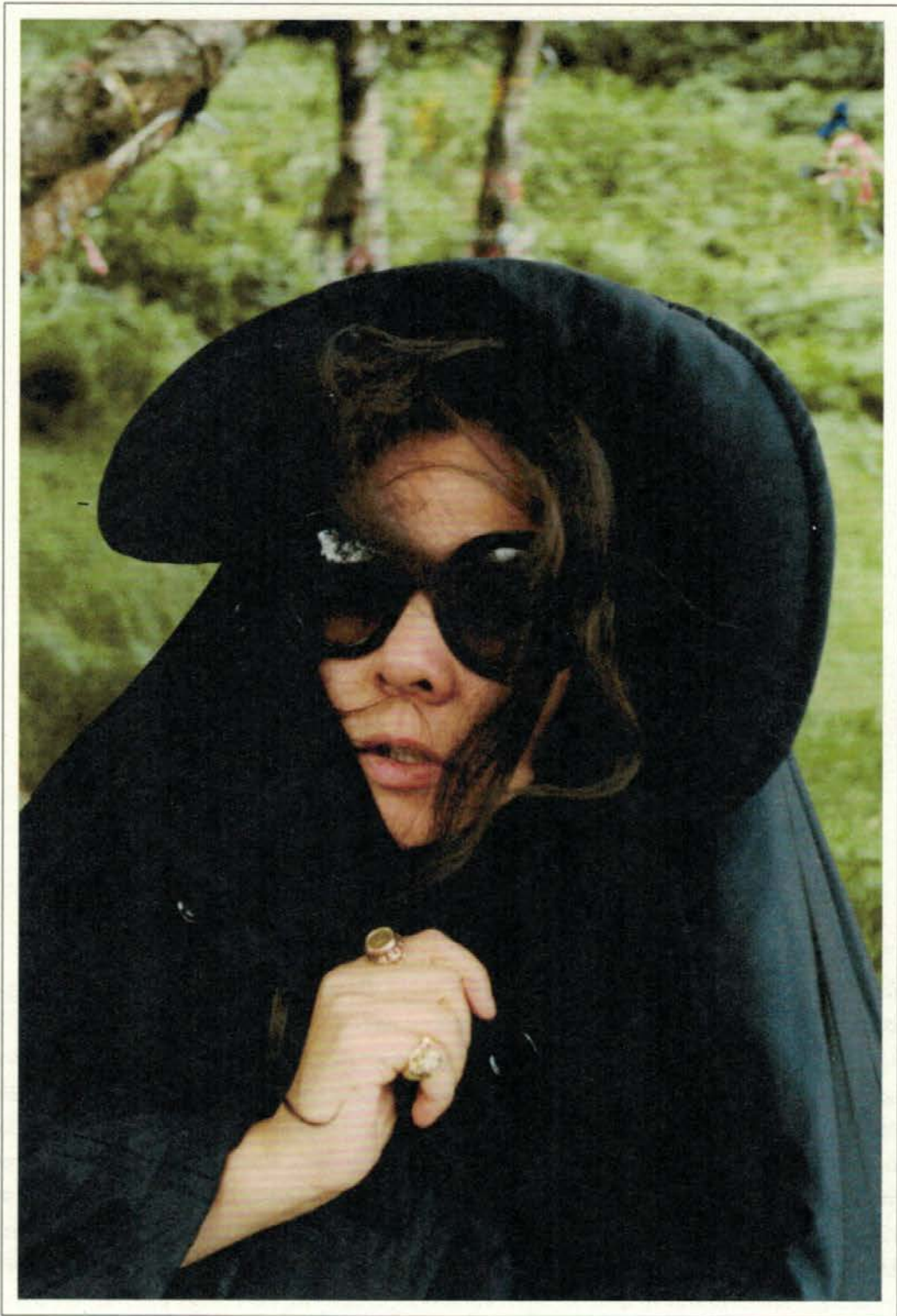


SIMONE ROCHA

INTERVIEW *Brooke Grabiec*

PHOTOGRAPHY *Jacob Lillis*



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We first encountered her designs in 2012, in Tokyo's Dover Street Market. A semitransparent top looked as if it had white yarn laminated between its tulle shell, utterly tactile, delicate, beautiful. With such a proliferation of clothing today, it's rare that a single garment stops you, makes you look, and then look again. We wrote the name "Simone Rocha" on a scrap of paper, a little beacon of hope that stayed around our office as an idea, an inspiration. Something special was going on—something that looked like the future. From brogues with Perspex soles to demure lace dresses, Rocha's designs locate power within tropes of femininity. She combines the traditional functionalism of early Chanel, the sensitivity of Louise Bourgeois, the futurism of Prada, and maybe most poignantly, bears the influence of her father John Rocha's former design house. Half Irish, half Hong Kongese, Rocha talks to us about the impact of these cultures on her work, French markets, and the effects of having a baby on her design process. On a trip through Ireland, she is photographed for *The Travel Almanac* by her friend and artistic collaborator, Jacob Lillis.

Hi Simone, you've recently had a baby. Congratulations! How are you doing?

Yeah! I had a little girl a few months ago—so I'm okay. I'm a little tired, but I'm alive, so all good!

She has an amazing name too. How did it come about?

Yeah, her name is Valentine Ming Maclachlan. My boyfriend's last name is Maclachlan and my middle name is actually Ming Ming. She was kind of a surprise and just came from this idea of love, so we wanted to call her "Little Love" and ended up calling her Valentine. She's very nice.

Has your experience of motherhood informed your approach to designing?

It made me feel a lot more sensitive this season. In particular the collection I just did, we coined it the "Mothering Smothering" collection because it was when I was going through pregnancy and having my first baby. It started with this idea of how the fabric could swaddle the body the way you would swaddle a baby, that was how a lot of the silhouettes started taking shape, so it was quite influential and a narrative of the collection. From a personal point of view it's made me take everything a little more seriously because you suddenly have a responsibility, and you want to make better work. You suddenly start thinking about what you want to leave behind, which is super morbid . . .

Another interviewer once asked you,

"Who's your client?" to which you replied that you find designing with a certain woman in mind a weird concept. It seems important that you're talking about a woman's identity as something that's constantly evolving rather than fixed.

