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CLOSE-UP

Prada universe: the story of fashion told in Shanghai

by Serena Tibaldi

«Fashion is not art. It requires a lot of creativity, but ultimately we stylists must sell, that's our aim. Whereas those who make art don't have to». This is how Miuccia Prada stops in their tracks those who attempt to compare *Pradasphere II* to an art exhibition. The show was inaugurated on Wednesday evening in Shanghai at the Start Museum, an exhibition space in the old railway station of Nanpu, and is devoted to the history and symbols of the brand founded in 1913 by Miuccia's grandfather Mario Prada and his brother Martino. Almost as though reaffirming the difference to which the stylist refers, the garments on display are not protected by display cases and visitors can stand as close to them as they wish, in contrast with what happens with paintings and sculptures. The stylist also underlines that the exhibition is not a nostalgic revisiting of Prada's past: «I love history, understood as tradition and as values such as craftsmanship and quality», she specifies. «I think it's important to know where we come from, because we're influenced both by our present and by our past. But this is not nostalgia».

The trap of celebration as an end in itself is also avoided by the presence of Raf Simons, creative co-director alongside Miuccia Prada for three years now. He is the one who chose the 200 looks, from the first collection put on the catwalk in 1988 to the most recent ones, which are literally the fulcrum of the exhibition route: in fact they are positioned in such a way as to form a central corridor running the entire length of the museum.

«I've worked following a historical and chronological order», explains Simons when he is asked on the basis of what principles he has selected the looks on display. «I realized firstly I didn't know much about Prada before 1988. It's easy to think that its creative history began with that first show, but the DNA of the brand was in fact already delineated by everything that had been done previously: for example, Miuccia Prada introduced nylon into the production of bags in the 1970s, changing the history of the firm and that of fashion as a whole». Having said this, the designer admits that it is actually the stylist's first collection, that from 1988, to which he feels closest. «I think the most important thing that emerges is the modernity of her ideas, from the outset. Modernity is such a significant value that it surpasses everything else, even eccentricity».

Simons' selection works, and even if the project is in a museum, it is devised to appear modern and concrete. If we think about it, the curatorship work done here by the designer is complementary to that performed on the current collections, in which he reinterprets the stylistic features of the brand "from the outside", through his own parameters. That is why the stylist wanted him by her side, and the effectiveness of the pairing is demonstrated by the renewed success currently being enjoyed by Prada. It is natural, therefore, for the formula to also have been applied in an event such as this, aiming to illustrate the brand's identity.

What make this overview of the Prada universe more complete are the side rooms of the museum, where the chronological narrations are replaced by a subdivision into themes. Each room in fact hosts a topic that is dear to the brand: among these are Luna Rossa, in honour of the brand's sailing team, Cinema, where the videos created over the years with directors such as Ridley Scott and Wes Anderson are projected, Fratelli Prada, a homage to the two founders (where the bag of the collection for spring/summer 2024, reproducing a creation by Mario, is also exhibited), and what is undoubtedly the most spectacular space, Materiality, in which 20 skirts created with the most famous materials and decorations used by the brand over the years are on display. The

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enthusiastic reactions of the first visitors are indicative above all of the role played by Prada in society today. The one person who does not make a pronouncement on the theme is, predictably, its main architect. «I try not to think about it», says Miuccia Prada, smiling, «I'm too projected towards what is to come».

The Pradasphere II exhibition

opened by an event abounding in stars, with 200 garments chosen by Raf Simons, it sums up the influence of the brand and Miuccia on the aesthetics of the last 35 years

[captions]

The exterior

of the exhibition in the former Nanpu station

Top positions

President of the Prada group Patrizio Bertelli, Miucca Prada with her son Lorenzo Bertelli (on the right), Head of Corporate Social Responsibility, and creative co-director Raf Simons.

