found many things beautiful. I used to love it when they would put explosives in the mountains in Jura so the piste would be safe the next day. In fact, what I found the most beautiful was the desert. I was maybe 16 when I first went to North Africa, and saw Berber women in Tunisia. I was completely seduced by them. From then on I started searching for family there, not necessarily family, but something in the same region as family. At my boarding school, there was a real mix of people, there were fairer girls from German-speaking Switzerland and then I had friends who were olive-skinned. My grandmother powdered her skin, to fit in with norms, but it was funny how nobody sought their origins.

Thomas: For you, it was like finding your origins in Tunisia?
Michèle: I found it in the beauty, in the wrinkles, the language, which I never learned, but I’m still trying now.
Elizabeth: When did you start applying certain Berber motifs on yourself?
Michèle: I started that in Los Angeles. To begin I wore Guerlain kohl, then Saint Laurent. Whenever I was at an Italian train station, I would stock up on an inexpensive crayon you could get; I would buy 10 at a time.

Thomas: When did you start the tattoos?
Michèle: That was complicated because it was in Los Angeles and no one wanted to do the drawing for me because the tattooists were either men who wanted to do their own designs or they wouldn’t tattoo fingers. In the end, it was in North Palm Springs. You weren’t allowed to do tattoos in Palm Springs, so we went over to the other side where the bikers were and a guy did it for me. He was so happy to do something he had never done before because people only wanted little pigs and Betty Boop. I drew it on my finger and he went over it. Then for this one, it’s the same story, we were just below Aspen, but there wasn’t a tattooist there. I had to do something that wouldn’t be too complicated. Under the influence of Rick Owens, it became much cleaner! I would have liked him to do these *petits croisillons* all the way up to my fingertips, but it was impossible, too painful. So it stopped there where I could take it up to. The rest I dyed. I wanted to have the tips of my fingers black, and my feet as well. I dyed my feet with Bigen. It’s a Japanese brand; I’ll get a box to show you. I started because Rick Owens started getting white hair at 25.
Elizabeth: Oh, news flash!
Michèle: Breaking news! Yes, so I found this product at the end of the street, which was quite natural. It’s hair dye. I’ve been doing it for years. It stays on the nails like it does on the hair. It’s permanent, but I’ve just got back from Château La Coste, where I was in the swimming pool, and it fades. For the eyes, I would have had them tattooed, but it doesn’t stay black or as thick, it goes blue. It needs to be black, a dense black. To go with my blue eyes!

Elizabeth: What about your beauty rituals? What’s the first thing you do when you wake up?
Michèle: A cigarette and a cup of tea. Then a hammam; I do it every day. I have one here in the house. I like how it’s foggy when you go in. I don’t really meditate that much. I think when I smoke, and it helps my sense of time as well. If I didn’t smoke during the day, I wouldn’t know what time it was!

Thomas: The food at your place is always very good and sophisticated. Did you always eat like that? Is it your Lyonnais side?
Michèle: It started when I arrived in Los Angeles. My grandfather, who died when I was very young, was a great chef. He had a restaurant in Lyon and at the airport, and he had a big house and farms. So food has always been important. There were lots of traditions in the family, where you couldn’t eat peas after July 14th, and things like that! I’m a bit like that, too.

Thomas: What about everything that’s olfactive, perfume, and so on? You seem to have a relationship with perfume that’s very personal. Don’t you mix your own perfumes?
Michèle: I don’t really like green scents; I like things that are quite strong, like Casablanca lilies, and I always say I like scents like hot sand and camel’s piss. Perfumes in that vein. A brand that I always liked and that still exists is Sables by Annick Goutal. But otherwise what I like best is buying patchouli, tuberose, roses, and mixing them. I put on a bit of this, a splash of that. It changes all the time. In the souk in Dubai, you find perfumes, and you mix them up. I like dark-coloured perfumes. I want to really smell them. People know when I’ve been somewhere, like at the gym, or they know when I’ve arrived because of my perfume. With my bracelets, too, which make a lot of noise. I don’t know why, but I like to announce my arrival! Like Tinkerbell, here I come.

Thomas: Is there a woman who you find beautiful today?
Michèle: There are lots. Louise Bourgeois. So many people I find beautiful. Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich. My mother had an air of Dietrich about her.

Thomas: You can’t disassociate the external beauty of the person from their internal quality?
Michèle: Now you say it, yes, I think that’s true.
Thomas: For you, it’s personality that’s beautiful. For men, too, but with a beautiful set of abs. Is it more visual for men?
Michèle: Yes, but there has to be something underneath that! It’s interesting, but it’s completely linked and the voice is very important. For example, [Gilles] Deleuze, he was very beautiful, with his twisted tones, because of the illness he had, but you could spend hours listening to his voice, and the voice and his eyes, and what he had to say. Now, that is seduction!
Thomas: So you’re more interested in seduction than contemplation?
Michèle: No, well, that’s what you say – that’s your quote!
Thomas: You’ll contemplate the desert, but not men.
Michèle: Yes. The end.

Composition with Two Flowers N°5, Philippines, 2014. From the book *FLUX I*, published by Note Editions

‘When you see the number of perfumes released each year, it’s a miracle there’s even one that stands out.’

Perfume designers Alberto Morillas and Jérôme Epinette discuss the adventure of creating the future of scent. Interview by Clément Paradis. Photographs by Erwan Frotin

The power of a fragrance to transport its wearer through time and space, to evoke distant memories and to conjure up emotions is well understood by master perfumers Alberto Morillas and Jérôme Epinette.

Born in Seville, Morillas began his career at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva before joining world-renowned fragrance house Firmenich in 1970. Since then, he’s created some of the most celebrated modern fragrances – the groundbreaking Calvin Klein CK One, the evocative Acqua di Giò, with its top notes of lemon and mint, the charming Daisy for Marc Jacobs and, most recently, Gucci Bloom, a modern floral creation.

It was Acqua di Giò, which he created for Giorgio Armani in 1996, which captured the mind (and nose) of a young Jérôme Epinette, who grew up in Burgundy and whose mother worked in the perfumery where he first immersed himself in the craft. In 2003, after studying at the Grasse Institute of Perfumery, he joined natural raw materials and fragrance manufacturer, Robertet, where he has remained ever since.

Over the years, Epinette has created many notable wood-based blends (it’s something of an obsession of his) for well-known houses including Olfactive Studio, Vilhelm Parfumerie, and Atelier Cologne, but it’s his work with Byredo, founded by visionary Swedish artist Ben Gorham, for which he has become best known. Bal d’Afrique, Pulp, 1996, and, of course, Gypsy Water, with its allusions to Romani culture and scents of fresh soil, campfires and forest nights, are all his creations.

With a shared avant-garde approach, both Morillas and Epinette represent the gold standard for perfume today, celebrated for their ability to fuse high-quality natural ingredients with breakthrough synthetics to create constantly surprising results.

System beauty sat down with the pair to discuss their approaches and processes, and the emotional power of perfume.

Clément Paradis: You’ve both worked for large houses and smaller perfumers. What is the key to a good understanding between a perfumer and a brand today?
Jérôme Epinette: The collaboration happens over time. At the beginning, there’s a period of understanding and analysis, and then gradually a certain awareness and trust is established. Our name is of course associated with the brand, which is a huge responsibility, so we throw ourselves into it 100%.
Alberto Morillas: When Gucci and Alessandro Michele called, I was slightly more nervous because I didn’t know him. It’s different to Bulgari with whom I’ve been working for more than 20 years. With Alessandro, it was a genuine exchange between two designers, and I’ve not felt that very often. He adores perfume and he gives his input, but he doesn’t say what he wants; it’s up to me to transcribe an emotion.

Is it harder to work for big or smaller brands?
Jérôme: There is much more intervention with big brands, with more people involved with decision-making power, so you have to play on all fronts. It can be a bit complex because you have to please both the designer and brand, but in the end, it’s about understanding who is actually making the decisions. That’s the main difference with smaller, more family-oriented brands, which are much easier.
Alberto: For Gucci, it really is Alessandro who decides the pace we work at. The brief for Mémoire d’une Odeur, for example, was complicated: gender-free and based on chamomile. I would say to Alessandro: ‘Are you sure about chamomile? It’s never been associated with a perfume…’, but he would say, ‘Yes, I like that and want it.’ He said he never wanted to make a perfume that smelled like duty free; he wanted to make one that reflected his ideas.

If I have a niche brand and want to create a perfume, what happens when I come to see you?
Jérôme: The first step is that I listen. One talent a perfumer must have is being able to grasp the message you want to drive through your brand. So I would ask what you think about life, what your emotions are, what you’re drawn to. Once I have those elements, I can start creating some notes. I don’t like offering a choice of 10 or 15 notes, but just one or two that I really believe in and think could be relevant for you as the client. We take so much pleasure in that as perfumers. It’s about sharing: you tell us what has happened in your life, the journey, and we make a fragrance around that.

How does it work with established brands, where you already know their visual universe? Are you able to predict what they will want and what will please them or are there surprises?
Alberto: Every brief is an adventure, even for me. I’ve worked with Bulgari a lot and even now I’m never sure if they’ll like what I’m going to offer them. I never offer them just one version; I have to show all the versions, all the emotions, then it goes to marketing and they decide. You can’t predict anything.
Jérôme: I completely agree. The perfumer has to go beyond themselves and come up with

something quite different each time. There is nothing worse than when a client says, 'Oh this is just another version of something that already exists.' People get excited about the next perfume, so we really have to come up with an original twist, a new concept, something unexpected – but will it be liked? That's the challenge.

