Martin Margiela at Lafayette Anticipations: Life after fashion

By Godfrey Deeny - 11 November 2021

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s oft-quoted adage that there are ‘no second acts in American public life’ is often taken as a warning to fashion designers not to embark on a perilous attempt to re-invent themselves in a second career.

It is certainly a maxim disregarded by one of fashion’s most iconoclastic designers, Martin Margiela, whose latest post-fashion creativity is displayed in an intriguing exhibition at Lafayette Anticipations, a novel and experimental art center in Paris’ Marais district created by the famed department store chain of the same name.

The path from designer to artist is often a perilous one. Just ask Helmut Lang, who was the single most influential designer in the world in the late ’90s, earning him endless ecstatic reviews for his collections. Which rapidly turned into brutal put-downs when he gave up clothes and attempted to become a fine artist from 2005.

Margiela, however, looks like he may be escaping similar opprobrium. In part, because the Belgian designer was as much a conceptual artist as a designer in his two-decade career in fashion. But also because his central obsessions in this show are those that gripped him while he was designing fashion: the cult of celebrity; anonymity; disposable consumerism; homoeroticism and the vindication of secrecy. The last is very vital for Margiela. To this day, Margiela has never posed for a portrait photo, and few people – even many fashion editors who have attended multiple Margiela collections – know what Martin looks like.
“One thing I made clear to Martin when he spoke about becoming an artist after fashion was that I always, and already, regarded him as an artist while he was still creating fashion,” explained Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, director of Lafayette Anticipations.

Yet, instead of a retrospective, we have a series of experimental artworks many actually made in the basement of Lafayette Anticipations, which has an impressive state-of-the-art design atelier where the uber discreet designer/artist would toil. All the art on display was actually ready nearly two years ago, though the exhibition was pushed until this autumn due to the pandemic.

“Martin working here is the whole point of Lafayette Anticipations, since we wanted a space where contemporary artists were given carte blanche to create whatever they wanted, and to their own rhythm,” explained Guillaume Houzé, scion of the family which owns the Galeries Lafayette, and the brainchild behind the space. A former warehouse and later school, the building was completely rebuilt inside by architect Rem Koolhaas, who introduced two giant central floors that can be raised on electronic pulleys to alter the art space into literally scores of configurations.
Staying close to his roots, the 64-year-old Margiela, whose brother is a hairdresser, showed multiple images of hair through this art show, which was divided into a series of 20 partitioned rooms over two floors. Beginning with Hair Portraits, composed of five large stacks of news and celebrity magazines; each topped by five mock glossy covers depicting stars like Monica Vitti or Catherine Deneuve, though all with their faces covered entirely in, well, their own hair.

While another installation, Vanitas, is an abstract portrait of a woman portrayed in the five stages of hair in her life. The five wigged heads, made of silicone and real human hair, are encased inside a glass box.

“This is very much part of the Flemish artistic tradition. How do you portray death, the end of life or the Memento Mori? Martin’s solution – the five stages of life from youth; preparing for her first child; the first gray hairs; dyeing her hair and then silvery old age,” noted Lamarche-Vadel in a tour of the show. Like 17th century Dutch painting, focusing on the representation of objects that symbolize the emptiness of existence.
As a designer Margiela was known for making the commonplace out of the unexpected – like his notorious corsets made out of recycled white leather stilettos. As an artist Martin does something similar – building that ubiquitous urban object, the bus shelter, out of dirty plexiglass and fake fur, the better to reimagine this place of refuge from sun or sleet. While the entrance way to space is composed of a giant photo of a deodorant stick – whose written composition is a list of this art show’s raw materials.

Similarly, Margiela as a designer was obsessed with human and animal forms. His most famous footwear was a cloven-toed boot. As an artist, he plays around with classical ideas of anatomy, but then presents just chunks of the human torso, in silicone or plaster, deconstructing ancient ideas about divinity and heroism into almost mutant body parts. Another room features giant red false nails in Nymphenburg porcelain.

In a word, Martin Margiela is not perhaps a new Damien Hirst or Anselm Kiefer, but he will certainly escape the brickbats that bombarded dear Helmut Lang.

**Martin Margiela at Lafayette Anticipations continues to January 2, 2022.**

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