

HUSSEIN CHALAYAN GRAPHIC MAN

Embracing Fashion's New Age

interview : terri peters



"Suitcase Dress," *After Words*, F/W Collection, 2000

From his *After Words* collection in 2000, where he shocked Fashion Week by sending a model down the runway to transform a suitcase into a telescopic dress, to his "Airborne" flexible, flickering, LED-studded video dress seven years later, Hussein Chalayan's work is consistently controversial and thought-provoking. And this year, the 38-year-old British/Turkish Cypriot—considered one of the most experimental fashion designers in the world and twice named British Designer of the Year—was the subject of an enormously successful solo show at the Design Museum in London.

Chalayan's creations blur the edges between fashion and art, as well as tackling larger societal and cultural themes such as identity, technology, the speed of modern life and urban alienation. Dubbed "architectural" and "futuristic," his *S/S 09 Inertia* collection draws on a digital aesthetic of frozen movement and blobby forms, incorporating smashed glass and vibrant neon colors. *Earthbound*, his *A/W 09* collection, is less overtly about technology and more about texture and shifts in scale. He uses neoprene, rubber and cardboard to contextualize urban materials and patterns, creating a collection of flexible, body-conscious designs that reveal his unique take on the possibilities of manifesting urban ideals at the scale of the body.

Chalayan divides his time between preparing four collections a year (autumn-winter and spring-summer, as well as two pre-collections) and his new post as creative director at Puma. In the midst of work on a new, as yet unnamed collection for *S/S 10*, the visionary designer speaks to *Clear* about the quest for newness, technologies that are changing how we dress, and what we'll be wearing in 100 years.

How do you approach design with technology?

I start with the idea, and, of course, there is an understanding about how it is going to relate to the body and integrate with the fabric. But I wouldn't say that I often do all these things myself. For example, for something I might need a mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer and a computer programmer. I come up with the idea and then I bring in the specialists to actually do things with technology. Technology is the only way that we can do things that are actually new, because in our field everything has been done. But technology allows you to create a new understanding of what clothing could be; it allows you to discover new territory. I think I'm like a storyteller, in a way. I use technology to be able to tell these stories.

"I think often we are drawn to things that defy gravity."

You directed *Place to Passage*, a film about futuristic, wearable architecture. How do you see the relationship between architecture and fashion?

It's the idea of questioning what dress means. How far can you extend the whole idea of a capsule around the body? And then what does it mean if there is a building that completely satisfies all your needs? Would there be a need to dress at all? What I do is part exploration and part suggestion as to how something could be looked at in a certain way. A lot of my work is about perception.

Do you see the idea of creating an environment—your idea of the dress as a capsule around the body—as extending to ecological or environmental design? Is this a part of how you approach sustainability?

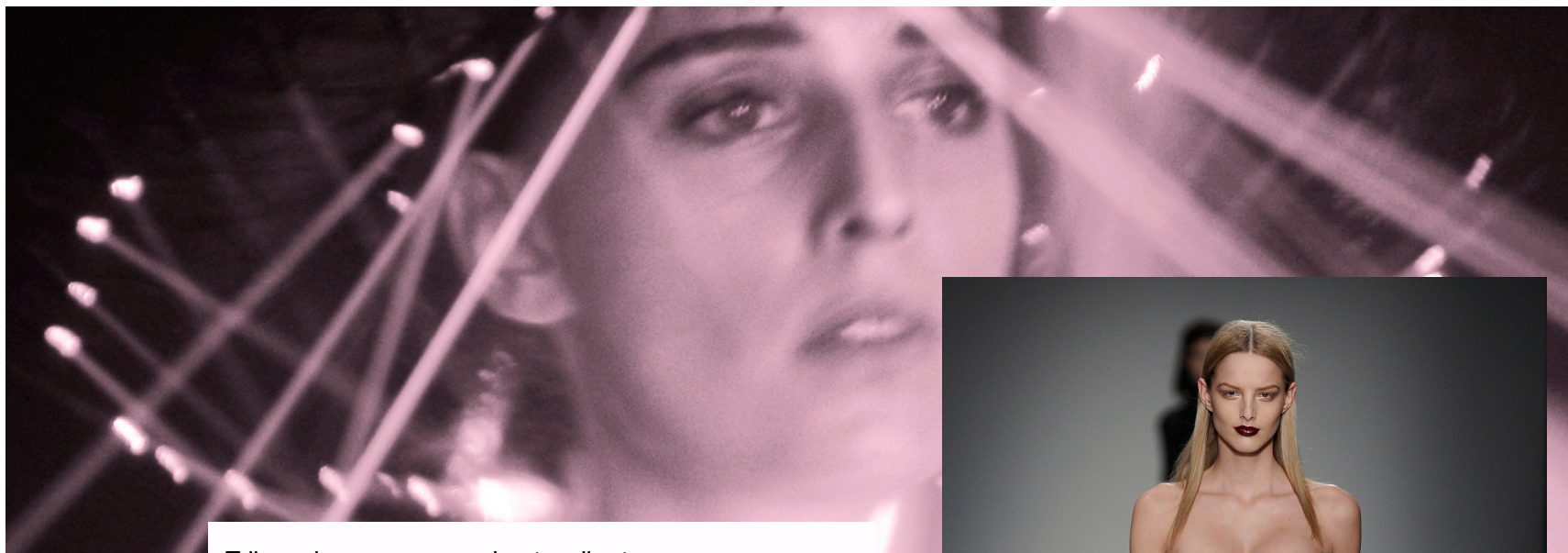
Sustainability is just a part of our lives now. It's just like oxygen—you don't even think about it. I think the side that interests me more is how it could be done creatively. It's about how restrictions can be used in a creative way to prolong the life of the things that we have.