Have brands contacted you saying, 'I want something like Dior Sauvage', but make it new and original. How does that work?
Alberto: Everyone has an eye on the market, and we have to as well. A designer who creates in a cellar on his own, he may as well be making perfumes for himself. Perfume has to please a lot of people, I'm not saying everyone, but there has to be something that is surprising, even in its very simplicity. Jérôme has created some astonishing things, but when you wear them, there is always an emotion, really something even if it's breaking away from the accords. Jérôme made Bal d'Afrique for Byredo, and it's one thing to smell it on a scent strip and altogether something else when you smell it on a woman. I can understand why it's so successful. The name, with its energy, can be associated with something sensual.

'If I smell Coco Mademoiselle in the street, it instantly transports me. Yet, if I smell it on a scent strip, it's not that exceptional.'

What makes your own specificity? You are both known for major perfumes, but also niche perfumes, like Bal d'Afrique and Mémoire d'une Odeur, that have created small-scale revolutions in contemporary perfumery. Neither were runaway commercial hits, but both were critical successes and had an impact on people.
Jérôme: With Bal d'Afrique, we were trying to create something surprising, different, and with a wonderful sillage that people talked about. If I smell [the Jacques Polge-designed] Coco Mademoiselle in the street, it instantly transports me, and I have to stop and breathe it in. I can actually follow someone down the street because I fall into a trance; you gravitate towards a particular note. Yet, like Alberto with my perfume, if I smell Mademoiselle on a scent strip, it's not that exceptional; it doesn't really affect me,
Alberto: It's happened to me, too. I've gone up to women and said, 'Madame, what are you wearing? It smells so good.' Every time I smell Coco Mademoiselle I'm surprised by it. It smells so good, extraordinary even, with that sillage, and yet it seems so simple. Even one I made, Acqua di Giò, still surprises me when I smell it in the street, over 25 years later. It doesn't belong to me, but I smell an emotion. It's a formula that works so well, with material elements that were so avant-garde. Adding new material to compositions is actually very difficult because the client isn't used to it. No one liked ethyl maltol [which has a candied scent] to begin with – I didn't – but it's become the vanilla of our era. It's like calone [which gives a sea-breeze odour]: when you use too much of it, everyone hates it, but now there isn't a perfume that doesn't contain calone! When I create a formula, I have no idea it will be such a success. If I knew how it works, I'd be a billionaire!
Jérôme: You don't know if it's going to be a great success, but very quickly you know if you're onto something. It has an effect on people and you're proud of that. When the sample arrives from the lab, there really is this joy and that helps with the message for the brand.

Your fragrances have poetic, evocative names such as Gypsy Water, simple names like Bloom, or more outmoded ones like Mémoire d'une Odeur. Do you know the names in advance? Do they influence how you work?
Alberto: I never know the names until the last minute because often the brands haven't patented one yet or they're still looking for it. Bulgari always comes with an idea for the name, but for other brands, I generally find out when the label for the bottle is printed!
Jérôme: The brands develop everything at the same time – the name and the packaging – while we're developing the perfume. There might be an inspiration, a concept, but generally we don't visualize the name in advance. With Byredo and Atelier Cologne, I am part of the naming process. Black Saffron for Byredo, for example, we came up with that name and the brand liked it; it was perfect for their audience and image. Sometimes they give us the name and we don't agree, but that's how it is.

If we look back through time, are there perfumes that continue to fascinate you?
Jérôme: I have mentioned Coco Mademoiselle; I'm forever shocked by it. Then there are other older perfumes like Opium or Poison, because my mother wore those, so you attach emotional value to those memories. Then also Acqua di Giò. When I smell it in the street, it remains exceptional. I wore it for a very long time. I would almost shower in it, and everyone around me would be like, 'OK, you have to stop with this perfume.' It was so strong with such a powerful sillage. Alberto, it really is a creation that I have studied because I had to know what was in this exceptional perfume.
Alberto: It's difficult to choose, but even if it is old, there is Chanel N°5. I have tried so hard to make it myself, but never managed! I started in the perfumery business because I loved all the Guerlain perfumes. Shalimar is the most Parisian of perfumes.

What do you think is the future of perfumery?
Alberto: No more ethyl maltol – we're fed up with that, even if it is still popular! I don't know what the crystal ball would say. Who would have thought that Baccarat Rouge 540 would be such a success? A brand that's barely known for perfume, an accord that's very simple, and it's been incredibly successful.
Jérôme: I think there will always be surprises. As you said, if we knew the future, we'd be billionaires! You mentioned the maltol accord. The combination of orange blossom and maltol is very fashionable right now. Also wood and maltol, it's always an association of notes, never just one. Otherwise, we'd go around in circles. Baccarat Rouge is very maltol-based, but it's combined with Ambroxan. It has a very long, diffusing sillage and I think that's why it's so successful.
Alberto: In perfumery, I do like to see the success of others. I think it keeps perfumery alive. When you see the number of perfumes released each year, it's a miracle there's even one that stands out. I don't know how consumers smell them all, I certainly don't! I have to force myself because we have to be part of the zeitgeist – you can't just be an old fart!
Jérôme: Yes, you have to have an open mind.
Alberto: You're young! I'm nearly 73.
Jérôme: There is no age for perfumery!
Alberto: I agree, as long as there's the emotion of creation, passion and desire. If you don't have the desire then you can't start working on creating perfumes. Talent is one thing, but that desire is more important.

Composition with Two Flowers N°1, Costa Rica, 2014. From the book *FLUX 1*, published by Note Note Editions

‘My ambition was to make the “most generic of generics” – the generic lipstick.’

Designer Pierre Hardy explains his inspiration for the packaging of Hermès Beauty. Interview by Éric Troncy. Photograph by Charles Negre

In the Hermès offices on Rue de Penthièvre in Paris’s chic eighth *arrondissement*, in a large, recently renovated building, Pierre Hardy and I are seated in a room that resembles a 1980s vision of a hyper-clean future. It is all a bit William Gibson-esque. Everything is white, slightly clinical, and through vast bay windows you can see the tall grass of the landscaped terrace and behind, the Eiffel Tower. On the few, immaculately white shelves sit regularly spaced perfume bottles organized according to colour, as well as small cylinders with white lacquered tops and coloured bases, all illuminated by a line of harsh, white LEDs.

Hardy is sitting at a big table, the colour of candied chestnut, his hands folded neatly together on the tabletop, exuding both serenity and excitement. The French designer has been working with Hermès since 1990, and was recently put in charge of designing the packaging for the house’s new beauty line, which launched with lipsticks in 2021.

The system he invented for the containers is composed of some 15 elements, with lacquered, brushed, and polished white metal tubes covered halfway by two bands of colour.

These little tubes are beautifully eye-catching. Refillable and made in metal, they have been designed with the environment in mind. In a playful twist, each tube is closed with a magnet that produces a satisfying and rather magical ‘click’. Their appearance even has something of the striped poles on a showjumping fence, a nod, perhaps, to Hermès’ origins as a harness and saddle maker.

Éric Troncy: What was your thinking behind the design?

Pierre Hardy: Cosmetics are subjective, corporeal and carnal, and I wanted the shapes of the objects to be the opposite of that, so there could be no confusion between what they are and what we do with them. I didn’t want it to be... how would you say it these days?

Ergonomic?

Worse than that – organic! I wanted a certain abstraction, a distance. This line will be built up over time, over a very long period of time. These are small, simple volumes that can be added to and combined with others. For me, it was a question of looking for elementary forms, without any real narrative.

Did you adhere to the Bauhaus notion that you can change lives if a fork is better designed?

I may have been thinking more about the Memphis Group in general, and Ettore Sottsass in particular. The colours in Sottsass’ work strike me as very different, but yes, it’s true that the yellow and ‘Burgundy brown’ do evoke one of his astonishing *Columns*. My ambition was to make the ‘most generic of generics’ – the generic lipstick. The only concession to sensuality is the little hollow on the top of the tube, which has a golden Hermès Ex-Libris motif on it, like a fingerprint.

I’ve never really thought of Pierre Hardy as a box or tube designer! Even though you were really involved in the design of your stores, and you create fresco drawings for some of them.

It’s a pretext! I’ve always wondered what I would do if I were an artist, but I don’t know. I have no idea what I would make if I wasn’t working in the applied arts. It’s very different to creating a work of art. Deep down, I think I like responding to an order!

That’s something you have in common with Warhol. He said that what he really fantasized about was having a boss to tell him what to do.

When a request is made, I project myself into it. It’s different to the images I produce for myself. In this particular case of the lipsticks, I wanted an absolute, because I think that Hermès the brand is all about the absolute: absolute quality, absolute perfectionism. Beauty is the newest department at Hermès; it only started two years ago. There were 15 *métiers* including leather goods and equestrian, men’s and women’s silk and ready-to-wear, shoes, jewellery and watchmaking, furniture and tableware – and now we have beauty. With that and with cosmetics, there’s a quest for the ideal. A woman who wears make-up always thinks that she will look more beautiful, if not the most beautiful, and I wanted these objects to be a kind of ideal to achieving that. Maybe because I work in other domains that are the opposite – which are anecdotal, ephemeral – this felt like an opportunity for me to be part of something with a very different relationship to time. I always try to look inside the object itself to reveal the physical qualities or formalism it may contain, and then to bring that to the fore, to elevate it, to enhance it, sometimes just to clean it up. Cosmetic literally means ‘to put in order’ – it’s putting in order what you have. I didn’t want there to be anything superfluous with the body, lips or skin, while trying to remain consistent with Hermès, in this case, the house’s gestalt aspect. Beauty seems like a word that we’re scared of today. In the 19th century, there may have been one idea of beauty, but today that’s no longer true. There are ‘beauties’, perhaps, because even certain sorts of ugliness are showcased as beauty now. ‘Beauty’ has become an almost impossible concept, especially in an age when making choices is seen as inappropriate, so that everything ends up being amazing.

