

All change

The concept of contemporary as envisioned by Alessandro Michele, Gucci's new Creative Director, gets a fresh look in the form of *No Longer/Not Yet*, an exhibition at the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai.

Words by Shermian Lim



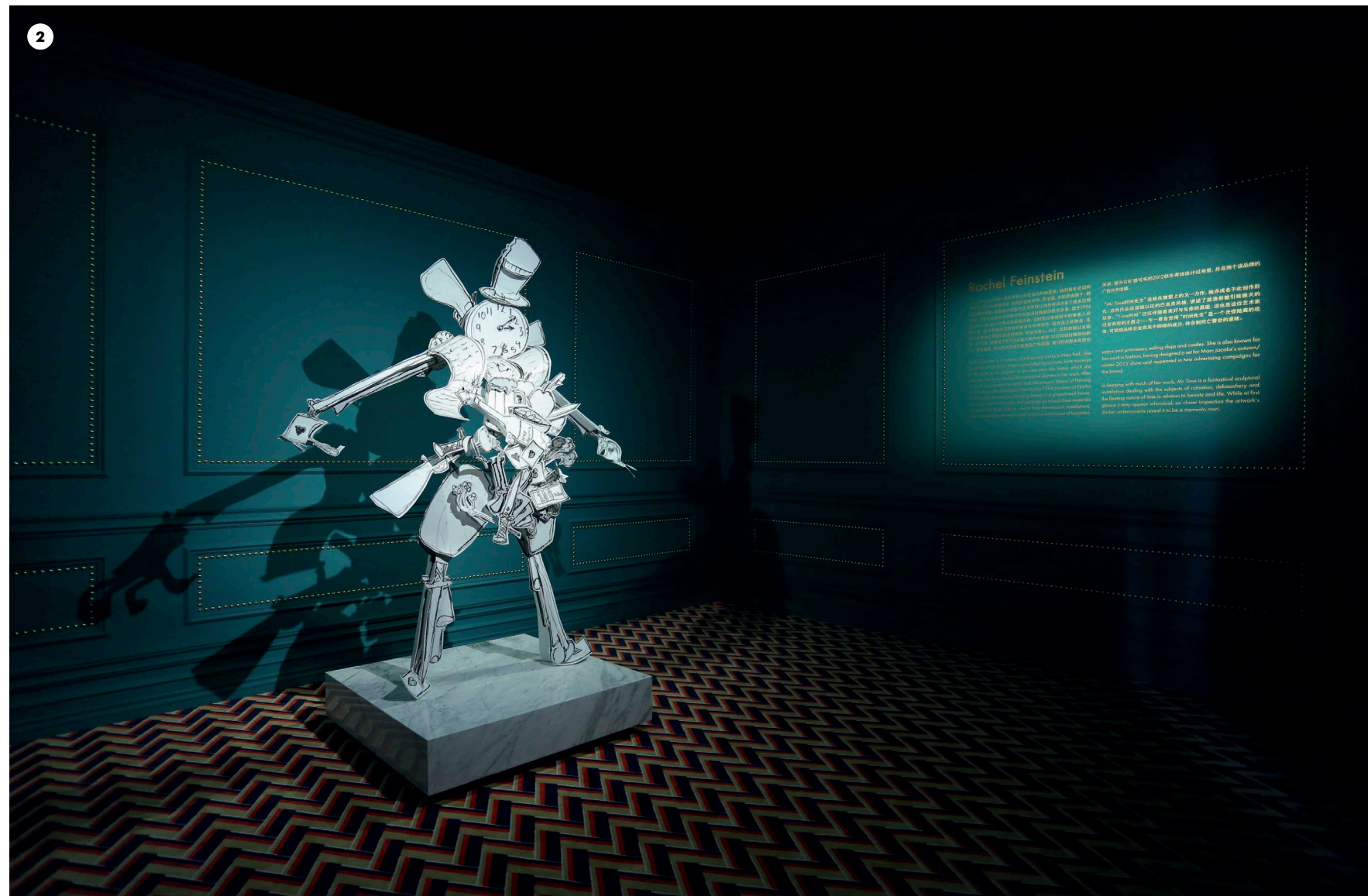
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FEW THINGS can better exemplify the fleeting nature of time than fashion—it's in one season, and then out within months. This has led Alessandro Michele, Gucci's new Creative Director, to ask himself—in his quest to spearhead a fresh direction for the Florence-based designer label—what exactly does it mean to be contemporary in the context of fashion?

