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Global warning

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GLOBAL WARMING

Italian fashion legend **ROMEO GIGLI** came to Hong Kong this spring to launch his latest collection at JOYCE and he spoke exclusively to SIGNED magazine's **DAISY ZHONG** about how the fashion world is in danger of losing its diversity.

“Fashion has become less interesting, you can find the same work everywhere,” says Romeo Gigli as he sits on a sofa at the Joyce boutique in Central. A 63-year-old blue-blooded Italian, he has an amiable disposition and a voice that’s soft and lyrical, like the draped skirts that have become one of his signatures. “If you take the labels away you cannot tell the difference between collections.”

Those who know Gigli’s work will not be shocked to find that he has an iconoclastic point of view. Along with his autumn/winter 2013 collection for Joyce, which effortlessly mixes classic themes with edgy touches, Gigli brings a unique insight into the current state of fashion design after a nine-year hiatus from the industry.

As somebody who changed the face of fashion design in the 1980s and 90s, Romeo Gigli is in a good position to assess the state of creativity in the world of highly-paid couturiers. Gigli’s asymmetrical necklines, gentle shoulders, cocoon coats, velvet dresses

and tulip skirts provided a refreshing contrast to the tired power suits of the late 1980s. Gigli’s early work inspired designers such as Marc Jacobs and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and his fondness for fitted, skin-tight trousers eventually led to the popularity of leggings in the early 1990s. His models wore the lightest of make-up and flat shoes to provide a timely antidote to the heavy foundation of the Working Girl-eighties that often made women’s faces look like a freshly ploughed field.

Gigli has some nostalgia for those days. “For over a decade, until the 1990s, visual fashion was in its heyday. In fashion shows from those days, it’s easy to recognise one designer from another, with different collections, different kinds of styles. But now the fashion world is in a state of confusion.”

ROMEO GIGLI AT A PHOTO SHOOT IN MILAN FOR HIS SPRING SUMMER 2013 COLLECTION



LEFT ANNA MARCONI BELOW MATTEO GIOLI
OPPOSITE PAGE TANG SHUANG OPPOSITE BELOW
LELA SHIGING WANG, ALL LOOKS FROM
THE ROMEO GIGLI SPRING SUMMER 2013
COLLECTION

His critique of contemporary fashion echoes that of Vivienne Westwood, another style icon, who attacked the idea of “disposable fashion” for making people all look the same and “never so ugly”. If Westwood is right in saying that twenty-tens are, so far, the worst years for style in generations, maybe that’s why so many great names of the past (Gigli, Elsa Schiaparelli, Christian Lacroix, and even Kanasi Yamamoto) are suddenly being reborn and rebooted with a mission to save fashion from a desperate dullness.

Gigli cites the influence of corporate money as a key factor in the decline of diversity. The relationship between art and commerce has always been fraught, but Gigli believes that these two now contradict each other more than ever, as designers “play safe” to satisfy a market that is either unsophisticated or conventional. “Money has far too much power in the fashion world. And it’s not helping creativity. That means we need to have innovative young

« WHEN YOU HAVE NO FREEDOM, YOU CANNOT DO WHAT YOU WANT, NOR CAN YOU BUILD SOMETHING DIFFERENT. »



designers around and design education has to focus on creativity just as much as it focuses on technique. But it’s difficult for young designers, because if you do what everybody wants, everything looks the same. That’s why it’s becoming more and more difficult for young people to enter the fashion design world. What’s important is that when you want to build something of your own, you have to work hard and develop your own style, and not do what already exists.”

Creativity has often manifested in unfashionable or upsetting ways. As early as the 15th century most painters in Europe were under the direct influence of the Catholic Church and obeyed their religious masters in return for patronage. But the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch stood out with his surrealist renderings of hell that offered sinners no hope of redemption and made the Church exceedingly uncomfortable. It’s probably not a coincidence that the most radical painter of his era had a rich wife who freed him from the creative serfdom of church patronage.

Gigli believes that fashion needs more designers with Bosch’s freedom and fewer who depend on corporate money that almost ensures a loss of freedom to create, and a failure to catch the zeitgeist. “When you have no

freedom, you cannot do what you want, nor can you build something different. Whereas 20 years ago fashion was full of freedom, reverberating with what was happening in art, design, and architecture, now the freedom of fashion is much more limited. Nowadays fashion is just about a skirt, a shirt, and a pair of trousers.”

But despite his criticisms Gigli cannot turn his back on fashion, which has been a major source of spiritual power in life. Joyce Ma, the founder of Joyce, has been a long-term fan and supporter of Gigli and she has been instrumental in his return to fashion, in part by giving his creativity the oxygen of liberty. “Freedom is what is important to me,” said Gigli. “Joyce gave me that freedom.”

Gigli’s palette has always had a Byzantine majesty with rust, purple and teal giving his silhouettes a sensuous harmony that can turn some women from wallflower to orchid, the revelatory nature of his dresses drawing out sexuality and sophistication in equal measure. His latest work includes silver greys, dark greys, forest greens and fuchsia, complemented with touches of black and white. These tones result in clothes that are as distinctive as a Bosch painting but much more beautiful and more suggestive of heaven than hell - and none of them have been tempered to be more suitable for a commercial brand.