‘I wanted to do something meta.’

Nail visionary Mei Kawajiri’s creative journey is based on never following the rules. Photograph by Robin Broadbent

Mei Kawajiri is wearing flesh-coloured nails with two-inch black tips, scored with menacing chrome markings. ‘I wanted to do something meta, so it looks like there are nails coming out from other nails,’ she explains. ‘I usually have crazy nails, but when I’m working, I like to keep it simple.’ This is said without irony. Indeed, a quick scroll down her Instagram feed – @nailsby-mei – reveals a rich tableau of talon art: six-inch tips encrusted with jewels and lace; blush-pink bubble sculptures; miniaturized Hunter wellies; and even, an embedded iPhone charging cord. The world is her playground.

Born in Kyoto, Japan, Kawajiri has never been one to follow rules. She dyed her hair red at school when it was explicitly forbidden; practiced professional nail art while still a student (again discouraged); and rebelled against standard practice of painting only one side of the nail (‘Why can’t we paint on the back, too?’ she shrugs).

In 2012, after honing her craft at nail school in Osaka, and later at salons in Kyoto and Tokyo, Kawajiri moved to New York, where she met stylist Carine Roitfeld, who snapped her up for a shoot for *CR Fashion Book*. Since then, her kaleidoscopic creations have seen her work with everyone from Miu Miu to Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga to Blumarine.

In person, Kawajiri is just as colourful and effervescent as her designs, her carefree attitude a much-needed breath of fresh air in today’s sombre world.

Tish Weinstock: What role does beauty play in your work and its continual quest to push the boundaries of nail art?
Mei Kawajiri: Beauty is just expressing your style, mood and whatever makes you happy. I’m not interested in the idea of just making yourself look pretty. I love eyeliner and hair colour, and of course, nails, too. When I was younger, my high school was so strict, but I wanted to dye my hair red. When I did, my teacher said, ‘You have to go home and change it back.’ So I went to a wig store, bought a wig, put it on and I went back to school. I never feel satisfied when things are simple. I’m always looking for something new and fun.

How does that apply to nails?
When nails came into my life, it was perfect. I wanted to get into tattoos, but because I change my mind so quickly, like every three hours, I realized I needed something like tattoos but less permanent. I was 18 and I went into a magazine store and found a nail magazine. This was 20 years ago, so the only designs they had were palm trees or leopard print. I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is so boring – I can help.’ I already had so many ideas for nails. I told my mum, ‘I don’t want to go to college, but can I go to nail school instead?’ And she was like ‘Yeah, but if you do it, you have to be the best.’

Very sage advice. How did nail school help you hone your craft? Was it what you expected? How did your ideas fit in with what they taught?
I learned all the basic things, but I had so many crazy ideas that I would draw in my notebook, like flowers with bugs on the back of the nail. I was also working in a nail salon in Kyoto as a student. I wasn’t supposed to do nails for people, but I would always be wearing the craziest nails and so people would ask me to do theirs, so I did. After a couple of years, I realized that Kyoto was too small and that I needed to move to Tokyo, so I moved there and started working with people who worked in nightlife, where everyone had crazy nails. I would charge people $60 for ‘chef’s choice’ which was where I would just do whatever I wanted. That gave me a lot of freedom to be creative.

I love the idea of chef’s choice. You later traded in Tokyo for New York. How did moving there shape your practice?
In Japan, everything was very clean and organized. Nails were all the same shape and colour. In New York, I could do whatever I wanted – pointy tips, square nails, long nails, short nails, all mixed together. My creations became more dynamic. I remember someone told me once that New York people wanted to be like Paris people – you know, chic and only wearing one nail colour – but now look, everyone wants to have crazy nails.

A lot of the materials you use are quite unorthodox, for example, lace, hair or an iPhone charging cord. How do you explain the significance of these?
All of these ideas come from my imagination. I once made a hairpiece out of nails, so I thought, ‘Why not put hair on nails?’ Anything can go on nails. As for the charger, our phones are always in our hands, so why not have a charger on our nails?

Our hands are among our most powerful tools of self-expression. We gesticulate with our hands; we greet people with them; we use them to scroll, touch and type. It makes sense, then, that nails can also become a vital tool for communication. What do your nails say about you?
Nails are my way of saying: ‘This is me; I am unique.’ They’re like my puppets, they talk more than me. Sometimes people recognize my nails before they realize who I am. I always have to be wearing a nail look. Even when I’m in pyjamas, wearing no make-up, nothing in my hair, if I have my nails done, I’m fine. I don’t even care about having new clothes – I just have to have cool nails. I have this big nail collection on my wall, so whenever I’m going to a party or dinner I just pick up some nails, press them on and off I go.

What do you want people to take from your work?
There’s a lot of comedy behind my work, but it’s also very beautiful and creative. I like something that makes you say, ‘Oh wow, I’ve never seen that before.’

We’re constantly bombarded with images and references, how do you stay inspired?
I look at a lot of nature and food. Yesterday I opened my fridge and I thought about what my nails would look like dipped into a strawberry. Kitchens inspire me. History, also. I just did a *Mona Lisa* nail.

Previously viewed as an afterthought – especially compared to hair and make-up – nail art has exploded in recent years. How do you see it evolving?
I think more people will get into double-sided, press-on nails. I see people having nail collections, where they will put on different nails depending on how they’re feeling or where they’re going. Nails will be the new accessory. People will change their nails like they change their outfits.

I can see that, like a wardrobe of nails you can choose from. What about your own career, how do you hope it will evolve?
I would love to create short films. I have an idea of a woman typing on her computer. You start off viewing from far away and then you zoom in and you realize the nails are actually connected to the computer. I have so many ideas like that.

‘I just wanted limitless creativity.’

After launching their own brands, make-up artist Isamaya Ffrench and hair stylist Cyndia Harvey are ready to shake up the beauty market. Photographs by Charles Negre

Many industry figures have a similar coming-of-age tale, with the protagonist stumbling upon fashion or beauty for the first time. This aesthetic *stade du miroir* usually takes place after an encounter with the pages of a magazine, an object – lipstick, perfume, shoe, bag – or an older relative or friend whose striking style casts a spell over the young creative. Hair stylist Cyndia Harvey and make-up artist Isamaya Ffrench lived other stories, however, outside traditional industry parameters. Which perhaps explains why they now occupy similar singular spaces within the industry as arbiters of new ways of thinking that often, sometimes unintentionally, hold the industry to account. Now, as they launch their own beauty brands, they are bucking the system once more.

‘I don’t like doing what has been done before,’ says Ffrench. It is a philosophy that has informed much of her past work and now informs her next chapter: a beauty line called Isamaya. In June, Ffrench introduced the ‘Industrial’ collection, a five-piece drop comprising a mascara, eyeshadow palette, glow serum, lip lacquer, and brow laminator. While the off-kilter oil-slick hues and cutting-edge formulas felt refreshing, it was the packaging – lids spiked with hard metal piercings, and a bound rubbery figure emerging from the palette – and BDSM-themed campaign visuals, shot by Steven Klein and starring a latex-clad Isamaya, that set the brand apart as something truly new.

Launched a week later, Cyndia Harvey’s T.H.O.M – This Hair Of Mine – is more pared back, but no less radical: a luxury haircare brand for those with textured hair. It’s a simple proposition, which she believes has until now been glaringly overlooked by the high-end market. The first release is a scalp serum designed to nourish the hair from the root. Harvey is not in her brand’s campaign, which she describes as ‘punk’ and features a female friend with alopecia and a model with a shaved head.

Though the pair share an affinity for shattering norms, their paths to their brands have been quite different. Harvey worked in a hair salon in London and assisted Sam McKnight for five years before deciding to go it alone. In 2016, she caught the industry’s attention with ‘This Hair of Mine’, a powerful visual essay exploring the strength and beauty of Black hair. Since then, Harvey has crafted looks for the industry’s most innovative thinkers, such as intricate webs of interlocking braids for Simone Rocha’s Autumn/Winter 2022 show or the slime-green roots for Diesel by Glenn Marten’s gang of tearaways that same season.

Ffrench got her start through osmosis. After moving to London from Cambridge, word got around that she was skilled with face paint and she soon found herself on sets for *i-D* and other magazines. Pushing the limits of conventional beauty, often through the use of prosthetics, and sometimes using her own face as a canvas, she built a reputation for an unorthodox approach. Over the years, she has created boundary-pushing looks and developed visionary make-up lines for Louboutin, Tom Ford, Byredo, and Burberry, where she was named global beauty director in 2020.

Isamaya and T.H.O.M aren’t just two more beauty brands, vying for your attention in a sea of homogeneity and the swollen commercial beauty market. They’re neither selling you some repackaged notion of beauty in the traditional sense, nor are they relying on tired millennial tropes to appeal to a younger audience. They are, instead, the antidote.

