

NONCHALANCE, RANDOMNESS, OR CHAOS

by Silvia Bombardini

Whenever you may feel a bit deflated by the infinite revivals of twentieth century decades, you can still count on the Central Saint Martins graduate show to bring a much welcome, mouth-to-mouth breath of fresh air to the fashion industry. Listing her many achievements since then may now be misleading, but it really wasn't many months ago that Mao Usami walked away from there the winner of the most influential L'Oréal Professionnel Young Design Talent Award. With a refreshing, hilarious collection featuring suggestively knotted socks, her seriously humorous "unisexy" philosophy has brought Mao to Shanghai and Paris already, with Japan coming up soon. Below, the designer shares her thoughts on sexuality and Freud, silliness and briefs, and old-men bellies, and tells us what happened when she tried to seduce a particularly hot white T-shirt.

Silvia Bombardini: It would seem impossible in days like these, in this age of countless mid-seasons, to actually create something so new in fashion. And yet the amusing, almost mumblecore nonchalance of your work tastes as fresh as today's milk. If I were to think of a character I would love to see wearing your pieces, it would be Kate Dollenmayer's in *Funny Ha Ha*. But did you have a personality in mind, or a muse, when you designed them?

Mao Usami: It may sound really weird but my muse in my mind is an odd old man who has probably been waiting for his bus for at least twenty minutes. I feel such tenderness. I don't always have visuals of women in my mind, even though I create womenswear, but definitely their personality. I always love people who can turn their complexes or negativities into their charms. An imperfection is such a unique beauty, I believe. People who can forgive, or even stay lazy on, what they are. Naive, but not insipid, and with tons of wit. Simply people who have their own style.

SB: Your choice of models on the catwalk certainly seems to reflect this: mixed ethnicities and body shapes, a no-nonsense, slightly grumpy attitude, and single braids like antennae pointing to the sky. How did you go about casting your girls, and what's the story behind the hairstyle?

MU: At the stage of casting my models I wanted to use my friends rather than perfect one-day models from agencies, because they are much closer to me and I thought they could totally understand the depth of my concept. They kind of had seen my previous works and how I had been working for my

collection. And they are good examples of how to introduce fashion into real styles. Also the reason why I mixed all different types of models is that they all have different charms and I just wanted to create that sense of nonchalance, randomness, or chaos, just like I tried not to use any of the same fabrics for their looks.

The braids are a good question! They represent how our modern fashion society is constructed: fit in, yet stand out a bit. It's like an awkward cuss.

SB: Your *Unisexy* collection almost gives shape to a new attitude, if not quite a movement, that has in recent years come to define a certain clique of emerging designers in London. A less hostile, somehow more comfortable or welcoming, team-like way to be into fashion: coming from Central Saint Martins, where indeed most rising talents come from. Is this something you've noticed as well?

MU: Not really, but it's a good sign that people can say "no" to the intensity of fashion these days. Modesty is one kind of movement. I always enjoy when people recognize that. It makes me realize what I've done. Nothing is clear when I am in the midst of things.

SB: One could argue that another virtue of London, unlike perhaps other fashion capitals, would be its ability to still appreciate silliness in an industry that often errs by taking itself too seriously. You, however, appear to take silliness very seriously; you said once you think of garments as toys. What does this mean to you and your work?

MU: I believe that some kind of ignorance, naïveté

or nescience could be really powerful sometimes, because it has no respect, no concerns, no responsibilities, yet it's most innocent, fresh, and serious. Sometimes we are impressed by how children invent ways of playing without instructions, or even without toys! I am always trying to find that kind of flexibility and it caused me to have a cynical attitude towards what I create.

SB: Still, the international appeal of a unisex wardrobe has proven to reach much further than the UK, striking seemingly universal chords. It wasn't long after you won the prestigious L'Oréal Professionnel Young Design Talent Award that your graduate collection was on display at Triple Major in Shanghai. What did you find to be the main differences between a Chinese and a British audience, and how well did the exhibition do?

