



## ISSEY MIYAKE—PHOTOGRAPHS BY IRVING PENN

---

A 1964 GRADUATE OF TAMA ART UNIVERSITY'S GRAPHIC DESIGN DEPARTMENT, ISSEY MIYAKE STARTED DESIGNING CLOTHES IN 1962, AT FIRST FOR SUCH CLIENTS AS TORAY INDUSTRIES, KNOWN FOR ITS KNITS AND SYNTHETICS, AND SHISEIDO. SINCE 1971 HE HAS PRESENTED HIS OWN COLLECTIONS AROUND THE WORLD. THIS MAKES HIM A PROFESSIONAL FASHION DESIGNER, BUT WHAT HE HAS DONE OUTSIDE THE REALM OF FASHION MAKES HIM A DESIGNER IN A BROADER SENSE OF THE WORD: HE HAS HAD EXHIBITIONS AT THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, LONDON'S VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM AND THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM IN AMSTERDAM. HE HAS HANDLED COSTUME DESIGN FOR MOMIX, A MODERN DANCE COMPANY, AND FOR THE CHOREOGRAPHER WILLIAM FORSYTHE. □ MOST PEOPLE CALL ISSEY MIYAKE AN ARTIST, AND SOME CALL HIM A GENIUS. I'VE MET HIM, AND I WOULD AVOID LABELS ALTOGETHER, ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT CONNOTE UNIQUENESS. MIYAKE, AT 53, IS INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED FOR CONSISTENT INCONSISTENCY, FOR HIS UNENDING INNOVATIONS IN MATERIALS, SHAPES AND PRESENTATIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY. BUT MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, HE WANTS TO BE PERCEIVED AS ORDINARY. WILDLY SUCCESSFUL AND DISARMINGLY ELEGANT, MIYAKE INSISTS THAT "I DON'T DESIGN ANYTHING SPECIAL. I'M OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD, REPRESENTED AS INVENTING THESE UNUSUAL DESIGNS, WHEN IN FACT I TRY TO STAY AS FAR AWAY FROM THE UNUSUAL, THE ODD, AS POSSIBLE." □ IT IS THE CHALLENGE OF THE AGE, HE SAYS, "TO MAINTAIN ORDINARY SENSIBILITIES. FOR DESIGNERS, THIS MEANS

*"B*IT BY BIT, WITHOUT EVEN REALIZING IT  
WE ARE BECOMING LESS AND LESS ABLE TO UNDERSTAND  
ORDINARY THINGS."

.....

avoiding, or perhaps transcending, what so many seek: an image, a look, even an audience that knows your name and thinks that it can therefore expect something next season that they will recognize as yours—in short, many of the rewards of commercial success. This does not mean that Miyake has shunned fame; he has simply invited it along. And it has been a willing companion for more than 20 years. □ Miyake's vision of design—of its purpose and effect—comes to life through his peculiar definitions of "ordinary" and "odd." "Bit by bit, without even realizing it, we are becoming less and less able to understand ordinary things," he says. "By ordinary, I don't mean what happens as we walk down the street each day. I want to be continually inspired by the long history of mankind and nature, to discover, over and over again, the threads that link together all the things human beings have created, from the distant past right up to the present. I want to create situations in which things can happen naturally, can connect as they should." □ Miyake's understanding of how things should happen is an extension of his now highly polished ability to extract the solution to design problems from the essentials. He recognized long ago that the answers are found in the most obvious places, and that the obvious is what surprises, delights and succeeds. The odd, on the other hand, is something strained for. Miyake has a passion for unsettling his audience with a material, a shape, a costume so rational that it's sensational. His ordinary sensibilities have led him to introduce such things as daily clothing born of ancient sashiko quilting and, at the