Tish Weinstock: Before we get onto the brands, I want to go back to the beginning. What did beauty look and feel like to you growing up?
Cyndia Harvey: Growing up in Jamaica, in my mother’s hair salon, beauty was what I saw around me: powerful, matriarchal women. I remember the care that these women put into how they dressed; it was about pride and ritual. It didn’t have to be about something ‘beautiful’. It would be rooted in something everyday. For example, I would always take pride in making sure my school shoes looked the best they could. That’s where I find beauty, in the mundane.

Isamaya Ffrench: When most people ask that, they’re asking, ‘What do you find cosmetically beautiful?’ But to Cyndia’s point, beauty is a whole different thing. I didn’t grow up in a matriarchy; it was the opposite. Everyone in my family was an engineer. There were no cosmetics in the house. I would go out and fix cars with my dad and help him build stuff. I felt very comfortable in that masculine environment. Beauty is about problem-solving; the industry is about solving problems through creativity – and that’s my engineering side coming out.
Cyndia: Beauty in the cosmetic sense is a luxury and a privilege. I grew up in quite a difficult situation and I started hairdressing as a way to escape. I had no idea about fashion. I only knew about hair within a salon context.

The fact that your initial connection didn’t stem from beauty in the traditional sense comes out in the way you both work. Isamaya, when did your relationship with beauty change?
Isamaya: I was studying art and product design, and doing a face-painting job on the side. It got around that I could do body painting, so I got asked to do a couple of shoots. I didn’t go straight into make-up; I did creative work with face paint. I wasn’t doing it in a Pat McGrath or Val Garland way. Instead, I was a young, naive person who didn’t care and was having fun. That’s why people were like, ‘Oh, this doesn’t feel very industry.’ Of course, that’s what the work looked like; I was uneducated and using fucking face paints. I didn’t even know what *i-D* was. Magazines just weren’t my world.

How easy was it to get those initial breaks?
Cyndia: Assisting Sam McKnight opened a lot of doors for me. As a Black woman, I could never have done that independently. When I started to work on my own, it was easier as people like Tim Walker already trusted me, and that was through Sam. I’ve always really respected someone like you, Isamaya, because you are someone who just came in. You didn’t have any background, but you had a vision

from the first day and basically inspired an entire generation about make-up.
Isamaya: Thank you. It's interesting having this conversation with Cyndia because we've had very different paths. One thing I know for sure is that I don't like doing what has been done before. So, whether I was into make-up or not, I would have never gone down the route of doing traditional make-up.

Your journeys have been different, yet you've both recently launched your own 'disruptive' beauty brands. Is there a change happening in the industry and is challenging the status quo a driving force in what you do?
Isamaya: Only now with the brand have I thought that I need to do things differently, but that's about instinct, not having some comment or opinion on what everyone else is doing. I don't think that it's ever been a driving force for my approach to work. I have never seen work as a rebellion.
Cyndia: I agree it's about pure instinct. It just so happens that our instinct drives a different conversation and makes people think. I'm not an activist, and just because our core consumer is an underrepresented group doesn't mean it's an activist brand. In interviews, people want to say I'm fighting for something. I am a Black woman, so that's naturally going to come out in the work; it's just intrinsic.
Isamaya: I did an interview recently, and someone asked me, 'Is this a gender-neutral make-up line?' I said, 'It can look good on both boys and girls.' Then the whole tagline around the interview was 'Isamaya's gender-fluid make-up line', and I was like, 'They have really missed the mark there.' I felt really sad. We didn't talk about sustainability or packaging, or the many other important things. I'm about make-up for anyone, but I'm not pushing an agenda.

Without setting out to buck the system, that's exactly what you've done with your brands.
Isamaya: The way I do things often gets called out for being 'anti-beauty'. What does that even mean? Beauty is personal and subjective, and the way I am approaching it is more anti-industry. Not to reject things, but just to do things differently. I've had amazing collaborations with brands, but ultimately it's never your own vision. I also wanted to be part of the brand and embody it. Charlotte Tilbury is part of her brand; Pat McGrath, too, although she does it through models. That's why I am in the visuals. Audiences want to be inspired and unfortunately, the majority of the time, you're restricted by certain parameters or commercial constraints, which just totally dilute creativity. I just wanted limitless creativity.

Your first drop takes its cues from the semiotics of BDSM. Why was that significant?
Isamaya: Symbolically, BDSM fitted into that idea of what make-up can do for you and set the tone for the brand: confidence and self-possession. I didn't want to do something that felt typically commercial. This collection speaks to people who feel they can be more of their authentic selves with this style of make-up.

Cyndia, what was the genesis of T.H.O.M?
Cyndia: It was more about a personal need to have a brand like this, rather than a need to change an antiquated industry. I work with a lot of high-profile clients, I live a certain lifestyle, and I buy into brands like Barbara Sturm and Augustinus Bader, but there's no elevated experience for textured hair. Let's not forget the influence Black hair has had on culture. Yet, Black people are not front and centre when you think of a luxury brand. I didn't just want to launch a brand with an influential platform. This is rooted in something far bigger. It's an opportunity for me to innovate in a space where no one else is, whether through product, messaging, brand experience or even what a brand can look like, and not just for Black people's hair, but for hair in general.

What informed the brand's visuals?
Cyndia: People can connect with make-up instantly – it's so visceral – but haircare brands don't have that same kind of charm. So that was the challenge: how do we make people as excited and devoted to a haircare brand as they are to their make-up brands?
Isamaya: You've got a wicked logo, Cyndia; I love it. I'm quite jealous.
Cyndia: Thank you. It was inspired by old African systems. The colour palette was taken from the orange top and green skirt that Angela Davis wore when she was interviewed after being wrongly incarcerated in 1972. For the campaign, we thought there was something quite punk about launching a haircare brand with people without any hair. As a brand, we celebrate everyone as they are.

Do you view T.H.O.M as being disruptive?
Cyndia: It is, but it shouldn't be. Why does this brand only exist in 2022? Why haven't these products been available for this consumer before? It's important for brands to be inclusive, but that does not mean that one product fits the entire mould. I know that if I use a certain product for all hair types in the way that the marketing tells me, I will fuck my hair up.

What should a beauty brand look and feel like in 2022?
Isamaya: It's about being transparent. I don't think there are any rules. You need to be conscious but inspiring, as so much stuff looks the same. It's also important to keep your eye on things like sustainability. It's very hard to do interesting and complicated stuff that isn't extortionately expensive, while also being good for the environment and using recyclable materials. We have a sustainability consultant now who's helping with our long-term goals. Our drops are going to be in limited runs and I want these items to have a second life.
Cyndia: I agree. It's about transparency. We don't want to be this huge L'Oréal type of brand; we want to be conscious and give our consumers the essentials. Quality over quantity. Anyone can create a brand and just buy a formula off the shelf, but every single ingredient at T.H.O.M has been researched by myself and our chemists. It's built from the vision up.

That certainly comes through with T.H.O.M, just as it does for Isamaya. How do you hope your brands will be perceived?
Isamaya: I want to liberate people from how we look at and consume make-up. I want to show that you can be inventive, that there are other ways to do make-up, to do a make-up brand, to do make-up campaigns.
Cyndia: We want to be a globally successful brand that changes the way people think about haircare. We also want to change the face of luxury in all categories. To think too far ahead is distracting, but we want to make a real and lasting change.

'Let's not forget the influence Black hair has had on culture. Yet, Black people are not front and centre when you think of a luxury brand.'

‘It was this extreme version of perfection.’

Thomas de Kluyver on Alessandro and Gucci Beauty, and the importance of always challenging your vision.

Photographs by Carlijn Jacobs
Styling by Katie Burnett
Make-up by Thomas de Kluyver
Hair by Olivier Schawalder

Previous page: Christie wears stylist's own metal-coil headpiece and tanning goggles. Make-up: Gucci Beauty Blush Des Yeux Gorgeous Flora and Blush De Beauté.
This page: Juwon. Opposite page: Juwon wears a dress by Jean Paul Gaultier Couture. Make-up: Gucci Beauty 06 Warm Berry Blush De Beauté.

Christie wears Lucite bangles on breasts by Marion Godart, bangles on arms and feet by Marion Godart and Lorette Colé Duprat, nipple concealers by Commando. Make-up: Gucci Beauty 01 Noir and 02 Anthracite Stylo Contour des Yeux, 05 Poudre De Beauté Éclat Soleil, and 714 Jody Wild Mauve Rouge de Beauté Brilliant.

Christie wears vintage gold tourbillon rings by Balenciaga at Pyrn Archives, stylist's own head and neck piece, nipple covers, and metal coils.
Make-up: Gucci Beauty Éclat De Beauté Effet Lumière and Baume Nourrissant Universel.