MU: Both are really passionate and open to new possibilities, and smart enough to understand that seriously stupid attitude. So it was a good chance to show my work there. The differences are probably between the generations and how they consider my work. I would say that in Britain there's a wider public interested in new things and they sometimes think about my fashion as something more art-based. On the other hand, the Chinese audience is much younger, active people, and they consider my work as more subculture-based.

SB: For a whole month at Triple Major, you stayed and worked as an artist in residence – the wet dream of any creative soul since the late nineteenth century. Could you tell me



something about this experience: What did you learn there? What was the most hilarious or rewarding moment of your stay?

MU: I learned how important balanced communication is. Sometimes I have to take some time to be bossy to bring my life on.

The most hilarious moment was when I met this sexy Freud type wearing his pants as a hat in a museum in Shanghai. I was totally relieved, like "Ah, Freud, you are the same. Naughty, and unconsciously thinking about woo-woo underwear! Oh my pure boy."

SB: [Laughs.] It looks, indeed, like what brought you and Ritchie Chan together were common ideals concerning sexuality, and the blurring of gender in fashion. How important are such values to you both, and how did they take shape in your collaborative project?

MU: For me, I had just simply found more attractive things in menswear than womenswear and that's enough to make me insecure since I was naturally born without a penis. I don't mean I want to get one but I wondered, why does fashion have to be divided into such categories. I think there could be common attractive things for everyone so that I don't feel that need to ask if it's for women or men. And Ritchie always selects clothes that have a strong story behind them and almost all of them do fit everyone who wants to wear them. And he asked me to think about interchangeability.

This time I kind of tried to keep most of them really simple yet leave possibilities for multiple ways of

wearing. Interchangeability has already been done in fashion, I think. And unisex too. But I found a permanent shape in that of the brief and, again, used it really humorously but seriously. I hope it will lift the seriously humorous towards common aesthetics.

SB: You wrote the cutest ode to a white T-shirt, that I will now repeat here: "I asked my white T-shirt: 'What is the fashion?'/ 'What is the humor seriously?'/ 'What is the sexuality?'/ 'What, What, What...What?'/ 'You never answered but I hope you are well.'" What is it that makes a tee so sexy to your eyes, and which was the hottest T-shirt that you remember wearing?

MU: Even after eight years of thinking about fashion, I was stuck and screwed. I never, ever felt like I had got something about fashion. And it drove me mad just thinking what to wear myself. I ended up wearing white T-shirts from the college shop in CSM that have the hottest neck ribs ever. And I literally asked a T-shirt about the issue: "What is the fashion?" Of course, no answer. T-shirts never seem to look back at me even if I try to be intelligent enough to seduce them, but I am always looking at them from far away with some tenderness. They are out of my league, bitchy. But I just hope that fashion is well.

SB: "Socks are the new shoes!" someone announced right after your show last May, and they may very well be right. What can

you tell me about these socks, and the post-Freudian symbolism that gets us trapped on the threshold?

MU: As I said, my starting point was asking a T-shirt about fashion. And when I saw them as personifications, suddenly I felt a bit sorry for them because I often have that feeling like "nothing for me please." I thought they might have that too, like a hangover, or wanting to be left alone. So that is what the shape of the socks means to me. They are trying not to obey and running away from stinky feet! And also it represents how tired or bored they've become, like dirty used condoms.

SB: Freud aside then, the kind of sexuality you've put on the runway is not one we're used to seeing up there, nor anywhere in the public sphere, really. It's a refreshing, more natural and familiar type, that of gaping crotches and plaid suits, casual and self-assured. If you were to choose one single piece from the collection that best represents your views, which one would that be?

MU: Definitely *Serious stupid 100 layers of "T-shirts" (R-18)*! (It's supposed to be without "r" in the word T-shirts.) This is the name of the layered T-shirt outfit. Both concept-wise and construction-wise, it shows every aspect in the simplest way. It could be simply one hundred T-shirts, but they were really carefully made. All layers are graded up every two millimeters, which, aside from the concepts of "uni"versality in sexuality, represents the fact that we can enjoy one hundred times

more the most seductive process of taking off one's cloths. Concept-wise, when people try them on, the person is gradually getting into the exact shape of a "t" and needs to be a bit patient, so that represents trying to understand how T-shirts think and is the ironic reverse of the obedience of a cloth towards a body. Some of them have a printed slogan on them but this isn't a word aimed at society, it is more for self-assurance, so the printing is all very subtle, like white on white, red on red... blah blah blah.

