CHRISTOPHE LEMAIRE

INTERVIEW *Brooke Chroman*
ARCHIVAL PHOTO *Nicolas Sisto*
PORTRAIT *Kira Bunse*

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After amassing experience working under Yves Saint Laurent, Thierry Mugler and Christian Lacroix in the Eighties, Christophe Lemaire founded his eponymous fashion label in 1992. From the onset, Lemaire's line stood for masterfully simple, wearable, and impeccably crafted clothing. In 2000, Lemaire became chief-designer at Lacoste, where he helped to successfully revive the classic sportswear label for the next ten years. In 2010, he was approached by Hermès' artistic director, Pierre-Alexis Dumas, and offered one of the most prominent design jobs in the fashion industry as creative director of women's wear for the esteemed house. Taking the torch from his predecessor Jean Paul Gaultier could seem a daunting task, but Lemaire not only navigated the transition expertly, he re-infused the brand with a relaxed elegance that placed style over fashion, through an insistent focus on what could be described as the sophistication of simplicity. After the presentation of his celebrated new collection for Hermès in Spring 2014, we chatted with the designer on his way back from a peaceful break in the French Alps. Lemaire shared his thoughts on how clothing changes depending on one's environment, the beauty of uniforms, his memories of Yves Saint Laurent, and his views on the direction of the fashion industry today.

Hi Christophe, are you in Paris now?

No, I'm in the mountains on the road to the train station to go back to Paris.

What were you doing up there?

I was at Val d'Isère in the French Alps. We went there with our team to disconnect a little bit from the every day stress of Paris—talk, step back, and think about how we could improve things. We took the opportunity to breathe and ski also, so it was a very good break.

After having time to reflect, what did you decide, in terms of how you want to move forward or things you might want to change for the coming seasons?

Oh, well it's all very—it's like cooking, you know—it's nothing that I can really speak about. As we say in French its our *"cuisine"*—our own private way to cook.

I was just looking at the beautiful photos of the last collection from your own line and it seems that one of the qualities you stress is the protective aspect of clothing, which suggests that clothing is not only expressive, but that it can operate like a shield or a cocoon.

Well actually, that is the point. I'm glad you feel that, because I have always been interested in the intimate relationship we can have with clothes. The point is that every morning everybody has to dress, move, and go to work; and dressing up is of course a projection of ourselves, of our personality, but there's also a sensual relationship to the clothes. It's like a little home—our little home. Someone said that; I don't remember whom, but it's very true. We have to feel comfortable in every sense of the word—comfortable and functional. We have to be able to move in it. And I do think we feel protected. So yes, there is definitely this dimension in the way Sarah-Linh [Christophe's partner] and I work on the collection.

Are there any aspects of modern life that have made you approach designing clothing differently?

The question of modernity is an interesting one. Some people are buying differently now and are much more concerned with quality and timelessness. I think people have never been so informed; they know exactly where to buy what they want. They have more choices, so we have to be very demanding regarding what we offer and remain singular. So maybe now there is a change in the fashion system. It is encouraging to see people start to wonder where things come from and how they are made. The late Seventies and early Eighties were very modern eras that are very inspiring to me, where designers were proposing a kind of emancipating vision, talking to women as smart and independent. I have a feeling that in the late Eighties and Nineties, it was more regressive than progressive and I am not very comfortable with this era's vision of modernity.

Does that quality that you're pointing out from the late Eighties have to do with the rise of consumerism and "labelitis" during that time? Or where do you see that regression begin?

When fashion started to be all about the shows, top models and big photographers, and it was all about image, it became artificial. I start to have a problem when fashion is all about sensation and making noise to attract the media; when the media system is pushing the designer to go to extremes. Of course it's important for a designer to say something, but talking loud is not the finality of the job. So I'm pretty glad there is now a change as well as a critical reaction to it. I was never comfortable with that.

It seems like a lot of criticism of fashion as spectacle started to emerge around the late Sixties in France, for example, with Guy Debord and the Situationists. Is that sort of thinking interesting to you?

Yes, of course. I'm very interested in Debord's critique of consumerism, and he's not the only one I'm interested in. Fashion was evolving the same way that the society of consumerism was evolving, also the media and magazines, and the way advertising became more and more powerful, and

changed the point of view of magazines, and the way fashion was conceived. It's kind of taboo to say, "I don't like modernity" or "I don't like this modernity," but I think it's okay to say so. I actually don't feel reactionary. I don't think it was better before, I simply think we should look for more ethics—it's a basic thing . . . I'm not so excited by technology, or the race for technological progress at all costs, to be more precise.

Has convenience caused us to lose some of our critical thinking?