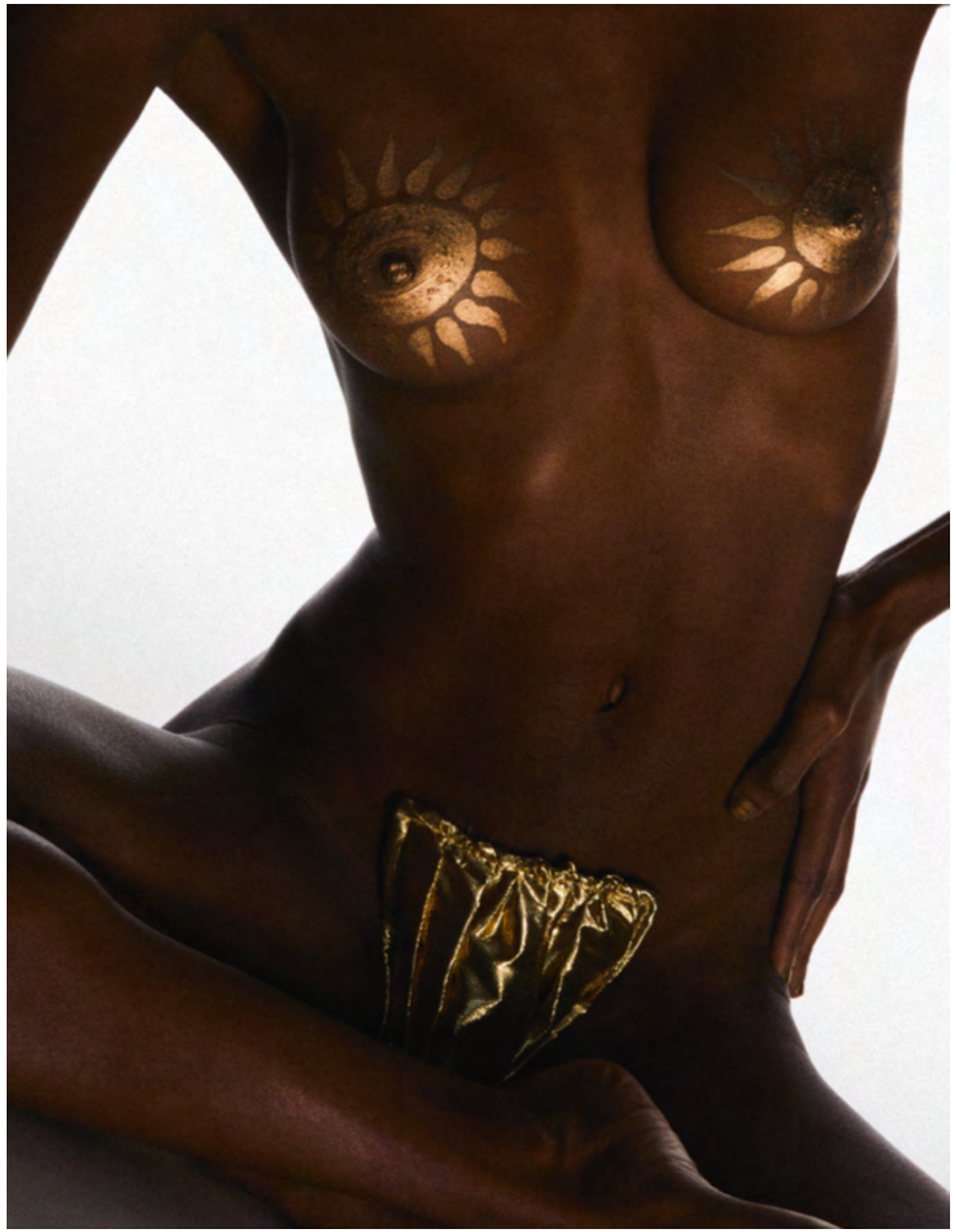
Christie wears stylist's own headpiece, blow-up suits, gloves and socks. Make-up: Gucci Beauty Brume de Beauté and Baume Nourrissant Universel.
Following double page: Juwon wears stylist's pink sheer jumpsuit. Make-up: Gucci Beauty 06 Warm Berry Blush De Beauté.

Christina wears stylist's own zipper thong. Make-up: Gucci Beauty Beauté Des Yeux Gorgeous Flora, 03 Chocolat Stylo Contour des Yeux, Mascara L'Obscur, 208 They Met In Argentina Rouge de Beauté Brillant Flora, and 120N Fluide De Beauté Fini Naturel.

Vintage acrylic shoes by Yohji Yamamoto at 20Age Archive.

Opposite page: Christina. Make-up: Gucci Beauty Mascara L'Obscur and 208 They Met In Argentina Rouge à Lèvres Mat.

Christina. Make-up: Gucci Beauty 120N Fluide De Beauté Fini Naturel. Opposite page: Eline wears dress by Loewe.
Make-up: Gucci Beauty 05 Gris Stylo À Sourcils Waterproof, 01 Fresh Rose Blush De Beauté, and 114 Grace Cinnamon Rouge à Lèvres Liquide Mat.



Models: Christie at Next, Christina at Ford, Eline at Ford, and Juwon at The Claw. Nails: Jessica Malige.
Casting: Julia Lange at Artistry Production. Production: Cinq Étoiles. Set design: Sophear at Art & Commerce.

Growing up in Perth, Australia, in the 1990s, a young Thomas de Kluyver was figuring out his place in the world. He decided to lean into his natural creativity, which he attributes to his mother, an artist and theatre director. Poring over issues of *Dazed* and *i-D* – six months old by the time they reached his local newsagent from Europe – he would copy the make-up from Alexander McQueen shows, experimenting on himself and his friends. 'That's how I taught myself to do make-up,' he says. 'There was no option to go to beauty school because it just wasn't there and you couldn't go on YouTube like you can today.'

After moving to London aged 17, the fledgling make-up artist quickly connected with burgeoning creatives including photographer Harley Weir and stylists Lotta Volkova and Robbie Spencer, further developing his aesthetic, while living with a pair of drag queens. 'Those girls really know how to paint,' he jokes.

Today, de Kluyver is one of fashion's leading make-up artists, regularly contributing to the same publications he dutifully studied as a teenager, as well as brands including KNWLS, Simone Rocha, and Gucci, the last of which he joined as global make-up artist in 2019.

In de Kluyver's world – which is equal parts childlike naivety and refined glamour – crystal, pearl and rhinestone adornments are used in place of eyeliner; skin shimmers with a pearlescent glow; and glitter is heaped on in excess. And he continues to go bigger and bolder: he recently imagined individual make-up looks for 68 sets of twins at Gucci's Spring/Summer 2023 show.

'I still feel like the same person,' he says, reflecting on his career to date. 'But the other day I was recently at a Gucci Beauty event in Selfridges, where I had my first job in London, working on the make-up counter. There was a big screen at the Gucci counter playing a video of me working, and it felt like a nice full-circle moment.'

System beauty spoke to de Kluyver about his ongoing collaboration with Gucci Beauty, using make-up as a tool for self-expression, and how he continues to grow as an artist.

Dominic Cadogan: You have such a clear signature style. What informs your aesthetic?

Thomas de Kluyver: I worked really hard to create my own style of make-up, but I got a better understanding of make-up as a whole when I looked at it in a more personal way. So a lot of my work looks at gender, self-expression and identity. I'm inspired by people and who they are, rather than taking references, and I do what I love on people's faces – that's when it became its own thing. Once I crossed that boundary, I realized there were so many possibilities with make-up. This was at a time when there was a lot of contouring and everyone wanted to look like the Kardashians. It was all hyper-retouched and 'fake', which I wasn't into, so my make-up was a big 'fuck you' to that.

Using make-up as a tool for self-expression is a concept that we see more commonly in beauty today than when you started out as a make-up artist. What does it mean to you?
I love the idea of make-up being about people's own identity and then being worn like a fashion accessory. It's so nice when it's honest and instead of trying to cover your face or hide from the world, you're trying to express yourself and who you are. Make-up should be personal, rather than the prescribed ideas of what it should look like.

You've been working as Gucci Beauty global make-up artist since 2019. How do you collaborate with Alessandro Michele?
A lot of designers might know the feeling they want, but they don't necessarily understand the physicality of products or which colours to put together. Alessandro loves beauty and he really understands make-up and hair. His attention to detail is so fascinating to me. He will say, 'I'd like sheer purple gloss on top of the orange lipstick', and it's something I would have never thought of but it works. It's lovely to work with people who really push you and make your work better or make you think of things in a new way.

How does your personal definition of beauty align with the ethos of Gucci Beauty?
It's a really nice fit working with Gucci. We really try to create products that aren't just for one specific group of people or to be used in one specific way – everything is multi-use. A lot of the lipsticks you can also use on your eyes and cheeks; the mascara can be made thick or worn more naturally. These are things we do every day as make-up artists and it's really nice to bring that to the consumer. When we started, beauty in that way was unheard of, especially on the scale of a large fashion house. Even the first campaign [in 2019], which was the first shoot I worked on for the brand, the lipstick wasn't perfect, and that was a really powerful message.

Beyond Gucci Beauty, which projects you've worked on make you proudest?
My book, *All I Want To Be*, with IDEA Books felt like a real moment at the time and it allowed me to give myself more of a voice to showcase my specific idea of beauty. The projects I've done with Harley Weir over the years have also been really special.

How do you continue to hone your craft at this point in your career?
I'm a bit of a magpie, every season I always try to find something new – new techniques, different ways of doing things, or reworking old ideas in new ways. Some things are more successful than others, but it's really important to keep challenging yourself and staying connected to what's happening right now as an artist. After working in beauty for over a decade, it's nice to feel like the voice I had and what I've been doing on a small scale in fashion has trickled down into the mainstream. I still feel really proud of the work that I did when I started and also of the work that I do now; it feels honest and that's important.

Looking ahead, what does the future of make-up look like to you?
When I started, it was this extreme version of perfection and then things moved towards imperfection. Now, I've noticed things becoming more perfect again, but in a new way, so maybe we'll see it pushed back towards imperfection again. Instagram and the internet have given people access to so much inspiration and there's been a huge surge in creativity within beauty, so I'm excited to see more of that and what the new generation has in store for us.

‘I stepped into a place that I never knew existed.’

Hair stylist Eugene Souleiman looks back on 40 years of scaring the mainstream.