What do you think are the major technological advances—whether in reducing waste or increasing efficiency—that have changed the way you design or how the fashion industry works?

Definitely, for a start, laser cutting. It has partly revolutionized cutting because it means you can have raw finishing on materials that have synthetic fibers in them. You can cut it raw and not worry about finishing it. You can also cut en masse as well using lasers. I think that's one thing. Then there are new materials that can be molded, and seamless technology and, obviously, nanotechnology ... But a lot of this stuff has to do with fibers—they don't actually feel good because they are the equivalent of computers when they were actually the size of rooms (and now they are the size of a wallet). They haven't evolved yet. So these things don't feel good yet because they are still like substances that are on surfaces, and they feel that way. They make materials feel hard and undesirable, so I think, in a way, that's just going to get more and more refined, a bit like how computers got more and more refined. It's the same thing.



"Suitcase Dress," *After Words*, F/W Collection, 2000



Tell me about your recent *Inertia* collection.

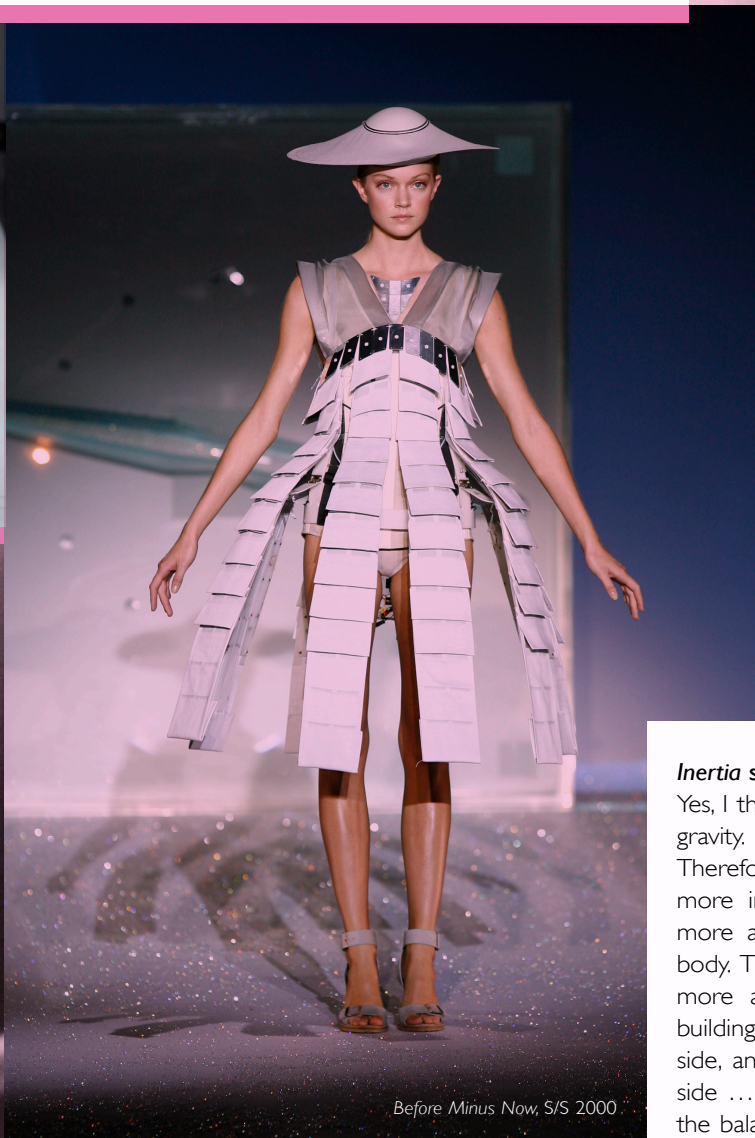
Inertia was a lot to do with the speed of our lives ... the idea of the crash as a result of speed, because of the way and the speed [with] which things are happening—on all levels. So, it was the idea of the body becoming the event and of the cause and effect of speed.



Runway F/W09



Runway F/W09



Before Minus Now, S/S 2000

Inertia seems to be about defying gravity...

Yes, I think often we are drawn to things that defy gravity. We think of them as more impossible. Therefore, we find them attractive because the more impossible something seems, at times the more attractive it seems—including parts of the body. The more gravity-defying something is, the more attractive you find it. It's the same with buildings that feel like they are floating. There is that side, and then there is actually the compositional side ... I think, for me, looking at a landscape and the balance you want to see there has to do with how things are set in gravity.

“I think I’m like a storyteller in a way. I use technology to be able to tell these stories.”

– Hussein Chalayan



When you look to the future—one year, five years, that’s easy—but what about 100 years? Where do you see the future of fashion?

For a start, I think it’s going to be much more about whether you need to dress at all. Maybe there will be alternative things to dress, where you might be able to spray on a garment or have a garment that’s made of light. Or it might go the other way, and it might be completely about reminiscing as well and going back to Edwardian costume. But above all, I think it’s going to be a combination of things, and it will be less about everyone looking the same. It will be more about this hybrid element that comes from globalization.