Totally! It's evolving, it's collaborative. There's a strength in not alienating anybody and I think that's really important today. For example I'm Irish so I'm European, and I'm also living in London where there's been the EU referendum, which I'm really disappointed about. It highlighted that some people unfortunately think they can go it alone, and I don't believe that's right today, in so many fields. In fashion it's not a one woman show, I have a wonderful team. I work with wonderful people and it's global, not just located in one city—so I find Brexit very upsetting. In one way you're angry, but this makes you more passionate and really want to make beautiful things, and to show strength in a positive way.

In your work cultural codes of femininity such as pearls, lace, pinks or very demure cuts of garments become individualistic and powerful. Do you think visual embodiments of power for women are changing?

I think there is a lot more power in personality. I love taking those codes, and making them strong. I only wear skirts. I like to wear my hair in plaits. I like to feel quite womanly, but still want to hold the power, and I think that is a way a lot of women feel today. There's so much going on in the world today, you need to be





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confident in yourself and feel good.

You’ve opened your own shop that could be thought of as an installation rather than a traditional store. What’s important for you about the environments you create for your clothing?

It all started with the show. I’ve gone to shows my whole life because my dad was a designer, and I got an unbelievable emotional high from it. It was such a privilege to come and sit down and look at all your emotions through clothes for ten minutes. I’ve always thought, if people are coming here I really want to give them an experience. Whether they feel sad, elated, angry—it’s about creating an environment and a mood. For example I’ve done a lot of shows in churches just because of the smell, or because it’s quiet or dark. I think it’s really special to be able to do that as part of your job. An extension of that was a shop in Dover Street Market. The first one I did was when they bought my first collection in 2012 and gave me the window and said, “You can do whatever you want.” I didn’t want to just put clothes in there—I was thinking I’d really like to build a lane, like the one that was behind my house because that’s what inspired the show. So we created this big green foliage sculpture. If someone gets that feeling, they can go upstairs and see the clothes. I’ve continued working with DSM in that

way; they’ve been really supportive and collaborative. When I decided to open my own store, I wanted to highlight all the influences that my collections come from, through different installations, collaborations with people, having art by people I respect in the store . . . that’s a constant influence. It was really about the idea that anyone who walked in the door—whether they want to buy something or not, or just come in and say hello to the staff—that they just had an experience.