other end of the scale, purely futuristic rattan bodices reminiscent of samurai armor. □ More recently, his press-pleats and stretch clothing, radical at first glance only, have solved real problems for real modern life. Inexpensive to own—"like buying a loaf of bread," says Miyake—these lines are designed to travel rolled up and yet emerge as pure, breathable elegance. He was inspired in this case by the pleats of the Egyptians and Greeks, but he invented a technique suited to the modern world, designing a shape first, a pure shape, and pressing it in a pleating machine. Miyake is as intrigued by the beauty of this simple solution as is his worldwide audience. "Pleats can give birth to texture and shape all at the same time. I feel I have found a new way to give individuality to today's mass-produced clothing," he told *Interview* magazine in 1990. □ One of 1991's departures was establishing a shop devoted entirely to stretch material in the Shibuya, Tokyo, branch of Parco (part of the determinedly original Seibu retailing group). Miyake explains this departure as a matter-of-fact move. "Gradually, an 'Issey Miyake image' has come to be," he says. "To do new things, we have to break away from the image and get some distance from our longtime customers. These are experimental stores, designed to engage a different kind of people." Gallery-like and specialized, the pleats shops are staffed with assistants culled from art schools, who do more than push sales; they talk design and encourage even the browsers to have fun with the concept of subtle geometric sculptures that are transformed by the wearing into intimate clothing—a

mobile conversation between the body and the rest of the world. □ From the beginning, in 1971, when he presented his first collection with models riding motorbikes spiraling down a parking garage, Miyake has considered it his work and his mission "to design fun." "This is not haute couture," he says. "I wanted to know who would be interested in my clothing and how they would wear my clothes, so we chose locations where ordinary people would feel at home. These weren't the usual mincing-model fashion shows. They were performances." □ Miyake says that if he hadn't been a fashion designer he would have wanted to be a dancer. He loves performance. The dance is a place where Miyake's ordinary sensibilities must tingle with surprise, for it is something we all recognize—movement—made extraordinary. It's a delight in the simplest form of expression. "I've seen many of Yamagata's pieces [of the internationally known butoh group Sankaijuku], which were fantastic, but I'm not necessarily a butoh fan," he says. "What I really like are American musicals with Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire. I also like ballet, Takarazuka [an all-female dance and theater troupe] and Rio's carnival. I like dance. I like exercise—people with energy, moving. Kids, anything that moves. Things that move I want to touch. I make nothing of the distinctions between classical, modern and the rest. I just want to see the best. Humankind's finest object is the human body, enjoying it our greatest pleasure." □ Miyake often returns to essentials this way. All of his work, in all its variety, implies that it is in the essentials, in the basic, distinguishing

*I* MAKE NOTHING OF THE DISTINCTIONS  
 BETWEEN CLASSICAL, MODERN AND THE REST.  
 I JUST WANT TO SEE THE BEST."

elements of a material, a place or a technique, that surprise will be found. Although as a fashion designer with a slot in the seasonal lineup, Miyake has times when he thinks, "Oh God, I've got to design another jacket," he is able to achieve superior results, in his collections and in his collaborative projects alike, by a determined kind of letting go. To bring the essentials to the surface, Miyake abandons his ego and all pretensions to originality, as all great designers do. "There is no single way I feel anything should be done. I work in a fluid manner, never fixing on a single pattern and simply repeating it all over the world." The sites for his collections have included the Centre Georges Pompidou, Tokyo's Hamilton Park and the Intrepid Museum, a battleship anchored on the Hudson River near midtown Manhattan. □ Even in fashion, the realm of the beautiful, Miyake doesn't want raves. His object is to arouse curiosity, even if it's followed by rejection. "If all I hear is, 'How lovely, how splendid,' I'm off thinking I've failed. But if I hear, 'What's this?!' I figure I'm on the right track." □ Miyake's modesty, anything but false, is at the core of many of his undertakings, particularly his collaborative projects; "I can do nothing alone," he says. He expresses a debt to everything and everyone around him, and to all that came before. His only concern seems to be not to abandon his ordinary sensibilities, which he defines in these cases as "those that allow us to assess the true worth of each contributing element." □ One of Miyake's long-running collaborations, a line of clothing established in 1984 with an Indian woman named Asha