Photographs by Julien Martinez Leclerc
Styling by Joe McKenna
Hair by Eugene Souleiman
Make-up by Lynsey Alexander

Awek wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Spring 2018.
Make-up: Summer Fridays Sheer Skin Tint, Blush Balm Stick, and Lip Butter Balm.

Julie. Make-up: Hermès Plein Air and Rose Hermès Silky Blush Powder.

Marthe. Make-up: Nars Sheer Glow Foundation, Brow Perfector, and Light Reflecting Setting Powder – Pressed.
Opposite page: Iva. Make-up: RMS Beauty Signature Set Palette and Re Evolve Natural Finish Foundation.

Iva. Make-up: Clé de Peau The Serum, Concealer N, The Luminizing Face Enhancer, Eyebrow Pencil & Translucent Loose Powder N.
Opposite page: Julie wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Autumn 2017. Make-up: Illamasqua Beyond Powder – Daze and Gel Sculpt.

Seng wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Spring 2019.

Evie wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Spring 2019.
Make-up: Rose Inc Skin Enhance Luminous Tinted Serum and Solar Radiance Hydrating Cream Highlighter.
Opposite page: Marthe. Make-up: Make Up Forever Step 1 Primer Shine Control and Reboot Luminizer.

Nyague. Make-up: M.A.C Studio Face and Body Foundation and Studio Fix Sculpt and Shape Palette.
Opposite page: Evie. Skincare: Aësop Damascan Rose Facial Treatment, Fabulous Face Oil, and Perfect Facial Hydrating Cream.

Seng wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Spring 2019. Make-up: Westman Atelier Face Trace,
Lit Up highlight stick, Vital Skincare Complexion Drops, and Les Nuits Eye Pods.
Opposite page: Nyague wears a dress by Valentino Haute Couture, Spring 2020.
Make-up: Pat McGrath Labs Skin Fetish: Sublime Perfection Foundation and Skin Fetish: Sublime Perfection Setting Powder.

Awek. Make-up: Bobbi Brown Skin Foundation Stick Weightless Powder Foundation.

Seng. Make-up: RMS Beauty Re Evolve Natural Finish Foundation and Living Luminizer.

Models: Anine at The Platform; Awek at Titanium; Julie at The Platform; Marthe at IMM; Nyague at Milk Management;
Seng at The Squad; Evie at Premier Models; Iva at Weiner Models.
Nails: Kim Treacy at Stella Creative Artists using Gelish. Production: Mini Title. Casting: Midland. Set design: Afra Zamara. Videographer: Eoin Greally.
Hair assistants: Massimo Di Stefano, Carlo Avena, Anastasiia Gryniuka, Ryu Tomoyose.

In 1982, Eugene Souleiman had just been kicked out of Goldsmiths and found himself at a local jobcentre. Whether it was a result of the multiple-choice questionnaire he filled out or simply because of how he looked ('I wasn't normal looking; I was a punk rocker, wore lots of Westwood and had nuts hair,' he recalls), the woman who worked there suggested he would make a good hairdresser. After an apprenticeship at the rather stuffy hotel Grosvenor House, east London-born Souleiman was redirected to the more avant-garde Trevor Sorbie – a much better fit.

This tension between fitting in and breaking convention has come to define much of Souleiman's career. '*Vogue* wouldn't touch me,' he says of the early days in the mid-1980s. Instead, Souleiman found his creative niche with counterculture titles like *i-D* and *The Face*, working alongside Corinne Day, Craig McDean and Pat McGrath. 'We weren't affluent, and we didn't have connections, all we had was ideas,' he says. 'We also didn't acknowledge what had come before, because we didn't really like what had come before. It just wasn't part of our culture.'

This underlying ambivalence and rejection of orthodoxy – coinciding with the arrival of grunge – caught the attention of brands like Prada and Calvin Klein in the early 1990s. 'I remember one moment when I was sitting in the bar of the Principe di Savoia [hotel] in Milan,' he says. 'We were doing Prada, and I was looking at all these incredibly rich, chic people. I'd been in Woolwich only six hours earlier – it just blew my mind.'

Despite a 40-year career, Souleiman has never lost that sense of ingenuity or rebellious spirit. It determines his work and who he chooses to collaborate with, whether John Galliano at Maison Margiela, Thom Browne, Yohji Yamamoto, Junya Watanabe, the late Alexander McQueen, or younger designers and labels like Charles Jeffrey or KNWLS. He puts it down to his youthful outlook: 'I'm quite young in a sense – my mind is very young and fresh.'

System beauty sat down with Souleiman to discuss his creative process and how his art is evolving.

Tish Weinstock: By constantly pushing the boundaries of what hair can do, you've essentially redefined the medium. The soap suds for the Margiela Artisanal Autumn/Winter 2017 show; beautiful butterflies for McQueen's Widows of Culloden*; and melted and melting candles for Charles Jeffrey's Loverboy Spring/Summer 2022 show. What role did hair play in your formative years?*
Eugene Souleiman: I used to experiment with my hair all the time. It was the done thing back then; you'd go to the chemist and buy three boxes of colour and all bleach each other's hair. Blues, greens, purples, leopard print, stripes.

Do you have photos from that time?
Sadly not, I got burgled.

What a shame! You started off doing shoots for cult magazines like i-D *and* The Face*, before luxury brands came along. How did that transition from the fringes to the establishment feel?*
There wasn't even a transition; it was all of a sudden. I was living in Woolwich, in a one-bedroom flat, and I had no money. I used to go to work, and just leap over the train barriers and walk from London Bridge. There was absolutely no support, but it was something I had to do. Pat [McGrath] was the same.

You mention Pat, how essential was your collaboration back then?
It was totally collaborative. We would be calling each other at night and be like, 'I've got this idea, what do you think?' Sometimes Pat would have an idea for the hair, and I'd have an idea for the make-up. There was a real synergy.

Today, it feels much more rigid.
I only really work with people who I admire, unless it's an advertising job. I mostly work with Craig [McDean], Paolo Roversi, and really young photographers. I also work with Thom Browne, John [Galliano], Japanese designers and Belgian designers. They all have a vision. A lot of mainstream people are scared of me. People see the work and think, 'Your work is so strong, you're going to be a nightmare', but I'm actually quite accommodating.

Can you tell me more about your underlying creative process?
It comes from an idea or a conversation, which I then try to communicate visually. I love to talk, listen and learn. I'm always learning, I think you have to. I've been working a lot with Nick Knight recently; we've been doing these head sculptures for the metaverse.

Does working in the metaverse change the way you think and create? Or is it just another medium?
It takes me back to art school, because the process is a little more sculptural; you're looking at things three-dimensionally. A scan is completely three-dimensional; it reproduces what you've done, but sometimes the algorithms can't read it and make mistakes. But I tend to go with them.

Back to the real world, what are some standout moments that have defined your career?
When I first started working with John [Galliano], it was a Narnia moment; I stepped into this place that I never knew existed. I had a moment with John in 2017. He was like, 'I want the girl to look like she's rushed out of the shower and thrown her clothes on, and her hair is still wet.' And I just said to him, 'Could it look like she forgot to wash the shampoo out?' And he was like, 'Yeah, it really could look like that.' So we whisked up shampoo and put suds in the girls' hair. When you're open and excited, and around the right people, it's a little infectious. You have to listen to the designer, because they obviously have an idea, but they don't want to tell you what to do. You've got to take them on a journey.

What do you get out of doing what you do? Has it changed over the years?
Emotionally, it's the same. I like to work at a fast pace; I'm an adrenaline junkie. I think I'm in the right, supportive environment to express myself and enjoy it. There's also something so wonderful about doing a woman's hair so she feels strong and beautiful.