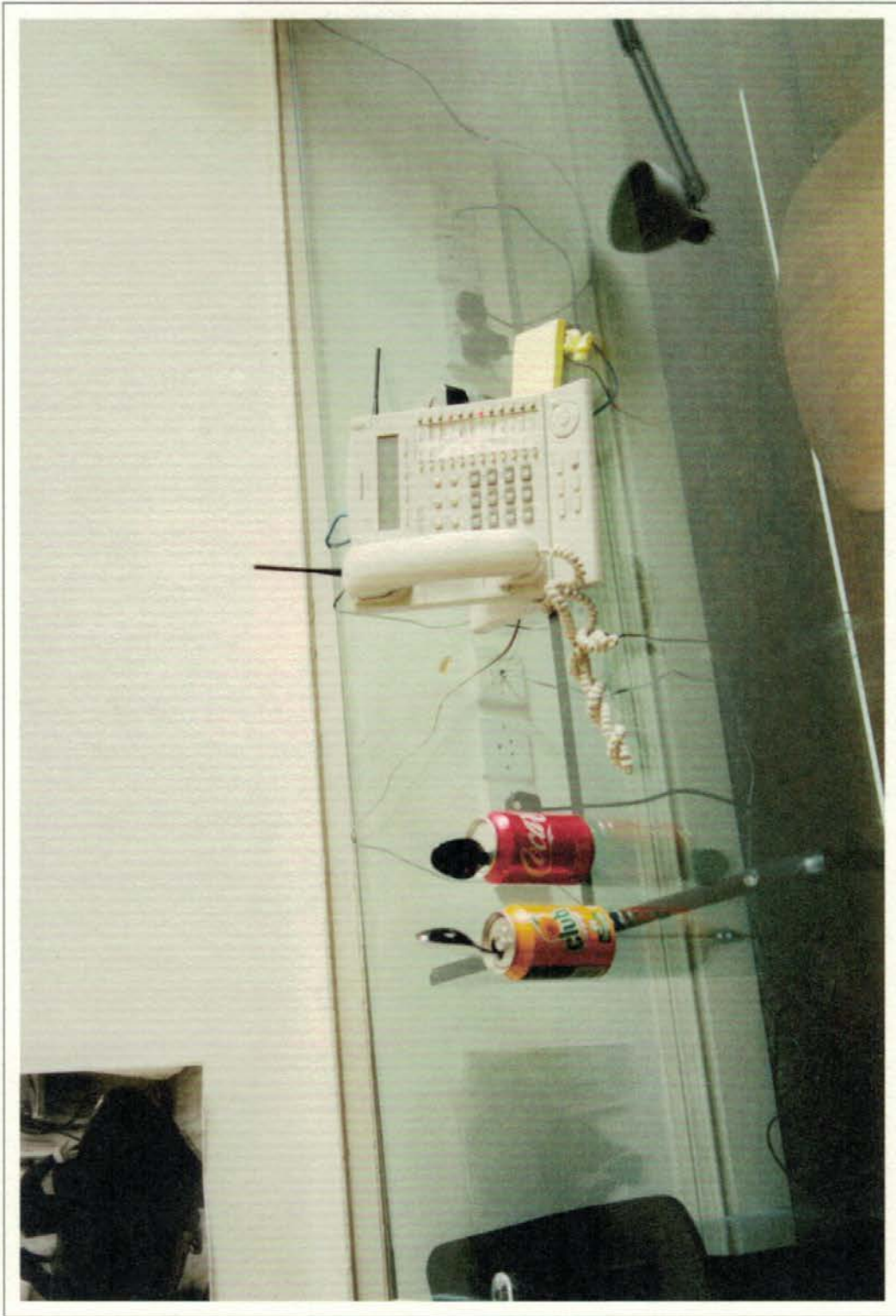
What was the environment like growing up in Ireland?

