

The Creative Class | Thierry Dreyfus, Lighting Designer and Show Producer

BY JULIEN NEUVILLE 27 AUGUST, 2013

In a rare interview, lighting designer and fashion show producer Thierry Dreyfus talks to BoF about his creative process, his obsession with details and why he prefers emotion over concept.



Thierry Dreyfus | Photo: Marie Drouin

PARIS, France — “Welcome to my cave,” announces Thierry Dreyfus, at the top of a staircase that leads from the bright main ground floor workspace of his studio to his own dimly lit office one level below. It’s ironic that Dreyfus, a celebrated lighting designer, prefers the dark. He is also known to shun the media spotlight, declining the vast majority of interview requests, despite having worked with many of the world’s greatest fashion designers.

“For Helmut Lang, it was the purity of almost non-existent lights; for Jil Sander, the crystal of light that goes with the skin, the textures. For Raf Simons, it’s about precision, softness, colours and details. And with Comme des Garçons, it was the discreet poetry associated with an about-to-break tension, creating the right balance,” recalls Dreyfus. Indeed, more than a technician, Dreyfus approaches his work like an artist, though he doesn’t like the word.

Born in the 1960s, the son of a doctor and a dentist, in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, Dreyfus got his start in lighting “by chance and for the friendship” when he took a position at the Strasbourg Opera. He shares few details about his early years, but it was while lighting operas in Nantes in 1985 that he was first asked to apply his skills to fashion.

“Thierry, do you want to work on a fashion show?”

“Is it men or women?”

“Women.”

“Then, yes!”

This is how Dreyfus remembers the conversation that led to his first fashion job. The designer was the American Patrick Kelly and Dreyfus used only candles to light what was Kelly’s first show, held in his apartment. Not long after came Helmut Lang, for whom Dreyfus worked for 17 years, then Thierry Mugler. These two collaborations helped to seal his reputation, but Dreyfus reveals little about how he got these jobs, saying only that, at the time, things were simpler.

In 1983, he established his own company which, by 2000, was handling lighting design for most of the Paris shows. But the same year, Dreyfus left the company and, in 2001, became artistic director of Eyesight, which he now owns and where his duties expanded beyond lighting to encompass activities like sourcing venues, building runways and doing sound. “There are other things we don’t do inside the company itself, but that we can also provide, like stylists, hair and make-up artists, casting directors, because those people change quite rapidly.”

During fashion week, Dreyfus refuses to do more than one show per day, so his client roster is limited and he can focus intensely on each job. Weeks before the shows, he meets with his clients to discuss their collections and ideas. “I incorporate myself in their universe. We talk all the time, we stay in touch daily. We send each other pictures, drawings, colours, inspirations,” he explains. For example, “with Marco Zanini, for Rochas, we talked and he told me that he was very inspired by Danish earthenware. A few days later, I sent him sketches of an entire scenography inspired by the work of Jean Pierre Raynaud, a French *plasticien* who worked with white ceramic tiles. It was an homage. Marco loved it and we moved forward.”

Dreyfus is present at every single show he produces and insists on adjusting the lighting himself. He has an assistant who handles the setup, but it’s Dreyfus behind the wheel. “You’ve got to pay attention to everything. The light can’t be too strong as to blind the model, or to reflect too strongly on a particular fabric. Also the skin of the models is very important. If you were doing the exact same show on first day of New York versus last day of Paris, you would need to completely change the light settings. The models get to New York all tanned from vacation, but once they are in Paris, following weeks of hard make-up, of sleepless nights and jet lag their skin is rotten. So, you need to adapt.” Dreyfus even goes so far as to design the lighting backstage at a show, so the make-up artists can work with a clear feeling for how their work will look on the runway itself.

So, does Dreyfus consider himself a perfectionist? “I would rather say that I’m obsessed with details — that I want my team and I to do our best.”

Yet the humble Dreyfus insists that he is merely a service provider, there simply to make the designer’s collection come to life. “During a show, as an attendee, you need to forget about the set, the lights, the music — the only thing that needs to remain is the collection. When the scenography is too strong, usually it’s because there is something to hide. Sometimes it’s a true decision. But, more often, it’s because what we have to show is weak,” says Dreyfus. “A show is a marketing exercise which needs to succeed in a very quick moment at transmitting the brand’s image and collection.”

Alongside lighting and producing fashion shows, Dreyfus has created ambitious installations at notable locations like the Grand Palais, Notre Dame, Versailles and London’s Canary Wharf. He has also designed the lighting for the hip Parisian club Silencio, designed by movie director David Lynch, and worked on stores for Robert Clergerie, A.P.C. and, most recently, Versace.

Dreyfus is currently working on an installation to be unveiled at the Istanbul Biennale alongside a piece by Anish Kapoor, but enjoys the pace of fashion. “I drew the sketches for the [Istanbul] installation two and a half years ago. It was a very long process,” he says. “Fashion is extraordinary because of its reactivity and periodicity. There is an obligation for designers to create something in a very short time and for us to immerse ourselves in their creative minds and answer to their demands the best that we can.”

He also loves the emotional imperative of fashion. Gesturing to a pair of paintings at the back of his office, Dreyfus says: “the feeling I get when I look at them, that’s what I want people to feel when they go to one of the shows I produce. I don’t want to explain anything, I just want them to *feel* it. If you are at a show and someone needs to explain to you what’s happening and why, the product isn’t good.”

“I feel like, today, journalists are afraid to misinterpret what they see, but we don’t want them to. We just want them to *feel* it,” he continues. “When Rei [Kawakubo] did her white show, people thought she was referencing Fukushima. She wasn’t. Or maybe she was.... Who cares? But because those people felt such a strong emotion, they needed to explain it. Many curators and museums directors tell me, ‘Thierry, you don’t get it, it’s not about emotions, it’s about a concept.’ Bullshit! If you look for a concept, it’s because you need to justify something.”

So what advice does Dreyfus have for those aiming to follow in his footsteps?

He points to a sign he has made on the wall of his office that says in illuminated, blue capital letters: “NEVER EVER RESIGN.” After a little silence, he adds with a smile: “Study the work of people you admire and then go knock on their door. But do it with generosity. People use to knock on Giacometti’s door, on Beckett’s door, and they would meet them. If people refuse, it’s because they don’t have anything to say and perhaps they’re not as interesting as you thought they were.”

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