Rather than seek a definitive answer to that question, Michele, who assumed his current role at Gucci at the beginning of this year, is content with posing questions that open up a creative debate, and he has facilitated it in a few ways, most notably in his latest collections and an art installation. The recent debut of this fresh vision in the AW15 collections for both men and women had observers commenting that the designs favoured the baroque, and were not particularly gender-specific.

“The first time I saw Alessandro's collection in store, I was like, is this the men's or the women's?” says Katie Grand, British stylist and Editor-in-Chief of the bi-annual style magazine, *LOVE*. It's a really interesting way to merchandise clothes, notes Grand. “I have the same jacket as my husband, and I have the same sweater as Alessandro. It's a very modern way of thinking and dressing.”

Grand, known as “one of the most powerful stylists in the world”, joined forces with Michele to curate works (by seven artists and two sound designers) that explore the concept of contemporary. The result of their collaboration is a special exhibition entitled *No Longer/Not Yet* featuring a series of eight rooms with paintings, photographs, exhibits and installations housed at the Minsheng Art Museum in Red Town, an art district in Shanghai. The city was chosen for the



1. Gucci Tian (on page 155)

Gucci Tian's floral motifs are inspired by designs used in 18th century tapestry and folding screens. Within the cube is a painting known as the *Boy in Red* by an unknown artist in 17th century England. The appeal of the painting to Michele is that the gender of the subject is ambiguous because the boy is dressed in women's clothing. This version of the painting is a recreation by an artist who specialises in Renaissance art reproductions.

2. Rachel Feinstein

Mr Time is a fantastical sculptural installation that New York-based sculptor Rachel Feinstein is known for. It references the baroque and addresses the ideas of ruination and debauchery. Time is a subject of interest for Feinstein, which is why *No Longer/Not Yet* curator Katie Grand decided to include her in the exhibition. “Rachel is a dreamer. She has a romance that Alessandro has. She's always been obsessed with time. I felt Rachel was essential to have in.”

3. Cao Fei

Rumba 2 features a herd of self-motivated robot vacuums programmed to clear a space as efficiently as possible, as a mirror of Beijing's rapid urbanisation that threatens rural existences. Cao Fei's installation is a multimedia project that also includes a film that further explores these themes.

4. Unskilled Worker (on page 158)

All portraits by Helen Downie AKA Unskilled Worker are new works inspired by the Gucci men's and women's collections for AW15. Each depicts a look

from the collection, painted in Downie's signature romantic style.

5. Glen Luchford (on page 158)

The walls display Glen Luchford's images for Gucci's AW15 advertising campaign, including never before seen outtakes. They are enlarged to an epic scale and afforded a new perspective within the atmosphere of a gallery, designed to look like a subway platform. Says Alessandro Michele of Luchford: “I'm obsessed with life and Glen was the right person to showcase that kind neo-romanticism. He's still very unique for me. If you are a beautiful person, you can create beautiful things.”

6. Nigel Shafran (on page 159)

Gucci gave Nigel Shafran an unprecedented level of access to the preparations for one of its shows. “I wanted to lift the lid on how a fashion show gets put together,” says Grand. “Nigel, his work is very raw and I said he is the perfect person to work with Alessandro. From design meetings and model castings to run-throughs and make-up trials, Shafran was able to document a rarely-seen aspect of the fashion industry.”

7. Li Shurui (on page 159)

Five acrylic paintings make up *Mindfile Storage Unit*, arranged around a hexagonal space. Positioned behind this display is the artist's 2011 installation *The Origin of the Universe is the Source of Light or Dark*, a long painted wall that arcs into a semicircle. *Mindfile Storage Unit* pays homage to consciousness, identity and self-awareness.