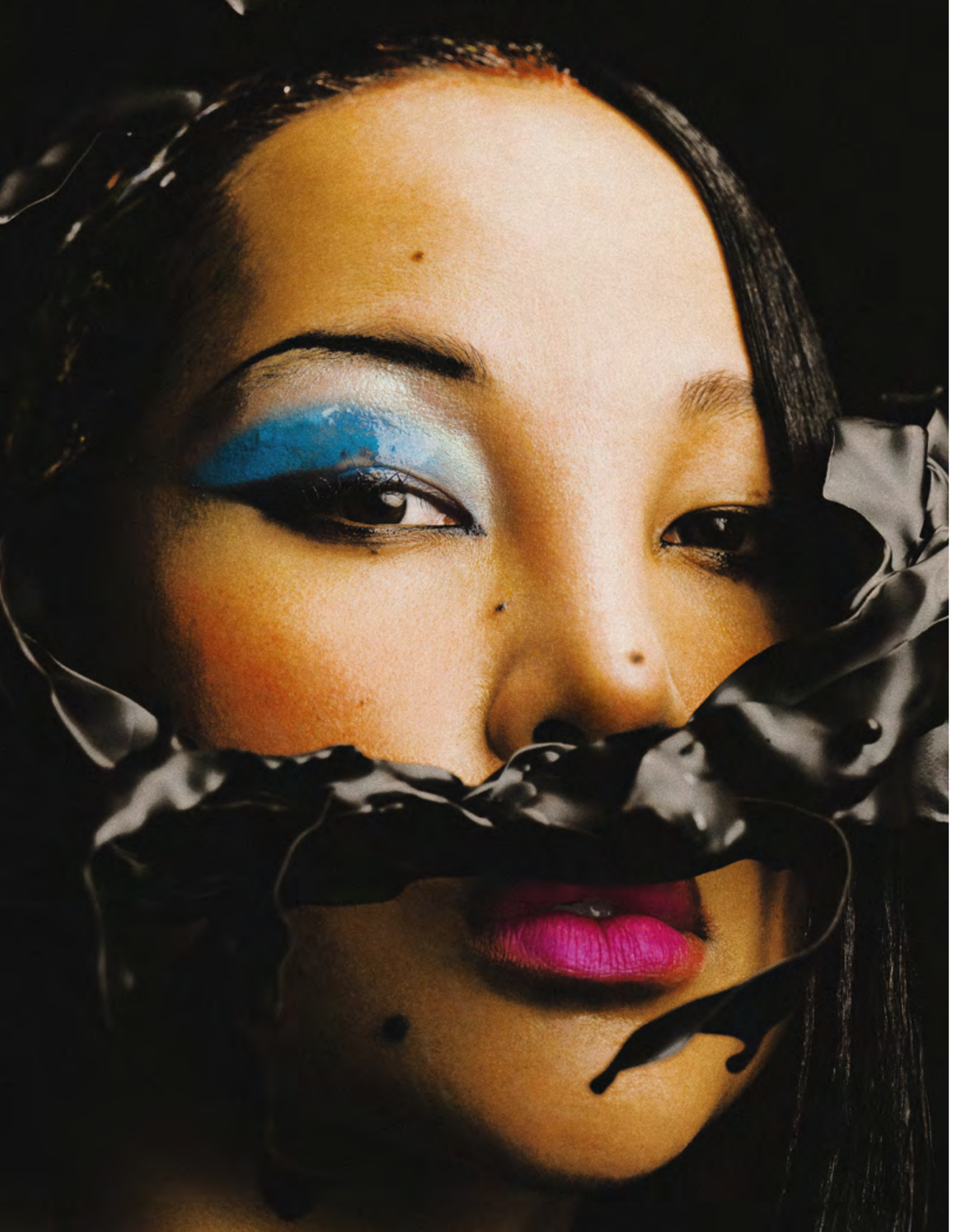
A lot of hair stylists and make-up artists are creating their own brands. Does that interest you at all?
I'm actually working on one and it feels like a natural progression. I'm very into science and chemistry and I'd like to marry that with my skill set and my ideas.

That sounds exciting. Do you ever think back to being at the jobcentre and to the woman who said you should be a hairdresser?
I do actually. I think it was the best bit of advice I've ever been given, although I didn't know it at the time. It's always good to listen to people, because maybe they will have a little more insight than you do.

‘I want to do everything in my power.’

New Chanel creative partner Valentina Li talks alien sea creatures, the power of being yourself, and navigating her wild visual world.

Photographs by Zhong Lin
Make-up and nails by Valentina Li
Model: Tsunaina



Valentina Li doesn't like to think of herself as a make-up artist. 'It's not that I don't like the term,' she says, 'but I don't think it describes everything I do.' She prefers the term 'face painter', although that doesn't encapsulate the extent of her work either. Yes, she paints faces, but she paints nails and bodies, too. Not just with make-up or nail polish, but with face gems, flowers, feathers, crumbled stone and cracked Chinese porcelain, and her nails are more akin to sculptures, fashioned into miniature mobile phones or decorated with tiny dangling, designer handbags.

Born in Guangxi, a small village in south-western China, Li belongs to a new wave of artists currently coming out of the country. It's the same creative landscape that has produced photographer Leslie Zhang; stylist Audrey Hu, with whom Li regularly contributes to *Vogue China*; and designer Sensen Lii of progressive fashion brand Windowsen, for whose Spring/Summer 2020 collection Li created gigantic jewel-encrusted manga eyes, her most mesmerizing look to date. So remarkable was it that Instagram recreations are now legion and it has even become an AR filter.

Refusing to conform to the rules of taste or tradition, Li's vision of beauty is inextricably linked to her preoccupation with love – her love of nature, the universe, and whatever extraterrestrial life that might exist beyond – all of which can be seen in the surreal semaphore that underpins her work.

Recently announced as part of Chanel's new Cometes Collective – a revolving community of artists who will set the agenda for Chanel Makeup – *System beauty* sat down with 30-year-old Li to discuss her visual references and what excites her about the future.

Tish Weinstock: Both the natural and supernatural world feature heavily in your work, how do you account for this tension?
Valentina Li: I lived in a small, poor village, which didn't have a good education system or any museums. There was nothing very interesting around, but there was a lot of nature where we lived. My mum would take me to the forest where she taught me about plants, flowers, and living things. I was surrounded by wonderful colours and creatures. I collected leaves and flowers that I would then draw and paint back at home. I also used to read a lot of sci-fi magazines and manga comic books. I loved anything supernatural; it shaped my personality into a girl who likes to dream. I have this theory: the deepest part of the ocean must connect to outer space and that's why some sea creatures look like aliens.

At what point did make-up become important to you both personally and professionally?
My aunt was really good at make-up. At primary school, we would go on stage and perform dances, and my mum would always ask her to do my make-up. Other kids would just get the teachers to do it, but I would always have specific requests for my eyes. I knew, aged six or seven, what make-up I liked and what I didn't, from the type of eyeliner to the colour on my cheeks. But I didn't own my first mascara until I was in high school. Where I grew up was quite uptight and it wasn't OK to wear make-up to school, but in the second grade, I joined the cosplay club, and saw that I was good at make-up. I went on to study journalism at university, but hated it. There was always a *Vogue* under my table and I loved looking at the make-up. That's when I realized I wanted to be a make-up artist, so I asked my parents if I could go and study in Paris.

How would you describe your approach to beauty at that time?
I was studying in the north of China, which was quite conservative. Everyone looked the same, but my hair was yellow and I wore green contact lenses and coloured mascara. At the start, I was a bit afraid, but then I started listening to my inner self. I was tired of being the same as the others; I wanted to be different.

After Paris, you returned to Shanghai in 2015. How did the two cities' beauty landscapes differ?
In Paris, we did a lot of contouring and colour on the face, but in China, it was all about clean make-up. After three years working there I felt quite lost. There wasn't any colour in my work, so I left China and went to assist Erin Parsons during various Fashion Weeks, to try and put myself back into the student mindset. I learned so much from her and when I came back to China, I had a new attitude. Before, I had been so afraid of the industry and society; I thought they would criticize my work, but I finally realized I needed to be myself. That year, 2018, marked a big change in my life. I did the presentation for my friend Windowsen, who like me is obsessed with aliens and sci-fi. He didn't give me a brief, but just let me create. That was what I had been waiting for. I don't like to be limited by rules. In the end, I got really good feedback, which gave me the confidence to be myself and not hold back.

Why do you use so many unexpected materials in your work?
For me, make-up isn't just about colour, it's also about texture. I don't see make-up as being just for the face, either; I see it for the whole body. I also use a lot of accessories, like my seashell earrings, and I've been working on some sculptures made from recycled water bottles. Make-up is a part of my life, but I think my visual world is bigger.

The beauty landscape has shifted quite a bit in the last 10 years. What changes have you been most excited about?
We're seeing a lot more AI and filters. Before, it was all about glamour, and now people are more willing to try different things. That's why they use filters; they're curious about how they will look with blue or green lashes, or face crystals. People feel free to express what they like. It's not just contouring and nice highlights. It's really positive. Why does everyone need to look the same when we are all different? I have a lot of LGBTQ friends and I've been to drag shows in Shanghai. Watching them in their heavy make-up and wigs, I was touched by how confident they were in expressing themselves. That's why I love make-up so much.

What's next for you?
I'm facing a big career change with Chanel, which I did not expect, but I'm super happy about it. Beyond that, I want to do something with film, like crazy music videos or design characters for films. Something like *Star Wars* 15. I don't just want to do one thing. That sounds kind of greedy, but I don't think make-up should be that narrow. I want to do everything in my power.

Styling: Vincent Wong
Hair: Ryo Narushima at Saint Luke using L'Oréal Professional Paris.
Photography assistant: Yuan-Ling Wang. Make-up and nails assistant: Yi-Han J.

‘There was a rebellion in me.’

Sam Visser discusses celebrity and the beauty of feeling great.

Photographs by Ethan James Green
Styling by Katie Burnett. Make-up by Sam Visser
Hair by Sonny Molina

Previous page, left: Somali Findlay, Muhammad Fadel Lo, Momo Ndiaye. Make-up: Dior 5 Couleurs Couture 279 Denim and Rouge Dior Coloured Lip Balm 000 Diornatural Satin Finish.
Previous page, right: Somali Findlay. Make-up: Dior Addict Lip Glow Oil 000 Universal Clear and Dior Prestige La Crème.
This page: Thatcher Thornton and Alex Consani. Make up: Dior Forever Skin Glow Foundation 00 Neutral, Dior Backstage Powder-No-Powder 0N Neutral,
Diorshow Brow Styler 003 Auburn, Mono Couleur Couture 449 Dune, Diorshow 24H Stylo 781 Matte Brown, Dior Contour 824 Saint Germain,
Rouge Dior Forever lipstick 200 Forever Nude Touch, and Dior Addict Lip Glow Oil 001 Pink.

Hang Yu. Make-up: Dior Forever Skin Glow Foundation 2WO Warm Olive, Dior Backstage Face & Body Foundation,
Forever Skin Glow Foundation 4C Cool, Mono Couleur Couture 443 Cashmere and 434 Grège, and Dior Contour 593 Brown Fig.

