

Resetting the Codes

by Silvia Bombardini



photo: Patrick Marks

It's James Long's job, and his talent, to concentrate first and foremost on the now and next. But as he gets comfortable and perfectly fills his new shoes as Creative Director of Iceberg menswear, it's our pleasure to look back at the path that brought him here, step by step. Born in Northampton, Long graduates from the Royal College of Art in 2007, and soon becomes one of the most successful first generation designers to herald London's Menswear Renaissance. As the movement proceeds to update wardrobes and upturn traditions in the British capital, Long takes on now a new challenge in Milan, where his signature approach, laid back but glam, fits Iceberg like a glove. On the wake of his first show in Italy, Long tells us more about history and risks, working by the beach, and how to wear a knitted tracksuit, and feel it.

Silvia Bombardini: Let's start from the beginning. It had been but a couple of years since your graduation from the RCA when, alongside Carolyn Massey, you became in 2009 the very first Newgen Men winners. Three years later, you launched LC:M. How much has the London menswear scene changed in recent years and what is the landscape like for hopeful young designers today?

James Long: I think being visible internationally is a lot easier now; everything happens a lot quicker than when I started. I don't know whether that makes it better or worse, it's just incredibly different. I tend not to reflect too much on the past, the now is more fun and each person's or design team's experience is very different. In answer to your question, the menswear scene has changed dramatically and yes it's a lot more competitive but I don't think competition is a bad thing.

SB: I'm guessing the atmosphere must be rather different in Milan or Rimini, where the Iceberg headquarters are.

JL: The atmosphere in the studio in London and Rimini is actually quite similar as I like to work in an organized and relaxed way. I also like to have fun and involve the team so they are quite similar in that way too. Of course Italy is warmer, sunnier, and we're based by the sea so it feels like being on holiday compared to London, but it makes me appreciate both places more each time I go back and forth. I love to travel between the two.

SB: Your recent Italian debut has been variously and enthusiastically described as refreshing, peppy and glam, particularly those sparkly tiaras. Could you talk us through the creative process that went behind Iceberg's FW16 collection, where *Britpop meets Italo Pop*?

JL: I was a fan of the brand so I was familiar with many of the great moments Iceberg had had. Paolo Gerani, who's the brand's CEO and family owner, really talked me through the history and spirit of the brand, and I really felt like I understood it, and felt like I could creatively direct the menswear line in a way that was new while respecting the brand's heritage and soul. *Britpop meets Italo Pop* is really the coming together of my ideas and the Iceberg spirit.

SB: An important distinction, for you, seems to be between fashionable and disposable: though the former, your clothes are enduring, easily casual, consistently wearable. You say that you wish for people to live in your designs, that they shouldn't become too precious. It sounds like the kind of garment you grow emotionally attached to, that you build memories with...

JL: I think clothes should feel special yes. I believe that you should be able to feel the design process within the garment, and its spirit. With both collection I am really involved, so my hand is in each piece. I think some of the Iceberg knitted tracksuits especially, are clothes to be lived in.

SB: With the backup of such an empire a lot more becomes possible, like mixing together intarsia and jacquard on a single piece of knitwear, as you did. But I guess that taking the reins of Iceberg must come with a lot of responsibility too, the weight of the legacy, the will to do it justice...

JL: I think whenever you're designing risks have to be taken, but you've always got to balance them with focus and dedication. Of course I feel the responsibility and wish to make the brand proud, but it's not just me, they are just as much part of the process when we all work together. I definitely don't do it on my own. It's amazing to be able to have an idea and action it with a wonderful team.

SB: Originally, Iceberg's ambition was to meet people's changing tastes, and behaviours, in the aftermath of the 1960s sociocultural revolution, and they did so with knit sportswear.

In 2016, with two new Creative Directors — yourself and Arthur Arbesser, for womenswear — what would you say are the main goals for the seasons ahead?

JL: I think Iceberg's goal is still to meet people's changing tastes — I like that idea, and I'm very into the notion of clothes with an international value, I love to see people wearing my designs. I think it's a goal to bring Iceberg at the top of its game in terms of fashion, and another important goal is to stick to what the brand's ethos is, but with a new set of eyes. It's wonderful to work with a brand with such a rich history as you can really get a sense of resetting the codes. I think personally, my main goal is to show the excitement I feel from working with Iceberg, and let that shine through the collections! Energy and spirit, here's a goal.

SB: Finally, now that both shows are done, have you earned yourself some time to relax or are you already working on new collections? Could give us a hint yet, on what to expect from you next?

JL: I never really stop thinking about it, it's not something you turn on and off, and I mean this in a good way, not to moan. It's my life, and if I'm away relaxing, I would probably come up with more ideas at the same time. My head designer Sam and I went on a little trip around Italy after Milan, so we had fun but would also always discuss new ideas and what we saw. It's something we love so it never really feels like work, especially when you have a big team of talented people supporting you — like an iceberg! — who also believe in your vision. I am at my desk just now putting first thoughts together. It's good to be free to look around and keep travelling, looking and listening and drawing.

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