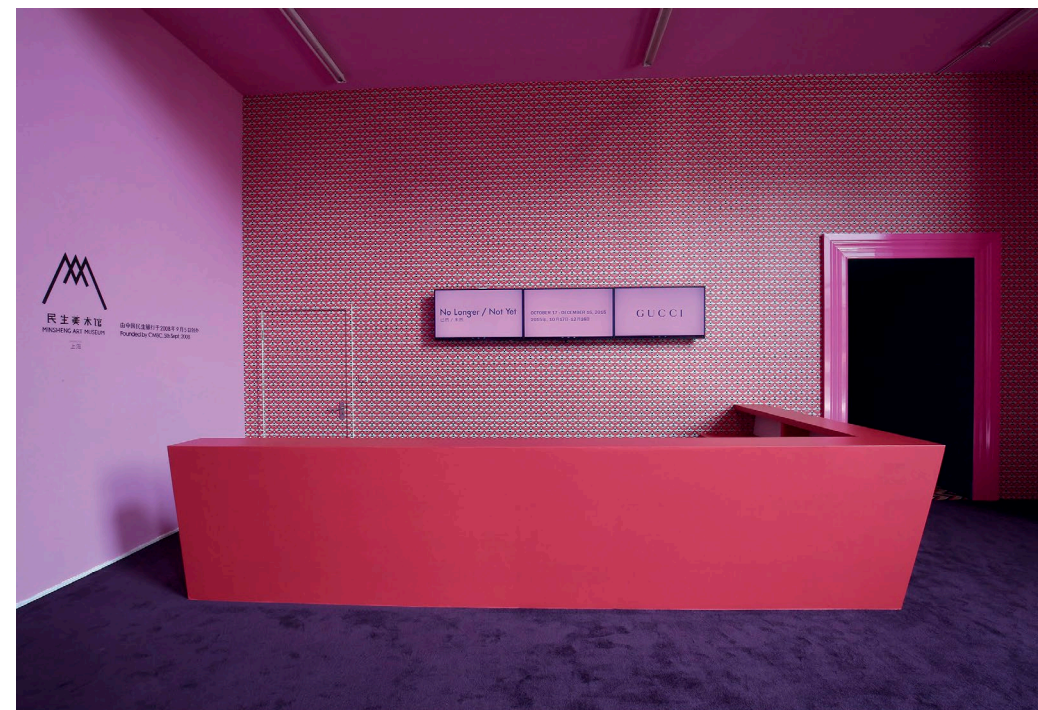




Katie Grand went with a pink-highlands oriental screen-printed jacquard coat with green fur cuffs from the S/S16 men's collection; and fashion stylist extraordinaire Tina Leung wore a double satin and lace bomber, and a black, nude and rose silk georgette and lace skirt. But the stars of the show were the exhibition rooms themselves: accompanied by a soundtrack selected by Steve Mackey (of Pulp fame) and sound designer John Gosling, wandering from room to room was a journey from one whimsical world to another. Some made pointed political statements, some educated viewers about the fashion industry, and some evoked playfulness—exactly how Michele wanted the exhibition to work, as a “reflection of my words”.

Curating for the exhibition was a new endeavour for both Michele and Grand, one that was initially “terrifying” for Grand as she felt it was “maybe out of her comfort zone”. In the past, her projects dealt more with historical archives and heritage, but for this exhibition, they were selecting modern artists whose works are relevant today, and would add their own dimension to Michele's vision. The end result has been a happy collabora-

Left
Katie Grand and
Alessandro Michele.



Left
Minsheng Museum:
exhibition lobby.

tion. “Katie and I had a lot of fun”, says Michele. “It’s something that we need because when you work in fashion, you have to do a lot and you have to work very quickly.” The focus, according to Michele, is firmly rooted in the present. “The future is like a beautiful dream, but what is really here now is more inspiring,” says Michele. “I needed to talk about the present, the contemporary.”

