



Those who admire or collect clothing (or accessories) designed by Maison Martin Margiela were royally treated to a haptic feast of imaginative inventions and conceptual one-upmanship in Antwerp. Label digits like ①, ④, ⑥, ⑩ or ⑭ designate clothing collections, while digits ⑧, ⑪, ⑫, ⑬ and ⑫ are objects or accessories. An encircled ⑳ identifies exhibitions. Thus doubling as MMM's 20th anniversary, this survey presents the perfect opportunity to tell inspiring backstories. One such story is that the renegade Martin Margiela, who with Jenny Meirens co-founded MMM in 1988, has eluded cameramen since 1997. House of Margiela's deliberate anonymity and anti-fame antics even spawned an *über*-marketing scheme, whereby four white stitches, visible on garment exteriors, signal brand status, while the blank label affixed with ① indicates their premiere collection. Will we soon discover that Meirens is Margiela, yet another brilliant woman forced to adopt a male identity, or even the fact that both have departed, leaving MMM in the hands of seasoned staffers who continue to reinterpret ideas initiated during MMM's first

decade. Recalling Lars von Trier's hilarious 2006 film *The Boss of It All*, in which a company president feigns living abroad so he can manage employees undercover, one imagines Margiela and Meirens masquerading as MMM bosses, secretly commandeering their international staff disguised in white coats.

"Maison Martin Margiela" (through February 8) demonstrates that MMM initiated most signature traits during its first decade. These include: signature darts stitched on knees, chest, and shoulders (1989); Edwardian puffed sleeves (1989); handmade garments (now labeled ① or ⑭) assembled from found objects or vintage clothes (1989); white-washed garments, especially Tabi Boots, whose surfaces inevitably crack (1990); the tension between a garment's finished and unfinished components (1990-91); scraggly white stitches hooking sleeves to sweater bodices resulting from oversized Barbie patterns (1994-95), a fascination with optical illusions and trompe-l'oeil prints (1996); the brand label numbered ① to ⑫ (1997), the over-sized wrapped clothes (2000); and "replicas" of classic garments (tuxedos, trench coats, white shirts and blue jeans, since 2003). Strangely omitted are dozens of mind-blowing pieces, such as MMM's over-the-top wedding dresses, sexy satin cocktail dresses modeled after chair covers, evermore outlandish wearable drapings, as well as a treasure-trove of brilliantly conceived accessories. In light of the history of participatory art, the following press kit quote is especially telling: "This is not the kind of fashion that furnishes its buyers with a ready-made total look, but the kind that demands the participation of the customer, expecting a minimum of creativity and interpretive labor on his or her part."

The singular theme explored by MMM, one evaded by almost every other house, is the concept of time. MMM creates incredibly well tailored, timeless garments, meant to last forever thanks to the house's endless reissues. In





the same breath, MMM fearlessly destroys or damages garments, allowing them to self-destruct, revealing the tailoring process. Runway models sporting necklaces and earrings made from colored ice cubes splashed color all over white outfits as their jewelry melted. Gorgeous shoes get tagged with white or metallic paint. Although MMM has always reworked old garments and found objects by hand into innovative threads, 2005 saw the

arrival of separate “Artisanal Collections” (© for women and ⑩ for men), MMM’s labor-intensive haute-couture alternative. The show at Antwerp’s MoMu featured 14 wearable sculptures accompanied by the production times, which ranged from eight hours for a sweater made from military socks to 55 hours for a fox stole comprised of 2,500 party paper balls, hand-dyed with China ink in various shades of gray.

MoMu more than conveys MMM’s passion, dedication, and commitment, but failed to show that their collectors share these qualities. One video features Karin, an Antwerper wearing 40 different outfits at home, although it would be more useful to see her in them going out and about, since public engagement is central to being an MMM aficionado. Rather than borrow garments from collectors, MoMu borrowed them from MMM, so visitors might conclude, erroneously, that hardly anyone purchases or sports MMM. The survey looks totally conceptual, almost prank-like, given its clever displays that de-emphasize actual bodies. What has always marveled critics and designers alike, however, is the fact that these far-flung shapes actually fit the human form, a feat that MoMu’s flat or idealized displays fail to reveal. To solve this problem, MoMu could have organized informal modeling of previously worn pieces. And a time could have been set aside each day for MMM-adorned devotees (many in their sixties by now) to come by, so visitors could experience a real show. That way, spectators would realize that the survey is far more than a fantasy or staged comedy.

~Sue Spaid