The star

The actor Jeff Goldblum at the inaugural evening of the *Pradasphere II* exhibition

Top model

Actress, model and LGBTQ+ activist Hunter Schafer

From the origins

Pradasphere II, on display in Shanghai until 21 January, is devoted to the history and symbols of the brand founded in 1913. The garments and articles have been selected by creative co-directors Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons

«We've never told our story like this before»

The Prada adventure, from 1913 to the present day, is on display in Shanghai. The stylist: «Nostalgia is a blindfold over our eyes. I'm a super fan of history»

400 pieces that seem like they were made today

by Paola Pollo

It is intended to be an immersion in a history a century and ten years long and yet it shines a powerful spotlight on the real today. Where the game of guessing dates and placing them in our memories suddenly goes haywire, disturbed by the only thought that occurs to everyone: «But this is the here and now!» And if the intention was to provide the most complete narration ever offered of Prada («we've never told our story like this before»), then the result is an indelible snapshot of fashion and of the DNA of a brand that has focused on intellectual quality while not forgetting the material aspect. And it all comes back as soon as you cross that threshold.

Pradasphere, chapter II, is the exhibition that has opened in Shanghai at the Start Museum, a former railway station that has been turned into an exhibition space. Over four hundred pieces, including garments, accessories and other items, documenting the documentable: from the small bags that Mario Prada manufactured in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan to a selection of two hundred looks taken from every show from 1990 to today, to the (farsighted) story of king nylon, an unprecedented «collection» of twenty unique skirts made using the techniques and materials taken from the archive, to the adventure of Luna Rossa, to the brand's commitment through its foundation, to the Pasticceria Marchesi. Creative co-directors Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, a partnership in which she finds (also from her personnel wardrobe and from the collection of Manuela Pavesi) and he chooses, plundering the company's archives and meanderings: «I trust him one hundred percent», Miuccia Prada says.

The beginning is a series of giant images of models on the catwalk, almost suggesting to visitors that it is they, this time, who are in the parade. And that is the way we feel as soon as we enter the gallery of shows in chronological order, on the left and then on the right, with the past that is reflected in today. And it is here that magic takes place: time is cancelled out, the codes are fixed, the «uniforms» point out the identity.

«It's the Prada DNA», as Simons states many times. «We know what it is today, but I wanted to show it, to explain it exactly, from the beginning. Here it is, in look number 1, on the left side, 1988, the white shirt with the black skirt, a belt and flat shoes with thick rubber soles: it's there, from the first show and I think it's important. It was interesting to show it. You can continue to reinvent your DNA, re-energize it, but also not let it slip away. Keep it alive. Because that's why people love Prada».

«Wow, just think... again!», the lady jokes, pretending to be surprised by the popular adoration, never affected by that time that she has probably defeated by denying the existence of nostalgia: «Nostalgia is a blindfold over the eyes» — she says —. The references of history are something else. I separate the former from the latter. I'm a super fan of all history, not only of fashion, but in art, in politics. We are present because we were past».

The proof: why Shanghai? «Why not? My first time was at the age of 25».

The choice of a warehouse as a space is the perfect accompaniment: with the long gallery with the shows and the manikins below and above, with soles that loom above and entertain, and

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sometimes views that open up onto the Prada universe; the reproductions of clutch bags from 1913, the crocodile creations in display cases designed by Damien Hirst, the story of king nylon seen through the lens of Albert Watson, the architectural projects by Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Jacques Herzog/Herzog & de Meuron, and not only, the collaborations with directors such as Ridley Scott, Wes Anderson, David O. Russell, Yang Fudong, the Luna Rossa simulator and the historic space in Via Fogazzaro that has been reproduced in order to host the show with the materials for twenty original skirts that are a feast for the eyes. «We didn't want to put fashion on a pedestal, but putting it in a museum is also complicated. Fashion lives on people, in reality, Yet in this space we've succeeded in suggesting the intimacy of the gesture of fashion», Yes, absolutely.

[captions]

Above, the space that hosts the Pradasphere in Shanghai. A recently converted former railway station.

Opposite, Patrizio Bertelli, Miuccia Prada, Raf Simons and Lorenzo Bertelli.

The twenty original skirts created with the materials and working processes of the collections from 1988 to today. The historic space in Via Fogazzaro has been reproduced for the display. The section is located at the centre of the large warehouse that was a railway station in Shanghai. Pradasphere will remain open until 22 January, to then go on tour.

