



GEEK CHIC

by Silvia Bombardini

A pale figure in muted hues, absently blending in with the dust and parquetry of a library hall and its sandy shades of patiently fading tomes; trousers and sleeves running a little short at the hem, her mind behind thick spectacles rapidly drifting elsewhere...

This unassuming silhouette of the nerd, still as oblivious as ever to fashion, inspired the collection that Canadian designer Steven Tai presented at the Festival d'Hyères earlier this year. An extended edition was later shown at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Berlin. "I think a lot of the charm of the character is rooted in the awkwardness of the character," he says. "It is quite innocent and sincere." And yet Tai, a bookworm and bonafide nerd himself, infuses his muse with a certain quiet pride as well. Intelligence, discretion, and a dreamy sort of curiosity and obstinate thirst for knowledge hide among the pleats of her seemingly harmless appearance. "I believe she would be more of a nerdy romantic who enjoys reading publications such as *The White Review*... but also books by authors such as David Sedaris and Sloane Crosley," says Tai. "I wish the clothes to be worn by a woman who is confident and proud of both her strengths and her weaknesses, someone who understands and appreciates the craftsmanship behind the clothes." While the clothes may appear witty, humorous and sweet, each piece is the product of a great deal of meticulous work. Thin layers of cotton cheesecloth, wool crepe or natural linen are neatly cut out and piled up like a manuscript to be bound, at times combined with foam or even paper itself; the suggestive textures and volumes are then left to unfold.

Tai, who was born in Macau and raised in Vancouver, relates the collection to his family's love of books and his own childhood. There is a hint of nostalgia in his heartfelt design approach. His creations discard our modern digital ways, and even when technology is employed, it's paired with hundreds of glinting, old-fashioned pen nibs. "I worked with a creative technologist, John Nussey, in London to create this piece," says Tai. "It was really interesting to work with someone outside of fashion and combine our knowledge from our fields to create a hybrid together." The golden nibs are mounted on tiny motors and sewn in rows all over the opening dress, which is then animated in breathtaking, shimmering waves. Tai had teamed up with Nussey once before, for a Louis Vuitton project that featured a lit-up monogrammed lining. That was when he was still a promising student at Central Saint Martins. Since then, Tai has been blessed by accolades, opportunities and awards. In Hyères, he won the inaugural Chloé design prize, and after Berlin, he was invited by Camper to join its summer workshop in San Fortesa, Mallorca.

We met as Tai was preparing for the Milan White Showroom in September. We're already looking forward to what he will come up with next.

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Photo: Kim Dineen