His past collections were famous for referencing everything from medieval bas reliefs to mosaics, Jimi Hendrix, Rastafarianism and waifs. Gigli’s new collection is also embedded with rich references to art and culture. “When I was sketching these clothes I started drawing from the opulence of 18th century European fashion. To get inspirations I redraw by hand all the antique brocades I had collected. Another inspiration is the tuxedo.”

As he was saying this he draped a forest green bubble cape with exquisite brocade around my shoulders. It felt like wearing cotton candy and looked like a bubble that had been blown from inside. With exquisite embroidery on the fabric it resembled extravagantly padded and puffed 18th century mantuas, but without a feeling of stiffness and limitation.

The reference to 18th century fashion also stirs memories of the stout, well-padded women of that era. Is that who the designer had in mind when he was crafting the silhouette of his dresses?

Gigli smiles and says he had Chinese women in mind. “I want to underline the soft, petite frames and the gentle demeanour of Oriental women. What I love about



« THE FASHION WORLD IS UNDER TOO MUCH CONTROL NOW, BECAUSE OF THE POWER OF MONEY. »



MAN THE JOYCE WINDOW IN CENTRAL HONG KONG, FEATURING THE ROMEO GIGLI COLLECTION. ROMEO GIGLI AT A PHOTO SHOOT IN MILAN FOR HIS SPRING-SUMMER 2013 COLLECTION

TRUE GRIT

We find ourselves in an era where the chain store has become the temple for the majority of fashion consumers, and where the latest items and styles carried by celebrities define the mainstream trends. This is a generation where a desire for originality in fashion brands and their design has been replaced by fast fads and peer pressure (to follow said fast fads). At such a time we are refreshed, or alarmed, by a rare designer like Romeo Gigli, whose commitment to individuality and persistence in following a personal aesthetic is seen as deviant and revolutionary.

Even though he experienced violent financial ups and downs in his fashion business, the ever-present contradiction between commercial marketing strategy and expression of individuality has not been a lasting obstacle to Gigli's creativity. The resolution in his unique aesthetic view is vividly reflected in his designs, and these are what ultimately led him back to a new era of success. His insistence on originality and individuality, despite the rapidly changing fads, allowed him to persevere and eventually become recognised as an artist who doesn't waste his money or his name value in following the trends—he rather use his efforts to create them.

An emphasis on individuality and originality is a key aspect of the training approach at the Fashion and Image Design department of HKDI; the balance of practical and creative training exists to assist students in building their own sense of style, in opening their minds to broader visions of beauty, and in toning their ability to judge and reflect on the role of a professional artist in the fashion industry.

By Perry Wong, Hong Kong Design Institute, Department of Fashion and Image Design

Oriental women is the kindness, loveliness and subtleness in their approach, which European women are missing. When I was working on a design, I thought of the elegant movement of their arms. In the same way, I like to frame their face, neck and shoulder on my models."

For Gigli the principle of fashion design has been simple. "You need to understand what women need. They want to be beautiful. So you need to help them to be more beautiful. I don't like it when people say that fashion is killing the beauty of the women – fashion is not a joke. Fashion is to enhance the beauty of women."

Another piece of advice that Gigli repeatedly emphasises to young designers is that they must have their focus in the right place. "I am a professor in Milan teaching 20 design students from around the world. For young designers,

I tell them not to watch too many fashion shows or to get obsessed with fashion magazines. It's OK to know what's happening, but not just that – you need to build your own style and your own vision. And you need to study. You have to learn about art, architecture, movies and books. You need to open your mind and broaden your vision."

That was exactly what Gigli did prior to embarking on his design career. As the child of an antiquarian book dealer and a Contessa, Gigli's childhood was full of art and books.



He was privately educated until the age of nine, and at 18 he dropped out of university and for the next 10 years he wandered across Asia, South America, Africa and beyond, collecting everything that interested him. When urged to become a fashion designer after his outstanding fashion talent was revealed by a stint as a consultant in New York in 1977, he decided instead to study fashion for several years.

"I am a Calvinist: severe because you can only do what you know how to do," he said in an interview in Venice last year. Thus he studied fashion for several years before making his conspicuous debut in the fashion world. His first collection was carried at Joyce in 1985.

For Gigli, the way that "big money" now controls fashion has made it harder for young designers to make a difference. However, precisely because of this homogeneity Gigli believes that we are more than ever in need of a fresh approach to design, and Hong Kong could be the perfect place for a new generation of trend makers to emerge.

"Today's Hong Kong is like New York in the 1970s and 1980s, when the city was full of energy. Whereas New York no longer has that dynamic, nowadays I find it in Hong Kong." ©

« TODAY'S HONG KONG IS LIKE NEW YORK IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, WHEN THE CITY WAS FULL OF ENERGY. »