Pradasphere II, survey of its identity between history and innovation

Exhibitions. Through 21 January the Start Museum in Shanghai is hosting the new examination via objects, ideas and images of the company that was founded in 1913

Angelo Flaccavento
Shanghai

The theme of identity is central in the history of contemporary fashion, perhaps because everything has become or risks becoming generic, colourless, indistinguishable. But identity is also something non-normalisable and complex. It certainly is in the case of Prada. Tracing the outlines of *Prada-ness* requires a series of props, a reading guide that defines without simplifying or diminishing, and even better if it's done by four eyes instead of two. Responding precisely to this taxonomic but fluid requirement is the exhibition *Pradasphere II*, recently inaugurated at the Start Museum in Shanghai and open until 21 January. The curation is overseen by the co-creative directors Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, while the artistic direction and the highly effective exhibition layout are the work of Michael Rock of the New York-based studio 2X4.

The first edition of *Pradasphere* dates back to 2014: in that case it was Miss Prada who explored her own history by isolating some thematic nuclei to expose them in a diachronic manner. The intent of *Pradasphere II* is much broader, and the device of Raf Simons' gaze, internal for only four of Prada's more than one-hundred-ten-year history, is decisive. "In my opinion the only way we could talk about ourselves," he explains, "was chronological, starting from the beginning".

Miuccia Prada adds: "I'm not interested in celebrations and I don't have a nostalgic view of the past because I'm relentlessly projected forwards. But I am interested in history, in every field, not least politics."

Pradasphere II is a historical exhibition untouched by even a whiff of historicism. With its more than four hundred artefacts, it is full of materials, indeed expansive and exhaustive, but also welcoming and intimate: all the objects can be appreciated up close, even touched and, unlike so many fashion exhibitions designed as a marketing vehicle or mere content creation for social media, it is intensely analogue, devoid of easy digital phantasmagoria. The central nucleus is a warehouse, complete with imposing metal shelving but that's lined with delicate pink velvet, which houses, in rigorous chronological order, Prada's fashion from its beginnings in 1988 to today, while side rooms act as a magnifying glass for key topics, from the Fratelli Prada shop that opened in Milan in the Galleria in 1913 (the frescoes of which were reproduced), to Fondazione and Luna Rossa. Noteworthy is the section entitled Gallery, conceived by Damien Hirst, which, to symbolise the relationship with artists, displays a series of precious bags from the archive in a cabinet opposite a second cabinet with copies of said bags made of silver. What is striking, overall, is the focus on the materiality of the objects, the effect of which is engaging and emotional for the viewer, because it reveals a little-known aspect of the history: the interest in industrial craftsmanship, admirably expressed in a room which, set on the repeated silhouette of the circle skirt, summarises decades of work that all on their own have rewritten how we understand weaving and decoration, from needle-punching to crinkled lamé,

from studs to sequins made from bottle caps. While sticking to chronology as the underlying principle of the exhibition, *Pradasphere II* appears to be a synchronic opus, which speaks to the present time: the relevance of the effects exhibited, even the most distant, is surprising. To conclude with the words of Raf Simons, "In fashion, everything was there from the beginning, from the first collection; a white shirt with a long skirt, men's shoes and socks." A vision of precision that underpins various waves of eccentricity. That is the complexity of Prada, in other words, the desire to dress the mind and thought even before the body, all while creating fashion instead of concepts, while concentrating on objects brimming with charm and also frivolity.

Miuccia Prada: "I don't have a nostalgic view of the past, I'm relentlessly projected towards the future"

Global Leader

According to Bain by 2030 China will account for two fifths of the global consumption of personal luxury goods

+100% Growth in China

In Shanghai Gianfranco D'Attis also said that the "medium-term" objective is to double revenues, in part by opening lots of new stores

3.34bn Revenues for the first 9 months

The Prada group (which also has in its portfolio Miu Miu, Church's, Car Shoes, Marchesi and Luna Rossa) in the January-September period grew by 17%

+32% Clothing sales

The category that grew the most in the first 9 months of 2023

+10% November revenues

The Prada group's growth was announced in Shanghai by Gianfranco D'Attis, chief executive of the company since January

40% Weight of the Chinese market

Complete view.

At the top, a section of the exhibition dedicated to women's clothes; above, the cabinet showing the evolution of Prada bags; to the side, the space for the brand's men's collections