

Montreal Gazette

His name is Denis Gagnon; The designer's singular look is also his mask. But a new documentary film shows him emerging from his shyness

Tue Mar 2 2010

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Section: Arts & Life

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Source: The Gazette

Illustrations: Colour Photo: ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE / Denis Gagnon in his studio, with a dress from the collection he'll be showing at Montreal Fashion Week on Thursday.

Photo: DAVE SIDAWAY, GAZETTE, FILE / A Denis Gagnon creation on the catwalk during October's Montreal Fashion Week. The designer closes the current fashion week with two shows on Thursday.

Colour Photo: More On Montreal Fashion Week: Eva Friede reports on yesterday's seafaring fashion-week launch by Philippe Dubuc (above) on Page C2., Gazette photographer Dave Sidaway was out and about at yesterday's shows, and shares his pix at montrealgazette.com/life

He's shy. Denis Gagnon, the fashion darling of Montreal - and the rest of Canada, too - hides behind his big, bold glasses.

Rave reviews and standing ovations for his inventive creations during the past 10 years have done little to boost his confidence or his cash flow.

His clothes are sold at Holt Renfrew, he's collaborating with retail chain Bedo on a fall collection, and last season, an unprecedented second fashion show was held to accommodate an overflow crowd of perhaps 500 fans at the culmination of Montreal Fashion Week.

"I felt so proud. It's incredible - I couldn't believe how many people wanted to see my show," he said on the speaker phone from his dingy basement atelier, putting finishing touches on his fall collection (think zips, fringe, black and dark browns and blues). The show runs twice on Thursday, closing this week's fashion shows.

But Gagnon is still waiting and hoping for his moment to arrive, waiting for all the acclaim to translate to a bit of fortune, if not wider fame.

"I'd like to realize my dreams, but a bit bigger," he said. "Maybe to show in New York."

Gagnon has steadfastly stayed put in Montreal, staging fashion shows here, opening and closing a boutique in Mile End, showing in Toronto occasionally, but never casting a wider net. He points to the contrast between him and Rad Hourani, the Montreal stylist who, with audacity, sold himself as a designer in New York and Paris.

"I'm too shy," Gagnon said. "I'm very insecure. I have to accept that's how I am."

Indeed, for several years, Gagnon has been hiding behind those oversize Lanvin glasses, given to him by artist-designer Renata Morales right off her nose. They have become his signature, a mark of his singularity and his mask.

In the past week, he has appeared on radio and TV talk shows on Radio-Canada, putting aside some of his reticence to speak about himself and his work.

Perhaps his moment is soon to come. In addition to a public show as a finale to fashion week, Gagnon's spring 2011 collection and a retrospective of his work will be shown at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in the fall.

And a documentary film by Khoa Lê, titled *Je m'appelle Denis Gagnon*, premieres at the International Festival of Films on Art on March 21, again at the museum.

The film is an intimate portrait of the designer, now 47, as he toils in his basement, talks about his shyness, visits his mother in Lac St. Jean and expresses hope and despair about his work.

"I'm not really good at talking about myself," he says in the film. "I'm not an intellectual."

He goes on to paint a breezy picture of designers inspired by the beautiful hues of a Mediterranean vacation, perhaps: "My inspiration is not from this basement, for sure."

At one point, the camera focuses on Gagnon, who stares right back, expressionless. The shot holds for a very long moment.

"The shot is like a canvas. He looks at the camera and says nothing, but at the same time a lot," said filmmaker Lê, who had worked with Gagnon in his boutique.

He said he wanted to show the real Gagnon

behind the big glasses. "The frontier between Denis the individual and Denis the designer is very fluid," Lê said.

The film follows him on a trip to the shores of Lac St. Jean to visit with his mother, friends and family. He had to leave Alma, where he grew up, Gagnon says.

He talks about how he dressed up his sister's Barbies at a very young age: "Some things are innate."

As for his collections, he knows only about 30 per cent of what he creates will be sold. He works like a fool, he admits, on things that are unsellable. "You can't worry about sales if you want to do something pertinent."

At another point, he questions whether it's worth doing fashion in Quebec.

After 10 years in the business, he says, he's poor. "Not poor - but I have no money. I have nothing: no house, no car, no RRSP, nothing."

Holt Renfrew has been picking up his collections for its World Design Lab. Barbara Atkin, vice-president of fashion direction for Holt Renfrew, has called his work brilliant. He has slashed and sewn leathers in virtuosic variations, braided silks and jerseys, beaded, trimmed and draped with skill and artistry.

And the clothes at Holt's sell, Gagnon said, with his first shipment for this spring of about 35 pieces already sold out.

But 35 pieces is not very many.

He needs an investor, he says. The collaboration with Bedo, for this fall, is

going well, he added. It will bring his clothes to a much wider audience at more affordable prices.

"There will be nice pieces, I think."

Denis Gagnon closes Montreal Fashion Week on Thursday with two shows. The 9 p.m. show is open to the public. Tickets cost \$25; call 514-790-1245 or order at www.admission.com.

Je m'appelle Denis Gagnon screens March 21 at 6:30 p.m. at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1379 Sherbrooke St. W. For photos and more info: www.jemappelledenisgagnon.com.

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Designer Looks

See the trailer for Je m'appelle Denis Gagnon at montrealgazette.com/life

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