I loved it . . . it felt very small, you could walk everywhere. I grew up in a village, in the centre of town, and played with all the kids on the street in the lane behind my house. My mother is from a town called Birr in the countryside and my father moved to Dublin and opened a shop called China Town, and set up their studio. He’s originally from Hong Kong. As a child I remember going to Birr in the summers and running through the fields, rolling off hay bales, and going to the chipper . . .

Do you remember your first experience of foreignness?

A boy on my road said I was his first Chinese friend. I was like, “Nah, I’m only half Chinese.”







Did you rebel through fashion at all?

I used to wear a lot of my mom's clothes. I would steal her Comme des Garçons brogues and Prada loafers, so I just borrowed everything from her. I used to wear everything on the reject rail from my dad's office . . . tie the reject skirts up under my arms and wear them as dresses. I was very much integrated into all of that, but then I did have the disco short-skirt situation where they were like, "No!" I would dye my hair every color under the sun, bleach it, pink, purple . . . I think that upset my dad a little bit.

Both Ireland and Hong Kong have influenced your work; has your relationship with them changed since you started designing?

Yes! I think now I have this hardcore romanticized vision of Ireland and then I think, "Oh it's just because I'm away and not there all the time." But then I go back and it's all true! It smells amazing, the people are amazing . . . it's not fashion driven at all, but that's what's so special about it. People just wear clothes because they like them, or for a practical reason, because it's always raining. Now when I go home, I'm much more appreciative of all the little things that I didn't notice so much growing up. I feel very fortunate to be from such a great little island, I have to admit.

Which other environments changed the way you think about design?

I spend a lot of time in markets. I really love trolling through markets in France, whether in Paris or in the South. I love all

the vintage lace and smocks, but back in the day people were so tiny! I can't help but buy everything and try it on. Nothing ever fits . . . but looking at vintage pieces really influences my design, how I can find new ways of designing and manipulate them to make into clothes today.

Do you have any one belonging that feels particularly meaningful to you?

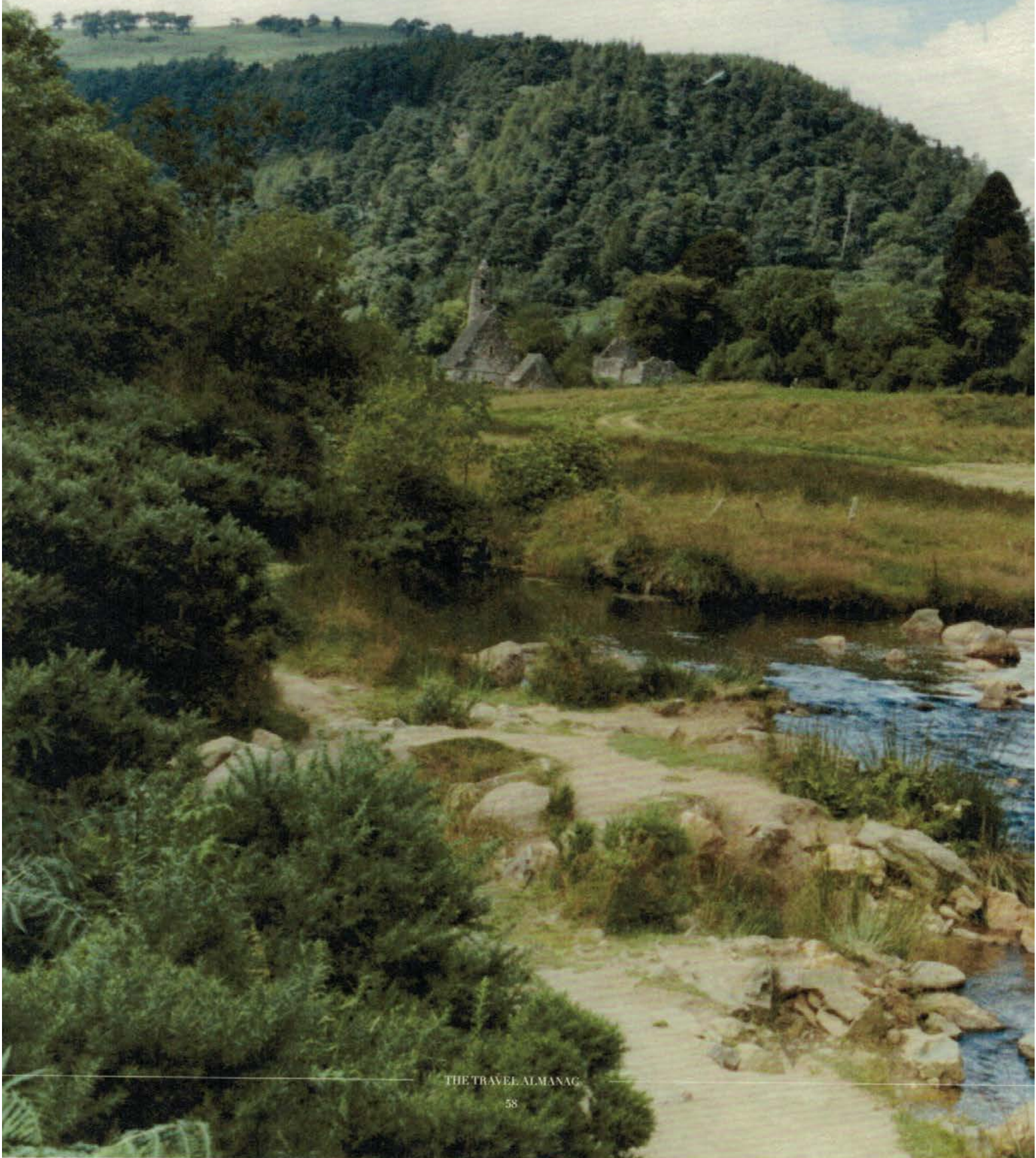
My granny's gold rings. I was given them when she passed away a few years ago. She was a very unapologetic, strong woman who meant a lot to me.