Sophie Koella. Make-up: Dior Forever Foundation 00 Neutral, Diorshow 24H Stylo 091 Matte Black, Onstage Liner 001 Matte White, and Mono Couleur Couture 098 Black Bow.

Abény Nhial. Make-up: Dior Forever Foundation 9N Neutral, Forever Skin Correct 8N Neutral, Dior Backstage Powder-No-Powder 9N Neutral, Rouge Blush 999, Diorshow Kabuki Brow Styler 005 Black, Dior 5 Couleurs Couture 079 Black Bow, Diorshow mascara 090 Black, Rouge Dior Forever lipstick 999 Forever Dior, and Dior Addict Lip Maximizer 035 Burgundy.

Mase Somanlall. Make-up: Dior Forever Foundation 1W Warm, Diorshow Kabuki Brow Styler 032 Dark Brown,
Mono Couleurs Couture 763 Rosewood and 443 Cashmere, Rouge Blush 962 Poison Matte, and Rouge Dior Balm 000 Diornatural Satin Finish.

Maca Cabrera. Make-up: Dior Forever Foundation 3W Warm, Dior Forever Skin Correct 2W Warm, Rouge Blush 999, Diorshow Kabuki Brow Styler 032 Dark Brown,
Dior Contour 943 Euphoric, Rouge Dior Forever lipstick 458 Forever Paris, and Dior Addict Lip Glow Oil 000 Universal Clear.

Molly Constable. Make-up: Rouge Dior Forever lipstick 999 Forever Dior, 883 Forever Daring, and 111 Forever Night, Diorshow 24H Stylo 091 Matte Black, Diorshow Kabuki Brow Styler 005 Black, and Dior Addict Lip Glow Oil 000 Universal Clear.

Shanelle Nyasiase and Thatcher Thornton. Make-up: Dior Kabuki Brow Styler 004 Black, Dior 5 Couleurs Couture 279 Denim, Diorshow Mascara 090 Black, Dior Contour 943 Euphoric, and Forever Dior Rouge lipstick 879 Forever Passionate; Forever Skin Glow Foundation N1 Neutral, Dior Backstage Powder-No-Powder 2N Neutral, Mono Couleur Couture 434 Grège, and Dior Contour 593 Brown Fig.

Arta Gee. Make-up: Backstage Face & Body Primer and Backstage Glow Face Palette 001.

Models: Maca Cabrera at Heroes; Alex Consani at IMG Models; Molly Constable at Next; Muhammad Fadel Lo at Next; Somali Findlay at IMG Models; Arta Gee at APM Models; Sophie Koella at DNA Models; Momo Ndiaye at Fusion; Abény Nhial at Elite; Shanelle Nyasiase at Elite; Mase Somanlall at DNA Models; Thatcher Thornton at Heroes; Hang Yu at Ford. Nails: Shirley Cheng. Production: Second Name. Set design: Ian Salter at Frank Reps. Styling assistants: Alex Hall, Jody Bain, Stephan La Cava, Morgan, Jimenez.

Sam Visser was born to be a make-up artist. Growing up in Ventura, California, while other seven-year-olds were playing outside or causing mischief, Visser was locked away in his bedroom, watching video after video on YouTube and applying make-up to himself.

One day in a Make Up For Ever store he recognized make-up artist David Hernandez and marched right up to him. The boldness paid off and Hernandez became his first make-up mentor. He soon a picked up a second in Sharon Gault and, aged 12, found himself on the set of a David LaChapelle shoot (after begging his parents for hours).

Bitten by the beauty bug, just four years later while still at high school, Visser lucked out again, when Kris Jenner (matriarch of the Kardashian clan) discovered his talents on Instagram and reached out. Moving to Hollywood, he switched his studies to start his career – finishing school independently – an opportunity thousands of budding make-up artists would kill for.

A few years later – after adding Ariana Grande, Mariah Carey and Kylie Jenner to his client roster – Visser moved to New York, seeking out his own aesthetic and leaning into a glamour that traverses decades: soft hazy blends from the 1980s, fresh-faced nudes straight off a 1990s runway, and Y2K-appropriate glossed and lined lips.

With a decade of experience – and still aged just 22 – Visser was signed up by Dior Make-up as its US ambassador. 'From an outside perspective, I've done all of these things, but I feel so early in my career,' he says. 'I'm grateful for everything that's happened so far, but I feel like I have only scratched the surface of what I want to say.' Aiming to expand his repertoire, Visser has been exploring image-making, giving him more freedom to curate the visuals he has in mind. Where he'll go from there, only fate knows.

Dominic Cadogan: Did you know from a young age that you wanted to be a make-up artist?

Sam Visser: I didn't even know what was possible or what a make-up artist did. I had grown up watching people on YouTube putting make-up on themselves, so I didn't know that it was something you could pursue outside of your bedroom and that you could work on a set with other creative people. When I realized it was something I could pursue, it was a snowball effect that grew and grew until it turned into a real, tangible thing.

I read that you were on the set of a David LaChapelle shoot aged 12. How did that happen?
I was being mentored by Sharon Gault. She took me in and showed me everything from an early age and I absorbed all of it. It was a really great experience to start off with. Seeing that environment really influenced me – it was so cool to see all these creative people making the most beautiful art ever.

What were some of your early breaks?
When I was assisting Sharon, I shadowed her on a lot of different editorials. Then I actually began to work when I was 16 and left school. Kris Jenner found me on Instagram through a random picture of me with somebody whose make-up I had done. It was a great start in that world. I learned a lot early on about how to create make-up for the camera that would be seen all over the world; it was a great learning experience. I was living in Los Angeles at the time, so I started doing a lot of different celebrities: Mariah Carey, Ariana Grande, Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner. It was exciting, but it was almost weird to start in the celebrity world. I enjoyed doing that kind of make-up, but there was a rebellion inside me that wanted to take it somewhere else.

When did you start finding your own aesthetic?
I moved to New York and the world of fashion really opened up to me. I realized that you could have your own perspective as a make-up artist, and I started to explore all the ideas that had been brewing since my early days when I was doing crazy looks on myself and my friends.

Unlike many other beauty creatives, you don't use social media as a source of inspiration. Why?
Social media is a great tool, but using it as a source of inspiration is hard for me because it's what is happening right now and I don't want to follow trends or copy what's already been created. My instincts about beauty should come from me, not from a phone, so I want to look beyond what's happening there. I love seeing what other make-up artists, image-makers and creators are doing on social media, but it doesn't inspire me.

How would you define 'beauty'?
I always try to approach beauty in a way that isn't something I've seen before – it's always something different. For me, 'beauty' is making somebody light up. I get excited when somebody I'm working with or the model in my chair feels really beautiful. It's such an emotional feeling. It's important to have conversations beyond the standardized version of beauty because feeling great is what is beautiful. If that means putting make-up on or wearing no make-up, using brow gel, or putting red paint all over your face – whatever it is, feeling beautiful is the most important.

What is the future of beauty?
It's undefinable. Ten years ago, you could have never predicted what is happening right now with make-up; beauty is so unpredictable. We're at a point where we've put every possible object on our faces. It's a free-for-all, but in the best way because everyone is so self-expressive. We just had a pandemic where everyone was locked up and for a lot of people their outlet was creativity. We don't know what the next six months or 10 years will bring, but I'm excited to see what the result will be.

Lip and eye... by Peter Philips

Photographs by Charles Negre

'It's a classic red lip and a beautiful conventional eye, but in an unconventional colour.'

Above: Dior Contour 999 and Rouge Dior Forever 999 Forever Dior.
Opposite: Diorshow On Set Brow 01 Blond, 5 Couleurs Couture 879 Rouge Trafalgar, Diorshow Maximizer 3D, and Diorshow Iconic Overcurl 664 Brique.

The Drag Questionnaire: Gottmik

Photograph: Marco Ovando.

Which three words first come to mind when you hear the word 'beauty'?
Confidence, energy, and for some reason, wig.

Who is the most beautiful person in the world?
I truly believe that beauty comes from within, so when I see someone with the most confidence owning a room then to me that person is the most beautiful person in the world at that moment!

What has beauty given you?
Beauty has given me the ability to love myself. Being able to challenge beauty standards and norms and finding where I fit into the beauty industry has been such an amazing journey.

If you could put anybody in the world in drag for the first time, who would that be and why?
I have a very short list of people who I *need* to paint before I die and they are all already full-time drag queens: Cher, Dolly Parton, RuPaul, and Lady Gaga.

What has drag given you?
Drag has given me the power to explore myself in ways I never could have imagined. I am constantly pushing my personal comfort levels with my art and discovering new things about myself every time I step on that stage.

What advice would you give a fledgling drag queen?
Find what makes you unique and *run with it*. So many drag queens – and artists in general – try so hard to keep up with the current trends when in reality, people want something new and unique to take in!

What's the shadiest thing you've ever done to another drag queen?
I *love* reading people, so any shady thought I have I usually turn into a little joke. Roasts are my favourite type of comedy and I would *love* to do a full roast tour or something.

I want to try drag for the first time, where should I start?
I think the first step is to make sure you know who you are as an artist and let that influence your personal style! You don't want to learn drag completely from YouTube because then you'll just end up looking like everybody else!

What's the best way to pick a drag name?
Picking a drag name should be fun! I chose mine by mixing my dead name and my last name together because I was using drag as an aid in my transition, so I thought it was an edgy little homage to my old self!

If you could live in someone else's body for a day – who would that be and why?
I would want to be one of Paris Hilton's dogs. Truly the most glam life I could possibly imagine.

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