

# Giles

## DEACON IS RED HOT

*THE PURVEYOR OF GLAMOROUS CLOTHES COVETED BY FILM STARS GIVES US A GLIMPSE OF HIS NEW COLLECTION IN THE MAKING*

*BY BRITT COLLINS*

*PHOTOGRAPHY DAMIEN FRY*

Hidden in a quiet corner, Giles Deacon is like a mad inventor dreaming up the unexpected, bizarre and downright sinister. 'Welcome to my lair,' he says, emerging from his cubbyhole behind piles of glossy coffee-table art books and a curious assortment of fluffy animals. A big bear of a man in a lime-green sweatshirt, jeans and his trademark aviator glasses, he is warm and earthy and reputedly leads a very ordinary life – a world apart from the icy froideur and self-absorption of your average fashion designer.

His low-key East London studio – a second-storey space in a Brick Lane warehouse where a dozen assistants are working away – is artfully messy, covered in a sea of fabrics and fashion sketches amid colourful rails and mannequins in floor-skimming, fairy-tale dresses. Among the highlights are a black gothic affair as delicate as a spider's web and a ghostly Miss Havisham-style gown of shredded chiffon that looks as if it's been salvaged from a fire. 'That was just

one of several dresses we set on fire,' he says nonchalantly – and it would later feature in his London Fashion Week show.

'We made it for a shoot for LOVE magazine this weekend. I know it sounds like a feral concept. The idea came from a game when you ask, "What would you take if your house was burning down?"' he explains with a glint of his offbeat, sometimes pitch-black humour. 'I imagined this world of someone beautiful in a stately house on fire. So we have this imaginary character whose home is burning down – which we've based on Hatfield House in Hertfordshire, where Queen Elizabeth I lived ▶

**'THE SHREDDED CHIFFON GOWN LOOKS AS IF IT'S BEEN SALVAGED FROM A FIRE. THE IDEA CAME FROM A GAME WHEN YOU ASK, "WHAT WOULD YOU TAKE IF YOUR HOUSE WAS BURNING DOWN?"'**

CATWALK PHOTOGRAPHY DEBBIE BRAGG





Black Vagrant cocktail dress from Deacon's gothic-inspired S/S 2007 collection



for a time. It's a stunning property with a rich interior and that leads us on to the main theme of the burning and then to other themes, such as the tapestries and the filigree work, so we get this kind of aged feel, but with a modern slant.'

This is a man best known for his unique sense of playfulness and subversiveness loved by couturiers, clients and magazine editors: he has had monkeys, spiders and snakes running across his collections, made handbags in the shape of baby dinosaurs, and shown fabulously surreal swan headpieces and dresses covered with prints of darkness of Bambis with their heads cut off. One entire wall of his studio resembles a teenager's bedroom with posters of cute bunnies, kittens and hamsters, sparking a conversation of his love of animals and the natural world from which he draws inspiration. His latest pieces, which would be unveiled during London Fashion Week at the romantic, chandeliered Stationers' Hall, are 'very textural' and inspired by medieval and religious art, nature – fire, ice and winter frost – and burning houses.

Fashion, he says, was never part of the grand plan. 'It was never a calling from the age of three or anything creepy. In another life, I probably would have, well definitely, done something creative, maybe animation or film work or, failing that, marine biology or zoo keeping. Or, you know, I'd have been a flea picker – something like that.'

His childhood was largely solitary but happy. He was neither rich nor poor, growing up in a remote part of the Lake District, where his father worked in agricultural sales and his mother was a housewife. He spent much of his time alone, drawing or roaming around the countryside. 'There was an interesting mix of landowners' kids and rough gangster kids from Newcastle. I found it all very stimulating.'

While scabbling around for any college that would take him, he gravitated towards art school at the suggestion of his mother. At Central Saint Martins, London, Deacon was among the brightest generation of homegrown talent – Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Stella McCartney and superstylist Katie Grand who, for a time, was his girlfriend and remains his great friend and collaborator.

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, it took him a while to start his own label. He was keen to explore the world. 'I wanted to gather experience at other fashion houses. First I went to Paris to Jean-Charles de Castelbajac. I enjoyed working with him, as he was an interesting character and, with his imaginative designs, is possibly the French counterpart to Vivienne Westwood whom I've always admired. In the 70s, Castelbajac also lived with Malcolm McLaren for a while in Paris. During my ten years at Castelbajac, Bottega Veneta, Gucci and others, I learned to adapt

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to various worlds. I worked with the most diverse people and learned that there are no good or bad methods. Just because one or other designer is commercially more successful doesn't mean anything. I'm only interested in the feeling of satisfaction at the end of the workday. I had a few daunting experiences with fashion hierarchies, where one person has the say and all the others are terrorised. Pressure is not inspiring. Working with nice people in a positive environment is vital.'

It wasn't long before Deacon hotfooted it back to London, lured by the passion, creativity and originality there. Since showing his mesmerising debut collection at London Fashion Week in February 2004, he became an instant sensation. As the story goes, after recovering from a mystery illness, he used his savings and a bank loan to make his first collection. His debut of showstopping dresses and a swarm of supermodels – rustled up by Grand – at the centre of it all was the stuff of fashion legend. 'I was lucky they were in town,' he says.

Who did you have again? 'Linda Evangelista, Karen Elson, Eva Herzigova, Erin O'Connor – just a couple of B-listers like that,' he laughs. 'I could have launched the collection anywhere, Paris, New York, Milan. London was on a bit of a downturn then, but I saw that as a positive thing, as a chance to get some press and breathe life back into the place. It's an important city for me creatively and I thought it was a good idea to get those supermodels in. I had worked with lots of them before. Katie and I sat down and worked out how to get as much mileage out of this as we could, and it worked.'

Since then, he has built a successful international presence and attracted starry clients, including Natalie Portman, Scarlett Johansson and Thandie Newton, 'who turn up at the studio and try on stuff'.

What's the current climate like for luxury brands? 'It's in an interesting place and also outside the UK it's pretty healthy. We get a lot of private commissions for couture pieces. It's always difficult in a hard economic climate to think that some people will spend fortunes on clothing, but there are people who do, thankfully. In a way, the recession inspires more inventiveness because it helps you sharpen your focus. The competition is a lot harder, so those pieces need to be quite special and unique.'

With that, I leave him to burn more dresses. ■ Watch the full interview and the A/W show 12 on the T&G app on your iPad



LEFT The shredded chiffon dress, inspired by burning houses and shown in the A/W 12 collection



LEFT Deacon's S/S 12 collection was awash in feathers and fantasy – with supermodels in showgirl gowns, ostrich plumes and giant swan headresses created by milliner Stephen Jones