Still, one has to look back to move forward, and Michele drew early inspiration from the writings of modern-day Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His essay, “What is the Contemporary?” posits “those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. This ‘dys-chrony’ does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time [and place]... than in the city and the time in which he lives.” Being “contemporary” then, isn’t about being fashionable, but being in step with one’s own time, and yet maintaining a distance from it.

In applying this to the concept of beauty, Michele presents his view in the form of an androgynous painting by an unknown artist in Gucci Tian, one of the exhibition rooms. “Beauty is really an open space, the most beautiful thing is the one that you don’t fully understand,” he says. The painting, placed in a cube decorated with Gucci Dionysus blooms wallpaper, is illuminated by neon sticks around the frame and features an unknown boy dressed in women’s clothing. Michele stresses that he never meant to open up a conversation about gender roles, but rather question societal standards about how we view beauty, and perhaps, why so many rules exist that confine us to a specific way of being.

Whatever Michele comes up with in future Gucci collections, it’s safe to say that the fashion world is watching with bated breath as he slashes through the decades of focus on heritage and steers the ship elsewhere. “If you want to create something new in fashion, you probably have to stay in a little bit of a mad place,” says Michele, who considers himself a maximalist designer. “I tried to destroy everything and create something new. We changed it completely to push another language.” And like all good things, a solid answer will take time to emerge. Or perhaps the answer is an open-ended one, allowing room for more than one definition to be constructed. What’s certain for now is that Michele, who “gives a piece of his life when he works”, is still considering, still searching. “I’m not always very serious in life,” he says. “Sometimes, I feel a little bit like I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what is new. I just know that it isn’t one single way.”

No Longer/Not Yet will be on display at the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai until December 16, 2015.

A FEW WORDS WITH NO LONGER, NOT YET EXHIBITION ARTIST HELEN DOWNIE AKA UNSKILLED WORKER.



As an Instagram artist, were you nervous about showcasing your work in real life?

I wanted people to see it because I understand on Instagram that there are elements to my work that you can’t see. Everybody expected me to be, but I felt very happy to see my work displayed.

How involved were you in the concept of the room?

I wasn’t involved. Alessandro and Katie chose the red and the way the room looks, and I think they’ve completely understood my work. They were framed in New York and Alessandro specifically wanted antique frames. They left me back in July and I hadn’t seen them again until I came here. And I’m just so happy to see them again.

What’s your favourite medium to work in?

I work in chalk, ink, oil pastel, felt pen. I work in a very chaotic way and with no process. I’ve been painting for a very short time, two-and-a-half years, and I think I’m beginning to want to do much larger work.

Your signature is the big eyes in your portraits. Did you always mean for it to be that way?

I never meant it to be. I start with the eyes and they are always complete. And the rest of the painting is built around the eyes. They are looking at me as I paint around them. I have to have it that way. It’s something that I want to emanate from within a character. Each one has an emotion.

You were invited by Alessandro Michele and Katie Grand to document the collection. Did you work from photos or sketches?

When I go to a show, I put my phone away. I don’t take any photographs at all. I allow myself to trust that the information is going in. When I get home, I run to my studio and paint. It’s not premeditated; it’s just a feeling that I can’t put into words. Nothing in my life is ever planned. I didn’t plan for any of this to happen.

Every outfit in the portraits is a Gucci outfit. Which are some of your favourites?

The one in the dressing gown with the fur sleeves with the red around the neck. I love the red suit, and in the show, it was styled with a wreath that was very delicate and see-through. But you know, for me, his clothes are a dream. If I’m painting human beings, then those are the most beautiful clothes they could be dressed in.

Did you talk to Alessandro Michele and Katie Grand a lot about what you wanted to do?

I knew I was going to have to paint 35 paintings in a very short time, but nobody said, “We want them in this colour, we want them wearing this and that.” I was just told they needed the paintings and I did them.

What was it like painting Alessandro Michele?

It was lovely. Have you met him? He’s so unexpected. He’s very loving, very real and very kind. I wanted to show him my idea of Renaissance colours in a childish way—how a child would look at a Renaissance painting and copy the colours. Because of [how it reflects] the complete change that’s happening in Gucci because of Alessandro.