Sarabhai, is one of the most eloquent expressions of Miyake's vision of meaningful cooperative design. Miyake, who believes that "we've come as far as we have by learning from diverse peoples and a long, long past," designs with Sarabhai's handwoven, hand-dyed silk and cotton calicoes simply for the pleasure of fitting a living cottage industry into everyday life. The products of Miyake's partnerships—books of Irving Penn's photographs (designed by Ikko Tanaka), catalogs featuring the innocent poetry of Shuntaro Tanikawa, costumes for the stunning choreography of William Forsythe—are commercially successful. But for Miyake, it is more important that they be personal adventures, embarked upon to surprise everyone, not least himself. And they do, because Miyake knows how to surrender. He chooses superior artists from other disciplines to interpret his designs, and, after the first meeting, leaves it up to them "to do what they will." Time after time, what results is a chorus of visions, not just a reiteration of Miyake's own message. □ Shuntaro Tanikawa is the master of the simple word. He writes in the Japanese syllabary of *hiragana*, which any child can read, rather than in the more subtle and complex *kanji* (Chinese characters), and he portrays the world as a place worth examining—knowable, if not translucent. The images from this world, their very humanness, represent to Miyake a valuable escape from the trend toward merchandising everything. The name of this escape is entertainment. For the catalog of his 1990 Pleats Please exhibition at Tokyo's Touko Museum of Contem-

porary Art, Miyake asked permission to borrow two poems, "Making Faces" and "Passing Gas," from a Tanikawa collection called *Nursery Rhymes*. The purpose: "to just let people enjoy the fun of it all, up close, rather than pushing them to say 'I love it' or 'I hate it.'" □ The annual Issey Miyake poster series, shot by Irving Penn since 1987, began with Miyake looking for someone "who couldn't care less about Issey Miyake, someone completely separate from our world, to photograph our work through his own eyes. Irving Penn was the only person I could think of. When I saw the photographs, they were just as I had imagined; they looked nothing like they would have if we had taken them here. Each shot had depth to it, each one its own voice, calling out, 'What do you think of this?' or 'This isn't the look!' To me, he is a *sensei*, a master." □ In Miyake's view, finally, surprise is far more important than praise. For the May 1991 Frankfurt performance of William Forsythe's *The Loss of the Small Detail*, Miyake designed a series of costumes. "When I began my pleats work [in 1988], I thought they would be perfect for dance, and that William Forsythe would be the most interesting partner," Miyake says. "I met with him, we talked, and I designed the costumes while he designed the dance." With no images of the choreography and no notion of the score, Miyake created costumes that looked "like the discarded skins of dragonflies." The performance brought a mixture of sustained applause and booing, and pages and pages of coverage. Miyake enjoyed it enormously. "It surprised me." ■



(ABOVE) "RHYTHM PLEATS," SPRING-SUMMER 1990. ■ (OPPOSITE) "THE DUNES," AUTUMN-WINTER 1990-91 ■ (FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT) "SINGLE PIECE OF CLOTH," HAT OF MOLDED POLYEURETHANE FOAM, DESIGNED IN COLLABORATION WITH MARIA BLAISSE, SPRING-SUMMER, 1983 ■ (RIGHT) "WAKAME" (SEAWEED) SPRING-SUMMER, 1988 ■

















(OPPOSITE) BAMBOO PLEATS, AUTUMN-WINTER 1989-90. ■ (ABOVE) "ELEPHANT" CREPE JACKET WITH DRAW-STRING SHOULDERS, SPRING-SUMMER 1983. ■ (FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT) SQUARE TUNIC WITH NYLON SLEEVES AND COLLAR, SPRING-SUMMER 1985. ■ (RIGHT) FIBERGLASS EYE MASK, AUTUMN-WINTER, 1981. ■









(PRECEDING SPREAD, LEFT) MERCURY PLEATS, AUTUMN-WINTER 1989-90. ■ (RIGHT) LACQUER PLEATS, SPRING-SUMMER 1990. ■ (OPPOSITE) BAMBOO PLEATS, AUTUMN-WINTER 1989-90. ■ (ABOVE) "TURTLE" JUMPSUIT, SPRING-SUMMER 1983. (ANY OF THE OPENINGS CAN BE THE NECK.) ■ (FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT) "SEASHELL" COAT OF COTTON-WRAPPED FISHING LINE, SPRING-SUMMER 1985. ■ (RIGHT) BODY PLEATS, AUTUMN-WINTER 1990-91. ■