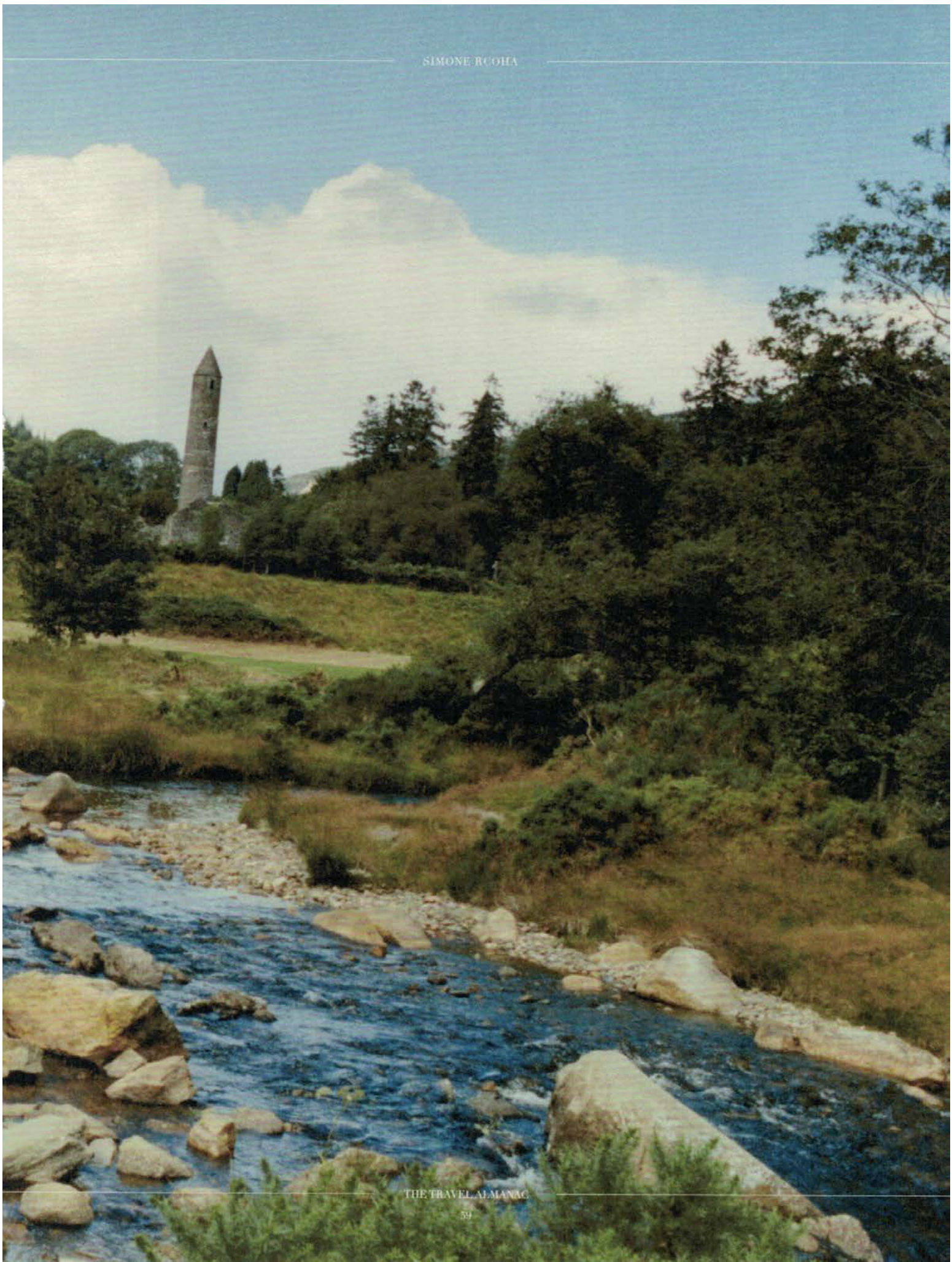
You've spoken about the poetry in the way elderly women in Hong Kong dress. Why do you think the elderly Hong Kongese and Chinese have some of the best style in the world? I see it too here in New York, in Chinatown!

