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# IRIS VAN HERPEN

## HYBRID SHOW

In the midst of assembling 16 years' worth of boundary-pushing Couture for her Musée des Arts Décoratifs retrospective, *Sculpting the Senses*, Iris van Herpen realized there was another creative ambition she had yet to fulfill. "I could see the interdisciplinary approach throughout my whole body of work, but I was missing something that had always been a part of me: my love of sculpture and painting," says van Herpen, who although known for her classical dance background, grew up simultaneously entrenched in visual art.

On June 24 during Paris Haute Couture Week, van Herpen presents her signature spellbinding Couture alongside her first aerial sculptures, ushering in a new era of visual artistry for the maison. "For a long time I've been working on expanding people's perception of how fashion and art can be symbiotic. This is the natural next step for me to really show what I mean," she says, likening her preferred process of moulage, or draping directly on the mannequin, to sculpting. "Even though we call one practice 'Haute Couture' and the other 'art,' to me, it's one universe."

Conceived as two pairs, the four large-scale artworks feature an array of innovative techniques on tulle surfaces, suspended and stretched via steel tubes. Tulle, a favored material synonymous with classical ballet costumes, also serves as the basis for most of van Herpen's Couture looks.

Though the couturier has considered creating aerial sculptures for many years, finding the mental and physical space to experiment required a change of scene and pace. Two years ago, after 15 years living in central Amsterdam, van Herpen and her partner Salvador Breed, who composes her shows' distinctive soundscapes, moved to a remote residence, located a 30-minute bike ride north of the city. A former farm with a lush wild garden and fruit trees, the property is situated beside a lake and bird sanctuary, making for idyllic daily jaunts. Though the natural world has always been a key influence, van Herpen has now found a deeper connection to the earth by having a front-row seat to its seasonal lifecycles. "The little transformations that happen every day fiercely inspire me," she says, relishing equally in the flower buds' blossoming and their inevitable decay.

A year in the making, van Herpen's sculptures not only celebrate her reconnection with nature, but also the immense freedom she has gained from slowing down. With *Unfolding Time*, curvaceous, hand-pleated silk forms recall van Herpen's sensation of time being stretched when outdoors. Upon further research, she realized this was, in fact, a universal phenomenon: "It's proven that within nature, people experience time in a different way."

The two largest sculptures—*Weightlessness of the Unknown* and *Embers of the Mind*—embody how for van Herpen, the creative process parallels the rhythms within nature. Calling the works "self-portraits of her inner world," van Herpen materializes the beauty and chaos of ideation and experimentation through ambiguous depictions of renewal and destruction. "The works are about catharsis," says van Herpen who experiences the handwork as meditative. "It's in that stage of surrendering to the craftsmanship, in being free from time, where I can let go of a certain physical reality that is constraining me and a sense of transcendence is materialized."

Fragments of painted silk hand-stitched to the tulle base, invisible from afar, comprise cyclonic compositions; up close, lava-like textures have been achieved through tens of layers of oil paint, evoking the heavy impasto of Japanese artist Kazuo Shiraga's gestural paintings. The impossibly floating forms capture the spirit of Abstract Expressionists like Joan Mitchell and the eerie,

otherworldly mood of Hieronymus Bosch, who, born in the same Netherlands region as van Herpen, has left an everlasting imprint on her imagination.

The couturier additionally considers Louise Bourgeois an important influence due to her idiosyncratic approach to craftsmanship and the variety of her artistic output. The product of two parents who ran a tapestry restoration business, Bourgeois frequently infused textiles into her sculptures.

The final artwork, *Ancient Ancestors*, further conveys van Herpen's homage to nature, but this time, the sea. The sculpture responds to recent studies conducted by French Biochemist Emmanuel Farge and his team at the Institut Curie, who discovered that the first marine organisms developed their sensorial capabilities by physically detecting the motion of the sea. "I find it quite beautiful that in the very origins of who we are, there is the essence of us feeling the waves," says van Herpen. In this work, the artist has combined sinuously arranged silk with 3D-printed elements whose architectural structures conjure fossils, coral, stone erosions, and plants found in van Herpen's garden. Like *Unfolding Time*, this work is accentuated by sprinklings of sand, both a metaphor for time and an homage to the sea.

While the artworks celebrate nature's awe-inspiring power, the hybrid presentation urges audiences to reconsider their own relationship with the planet. Just as van Herpen was exposed to the arts at an early age, her parents made her aware of the ongoing environmental crisis and the need for collective change. "Western thinking has long been dominated by an anthropocentric perspective, a worldview that positions humans as separate from and superior to nature. This paradigm has led to significant environmental degradation and the increasing biodiversity loss," says van Herpen.

Alongside the sculptures, performers are presented as living artworks, which are elevated and partially sculpted into their own canvases to reflect mankind's perceived superiority. In confronting the audience with their gaze, van Herpen encourages a process of self-realization, in which individuals expand their understanding of the self to include their relationships with other living species. "At my home, I don't consider the garden as being mine, but rather it's a space that I share with all other life forms. The wilder, the better," says van Herpen, who particularly is fascinated by observing the insects and imagining their "umwelts," a term coined by German biologist Jakob von Uexküll to describe an organism's unique sensory experience.

Whether through gravity-defying silhouettes or ethereal draping that catches the air, van Herpen's Couture-looks, too, seem to have a life of their own. While 3D-printing and the folding of silks are in the maison's DNA, new techniques are showcased. The *Umwelt* and *Aeromorphosis* gowns, for example, feature a subtle gradient of pearls echoing the sculptures' cyclonic compositions, while the transparent *Ataraxy* gown, sculpted with a heat gun, emulates the artworks' floating quality. Like *Unfolding Time* and *Ancient Ancestors*, the white *Ecosophy* gown fuses organza with intricate 3D-printing that seamlessly transitions into lace. Van Herpen honors Japanese craftsmanship, precision, and spirituality of daily life with the *Sensorium* dress, composed of obi fabric from the couturier's kimono collection.

By presenting the Couture looks and sculptures concurrently as artworks, as opposed to the typical frenetic runway, van Herpen suggests that the audience choose their own paths and spend more time appreciating the artistry and craftsmanship. "These looks took many months to make, so the importance of slowing down is not only present in the work itself but also in how people perceive them," she says.

Van Herpen describes the overarching feeling that characterizes this presentation and the maison's creative evolution as "hybrid." Whether Couture, art, or architecture, her interdisciplinary approach remains the same, and with this hybrid collection, it has been fully embraced.

## CREDITS

Writer: Stephanie Sporn  
Press: KCD Paris | SPICE PR | Sutton  
Styling: Jerry Stafford  
Casting: Maxime Valentini  
Make-up: Karin Westerlund | NARS  
Hair: Eugene Souleiman | Shu Uemura  
Music: Salvador Breed  
Production: Jonas Kraft  
Film: Michel Mölder & Tomas Kamphuis  
Camera Assistant: Vincent Stam  
Process Video: Jip Mus  
Photography: Franck Bohbot  
Backstage Photography: Molly SJ Lowe

### Performers

Gia Bab  
Lily Cole  
Isshe Hungry  
Coco Rocha  
Iekeline Stange

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