It's just the way we are conditioned. I don't think technology is a problem in itself, but we are conditioned to be spectators. And the way information is conceived, and advertising . . . I mean, there's so much advertising, it's a real pollution. We are just conditioned to be consumers and not free thinkers, and that's a problem. That's why we expect to address women that are free thinkers, who are not slaves to fashion, who are not fashionistas, who care for style but with a distance from the circus. We are very happy and very proud and it's deeply satisfying that we have more and more people coming to us saying, "Yes, we want that different approach and different way of showing fashion." We try to design smart clothes with quality and refinement, but just with a bit of common sense. Back to the basics, back to real life, you know. *[Laughing]*

In your early days you worked for Yves Saint Laurent and Thierry Mugler. What was it in their clothes that you saw as empowering to women, and how did you see this kind of intelligence carried out in their clothing?

Saint Laurent was always a very strong reference for me. He was a genius designer, of course, with a great sense of proportion and style, but probably even deeper there was a deep tenderness for women. He always tried to understand women's insecurities and to help them to feel more confident. So there is this tenderness and approach that is not only about the ego and "look what I've done"—it is always about the woman at the end of the day. He was designing to make them feel stronger—with the understanding of a certain ease, of course. I like ease, which was always in Saint Laurent. It's very sophisticated and easy at the same time.

Let's move from talking about this particular sense of ease to a sense of place. Let's talk about clothing's relationship to place. Do you wear the same clothes when you go to Paris or Japan or in the mountains? How do different environments necessitate different types of clothing for you?

Well, that's very interesting. I do believe in uniforms. I like the concept of a personal uniform: the idea of having a few clothes, which are really myself, which suit me, and which I enjoy wearing. And I noticed that with people I admire, people who have style—from my point of view—there is a certain consistency in what they're wearing. But having said that, I also noticed that you feel different wearing the same outfit in Paris or Tokyo because you feel that the environment is different. The way people look at you is different. The cultural background is different. So sometimes it's true that, if you're sensitive to that, you will realize that wearing the same shoes or the same pants says something different.

Absolutely. And maybe that also has to do with the fact that there's a very different sense of time in different places. For example, time means something very different in India than it does in New York. So because fashion is always in relation to time, has your understanding of time changed as you've been traveling more and more?

Yes, of course. Time is the real luxury. When I'm traveling, I enjoy not having plans. With Sarah-Linh, my girlfriend, we like to be very slow, not pushing too much, because this is the best way to be sensitive to what's happening around you, and to understand those little things; to understand the culture, to understand what's really happening. In French we have this word *"flâneur."*

Like Baudelaire described: the man who wanders the streets with nowhere particular to go.

Exactly. So you know! That's it, you got it.

So you like to travel more in the style of the flâneur.

Yes. Of course I don't have much time to do this, but even if I have a small amount of time . . . when I was younger I put more pressure on myself to be active, and to see as much as I could, and I realize more and more that it's more important to feel the moment.

What was your childhood like?

I grew up in France. I also grew up in Africa a little bit because my mother went to work at the university in Dakar, so I spent three years there. I realize now that I might have been quite influenced by the African relationship to time; the way to move in space. And then compared to France: My mother's family is very bohemian, from the east of France. My grandfather was Russian, he was a writer, a painter, and very artistic. And on my father's side, it's much more Paris bourgeoisie. My uncle was the director of French Vogue in the Seventies, so I have these funny memories of vacations at my grandmother's house, of course in the south of France, and there was some drama with this uncle and my aunt chasing each other around. He was a character, typical of the Seventies jet set; very snobbish, but funny. Then I was in boarding school for seven years.

Ah, so you got accustomed to uniforms there.

Yeah, totally. I had to wear a uniform, only for weekends, not everyday.

Only for weekends?

Yeah, it was the Seventies, so it was more casual. I am very much for uniforms at school. I think it's very democratic actually. And also it's psychologically positive, because once you put on the uniform you put yourself in the psychological state of being a pupil. There is something very func-

tional about them, but there's also something quite dignified. I think Yohji Yamamoto said something like that, that he likes to wear black because it reminds him of the craftsman's uniform. I think he was also obsessed with August Sander pictures . . . Wearing a uniform also means that I'm assuming who I am, and what I'm doing, and dignity is very important I think. For me, elegance is very much linked to dignity.

I think we have some misconceptions today about dignity and luxury being hand in hand, and I wonder if we can connect dignity more to work rather than luxury?

Yes, maybe. I don't know what to say about that. I'm not sure that luxury, as it is, and how media and luxury brands convey it, is really talking about dignity. It's just talking about a kind of artificial elitism, and it's very much about money. Especially today where the economy is pushing people to not really think about what they're supposed to do. They're asked just to do a job but not necessarily given a reason to be proud of it.

It seems like there are very few houses today, like Hermès and your design house, that take the time to preserve old ways of making and crafting a garment.

Well, I'm very lucky to work with Hermès because there's a very strong work ethic there. Of course, there is a culture of excellence. Marketing comes after products. It's unique today. In the philosophy of working, it's all about the products and style rather than the word "luxury." ◆