I think they have an amazing heritage of style. When it goes back all of these generations, it's just beautiful—there's beautiful colours, fabrics, there's a lot of symbolism, whether it's flowers or animals, it always comes from a really nice heritage. They're very proud. My family for example are really proud of the way they put themselves together—it's not fancy, but there's a natural pride and that's what makes it so fascinating. They put things on because they like them. They have absolutely no desire to wear something because it's trend driven.

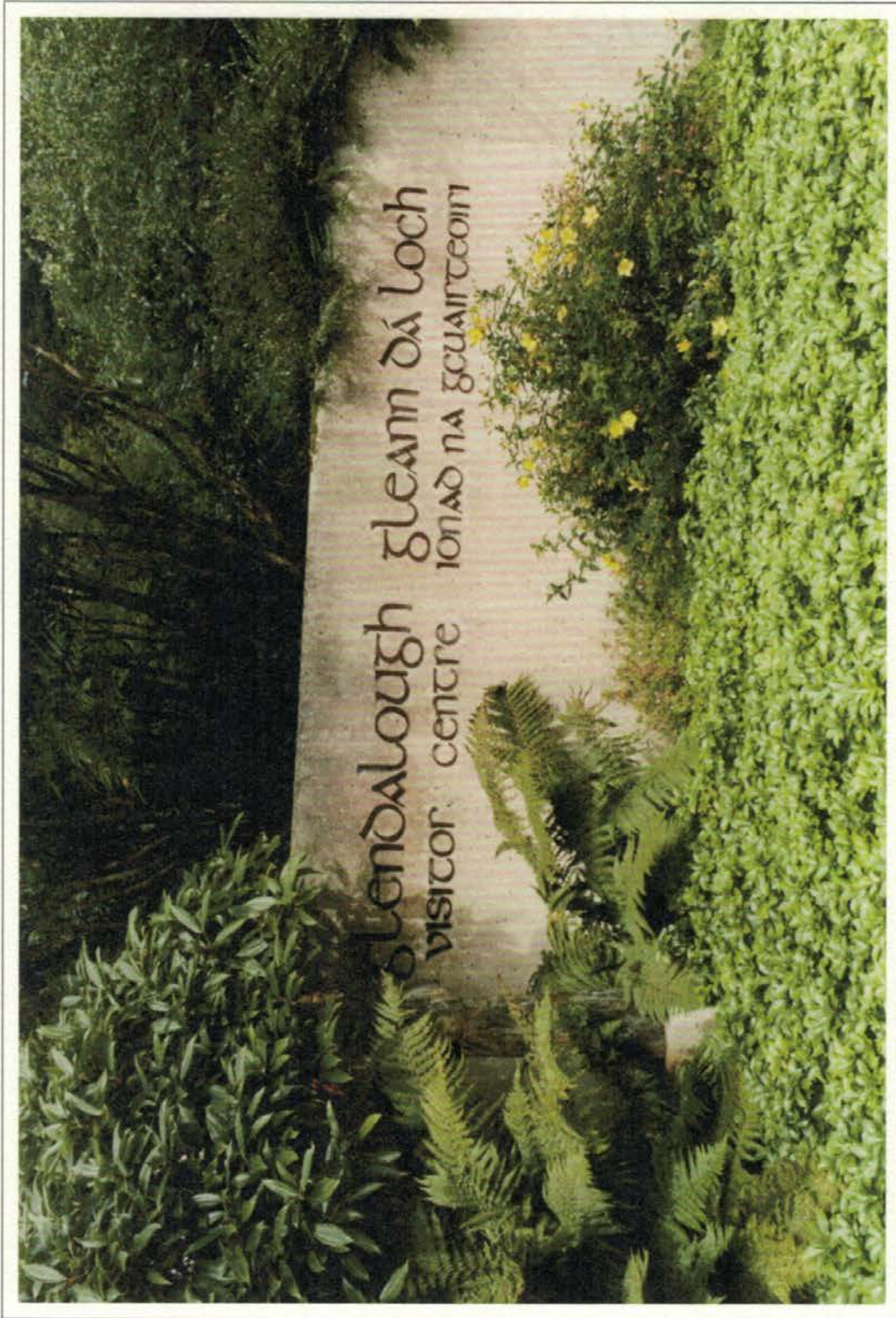
What are your departure and arrival rituals?