SB: You said earlier that this might be a common thought here in the West, but your ideas really seem to stretch, at times quite literally so, towards realms outside of fashion. In fact, as for your still undisclosed project with Triple Major, lifestyle products, ceramics, and "arty stuff" were promised along with a small capsule collection. Could you give us a hint as to what we will see?

MU: The project is still in process, so I am not one hundred percent sure yet but it should be something that relates to an invisible sexuality, to shake your senses even more than the fifth.

SB: A penchant for performance and fine arts, which you studied briefly, can still be found in your designs, giving them that unique interdisciplinary charm they have. Fashion, however, was always your major and we're very thankful for that. Is it something that you always wanted to do, or was there maybe a designer or brand back in Japan that inspired you to follow this path? Can you remember the first fashion item that ever made an impression on you, perhaps as a child?

MU: Actually, I hated doing fashion for my first five years because fashion takes too long to understand. I never understood and there was so much patience to be had. However, once I found that I can be as stupid as I want, I felt much more relaxed. No answer could sometimes be the answer. I don't have any particular designers who made me want to get into fashion, but my mom used to work as a fashion designer so I naturally grew up with fashion, I guess. I remember when I first saw Galliano's work I was so impressed, though. People are always surprised when I name feminine designers like Valentino as the ones I admire, but I am pleased and shocked every time I see such a contrast.

SB: But speaking of art, there's something in your work that vaguely reminds me of art by certain feminists, like Louise Bourgeois, or perhaps Sarah Lucas. Is there an artist today that particularly inspires you, or maybe someone you would love to collaborate with in the future?

MU: I am inspired by artists too. I can't name all of them but yes, definitely, Louise Bourgeois and Sarah Lucas are among them. But at the same time I am influenced by minimalist and mathematical art, such as the work of Agnes Martin or Fred



Sandback. Last but not least, philosophy-wise, I was so inspired by Salvador Dali and Erwin Wurm. Some of the artists I admire are not alive anymore, but I wish I could have a chance to collaborate with them in the future or even in heaven.

SB: You told me you would soon team up with a painter, a musician, and a dancer for an exhibition in Japan that will happen in March. That already sounds incredibly exciting. Would you tell me something more about the artists involved? This will be your first exhibition in your native land, is that right? What do you expect?

MU: Yes, that's right. It's gonna be my first exhibition in my motherland. When I came back to Japan, my friend Yurika Kinoshita, who is a painter, asked me to do an exhibition together with her. She has been obsessed with people's weird behavior and painted them through her impressions of these subjects and I felt my muse could fit into her obsession well. When I went to Shanghai in the summer, I saw so many old men who showed off their bellies by rolling their T-shirts up. That's typical behavior for them but not for me. And that's my very first starting point for this next project. Such weird behavior is kind of the common ground for both of us.

Music is always an important aspect of my work because I believe it is one of the most sexual expressions and I have been working with Gen Seichi, who also created the music for my show. In order to create a mix of all of our works, we decided that a dancer could be the key person,

the device to connect us all in one. Moreover, I was wondering whether fashion is for self-satisfaction or for publicness, so I thought it would be interesting to place fashion among the arts for a change.

SB: What else can you tell me about the future, Mao? What will you wish for in 2014? And if you can say, why are you in Paris now?

MU: I am always looking for new environments and I think I am mature enough to set myself up in the fashion world now, so Paris calls me. Aside from Paris, I am going to exhibit my graduation collection at the Japanese embassy during London Fashion Week from February 12 to 22, and also, Ritchie and I want to keep doing projects together in the future, or probably I will want to start small projects by myself, or whatever interesting things come along, as long as I can get a sip of tasty coffee in the morning and a comfy bed for the night.

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