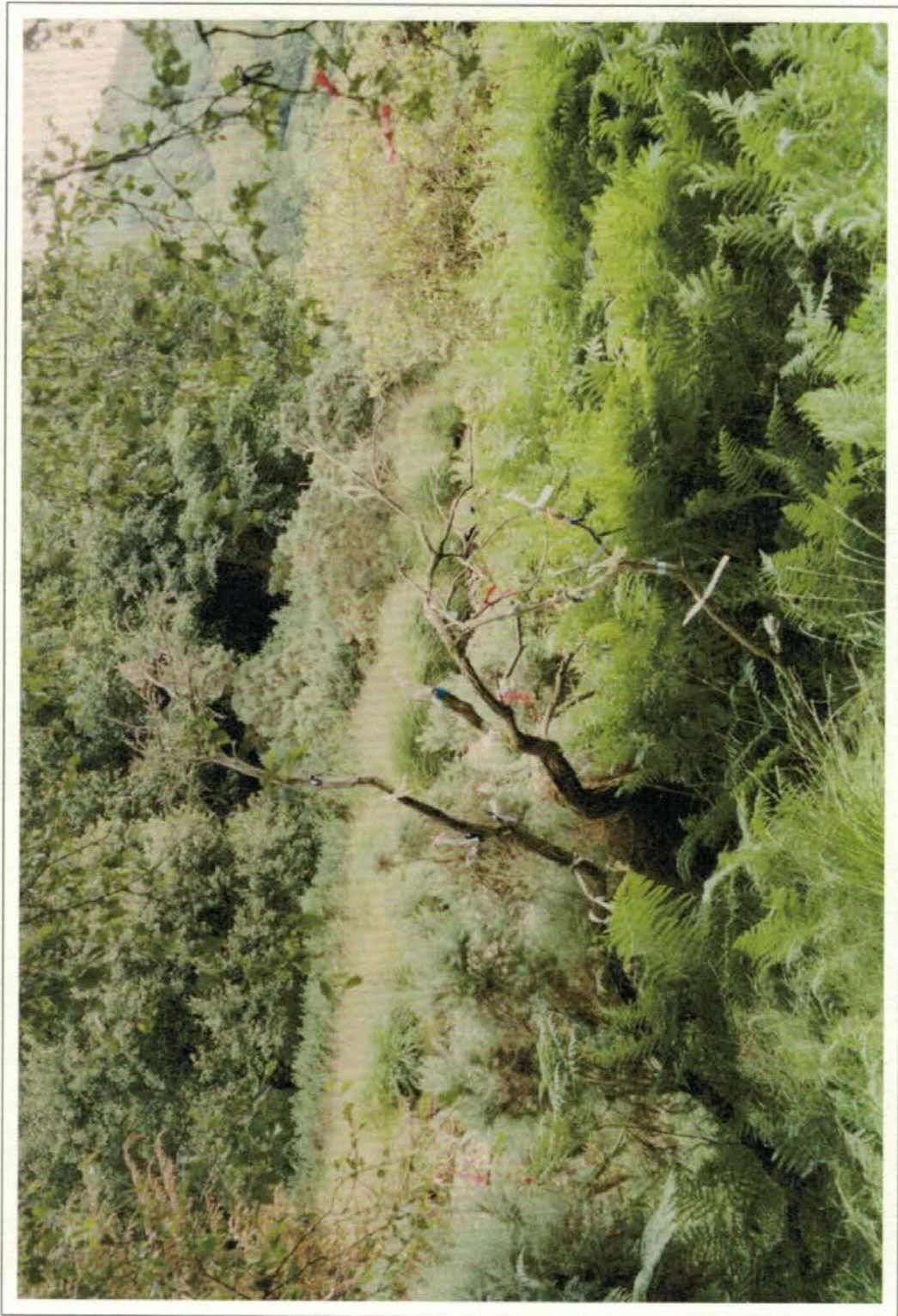
I really like to pack at least a day in advance. I just started using Muji squares which fit

















*“The first time I went to Tokyo I was 16 and totally influenced. I was convinced I was in *Lost in Translation*. I started dressing like a Japanese schoolgirl with knee socks and bows in my hair and pink blusher.”*

perfectly into my hard case. I also take my backpack with everything—passport, book, moisturizer, money and headphones the night before, and leave what I am going to wear on a chair. When we arrive somewhere I look immediately for the closest food market. I always feel like I have my bearings if I’m walking around with some fruit in a plastic bag for my hotel room. We also always look for any antique or bric-a-brac markets and if we have any friends in that town.

Is it important for you to take breaks from working? Where do you prefer to holiday?

I try! I spend a lot of time in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. We have a little family house there and I’ve been going there for over ten years. We go to the market to get our vegetables every day, it’s really . . . that would be the best damn time. Also there’s the Matisse Chapel on the way to Paul-de-Vence if you’re going to Colombe d’Or; there’s the Picasso museum; there’s the Eileen Gray house; there’s an amazing house designed by Jean Cocteau, who also has a tiny chapel in Villefranche. I love going down there. And then every Easter I go to Asia to see my family or travel around . . . I love going to Japan. The first time I went to Tokyo I was 16 and totally influenced. I was convinced I was in *Lost in Translation*. I started dressing like a Japanese schoolgirl with knee socks and bows in my hair and pink blusher. I would also bring

home lots of Japanese magazines. I still wear knee socks today.

What concerns do you have as a designer that you feel are specific to our time period?

I worry a bit that everything is disposable, because there’s so much fashion, so many shows, collections, Instagram and whatever: people see it once and then they don’t care, they don’t need to feel it in the hand or try it on. For me that’s a concern, that things are becoming predominantly visual . . .

How do you work with that?

I think you’ve just got to make it worth it . . . [laughs]. So when people get to the store they’re like, “Oh my god, it’s even better than I anticipated.” And also not to show too much. We don’t go crazy releasing everything six months before. We just do enough. So hopefully it’s worth the wait. •

BARCELONA

