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# Designer Hussein Chalayan in Conversation with Sandy Black

**Sandy Black**

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Part artist, part sculptor, part showman, and part fashion designer, Hussein Chalayan has made the fashion performance his consummate medium of expression. Chalayan's influential work in fashion, since his debut in 1993, has been the subject of innumerable profiles and interpretations and in 2004 a retrospective exhibition marking ten years was staged at the Gröninger Museum in The Netherlands. Five years on, *From Fashion and Back*, his first solo exhibition in the UK has been presented in London at the Design Museum (see review in this issue). Chalayan is an innovator and an intellectual, pioneering approaches to

fashion that draw on areas such as anthropology, science, and technology, and the personal philosophy which informs his own beliefs and identity. Through his fashion show presentations, installations, and film collaborations Chalayan has created memorable spectacles that often comment on the human situation and political circumstances of our times, particularly in relation to his own Turkish-Cypriot ethnicity. Through precise and visionary choreography of an impressive range of collaborators and technical experts, Chalayan expresses concepts often rooted in displacement, trans-migration, and transformation, making personal, cultural, and socio-political statements in addition to creating beautiful objects and fashion for sale. It is these seminal moments of catwalk performance that have become iconic in contemporary fashion—both visually and intellectually. In Chalayan's hands, the dress becomes emblematic and layered with meanings, whether or not these are perceived and understood by his audience: the personal concept and design development process are essential for the designer.

Chalayan has fashioned dresses from a broad and unexpected palette of materials: the rigidly constraining carved wooden bodice screwed together with metal fittings; the "Aeroplane" dresses of molded fiberglass, with moving panels revealing a froth of tulle (Figure 1); the colorful traditional Turkish costume that gradually mutates into a modern Western coat (see Figure 2); the chair covers that transform into dresses, together with the table that becomes a conceptual wooden "skirt"; the fragile dresses of sugar glass which are calmly smashed on stage and on film; dresses suspended from helium balloons, dresses which transform their structure and shape or which project moving imagery through panels of LED lights. Throughout these presentations, the overall silhouette is fashioned around a minimalist body, the models behaving as mannequins in the original sense, supporting the sculptural shapes that the clothes impart.

Funding such conceptual performances and exhibits is a struggle for any independent fashion designer, whilst also maintaining a viable business. Chalayan has for this reason periodically undertaken design consultancy for external fashion brands, and designed theater costumes for performance. He now enters a new phase in partnership with sports brand Puma, part of the PPR group, owners of Gucci, Alexander McQueen, and other major fashion brands, as creative director.

Hussein Chalayan was born in Cyprus in 1970, and later studied at Central St Martins College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London, graduating in 1993. His graduate collection, *The Tangent Flows*, was famously covered in iron filings and buried in the garden for weeks before being shown. Since launching his own label, he has twice been named British Designer of the Year in 1999 and 2000.

Just before the Autumn/Winter 2009 collections (February 13, 2009), Sandy Black spoke to Hussein Chalayan about his own practice, designers' influence, and the wider issues of sustainability in fashion design and manufacturing.

**Figure 1**

*Echoform*: "Aeroplane Dress"  
(fiberglass resin). Autumn/Winter 1999.  
Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan.  
Photograph: Chris Moore.

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Sandy Black: Does the concept of sustainability have a place in your development process?

Hussein Chalayan: Sustainability is a big subject. The kind of fabrics we use don't really exist in a sustainable form. You can find basics, like cotton poplins, and jerseys. But anything beyond that just doesn't exist and is so expensive. In fact we are still not part of a system where you can benefit from more elaborate but sustainable fabrics. So for me, the

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**Figure 2**

*Ambimorphous*: Turkish costume morphing into a contemporary coat. Autumn/Winter 2002. Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan. Photograph: Chris Moore.

only way I can contribute is if I start a new project myself, working with developers to create my own fabrics, as one offs, that is when you can make a difference, by being more careful. But of course it is still not realistic to think of doing the whole collection this way; it is just not cost effective. You need more people in the industry to get together, more unlikely people to get together, for this [sustainability] to happen on a bigger scale. At the moment it is all happening on a boutique scale. But if you really put your heart into it, you can do it. It is not just a designer wanting to be sustainable, it is about the whole system changing and this takes time.

SB: It is about creating infrastructure, but also about providing information. The designer level is highly influential of course, but the designer has to be supported.

HC: I just don't find fabrics produced in a sustainable way. I am working on a project with Puma related to Africa. It will involve sustainable fabrics and hopefully create jobs. And this is a project that will be personally guided by me. The premise is that we have to work in a sustainable way.



SB: It's early days and sustainable fashion is still compartmentalized into niche products. It would be good to see the day when we don't have to think separately about these issues. But the influence of designers should not be underestimated, do you agree?

HC: Yes, we are role models. And we are scrutinized. And I personally eat organic food, why shouldn't I wear organic cloth? But I must admit that even organic food is not always convenient or possible to consume.

SB: It has probably taken fifteen years for food but hopefully we can move faster in fashion, looking positively at what can be done. One of the issues I am looking at in my writing is the role of innovation. Are there tensions between the innovation and commercial aspects of your work?

HC: The word commercial is a nullifying word. Anything you can use I find worthwhile. If you are confident enough to wear a chair around your neck, that is your choice. But from the point of view of what I propose as a designer is to connect gaps in the world. You can always carve a niche in the market by doing what has been done, but I always wanted to do something different. At times this has been very difficult. Innovation is always coming into it; I always try to react to life and the environment, whether it is social, technological or political so I feel that for me this is the main incentive of my becoming a designer.

SB: What inspired the vision of working with iron filings?

HC: That was my graduation collection in 1993 [*The Tangent Flows*]. It was based on a story I wrote and each piece was representing a part of the story or reenacted parts of the story. The clothes become the components of the story or were the residue of the story. I always try to convey a sense of life, like storytelling (Figure 3).

SB: Clearly there is a strong narrative and thematic conception in your work. Do you ever get inspired by stories related to ecology and sustainability?

HC: I have all-encompassing projects that people read in different ways. I actually had a project that was about climates, but it wasn't about sustainability. It was about how the body is like a climate, about life and death cycles. Then [fashion writer] Suzy Menkes thought it was about climate change, but it wasn't.

But I would like to say something about body and beauty. I think people are more careful about what they put *in* their bodies than what they wear. There is a lot more going on in organic food than textiles. What you put inside your body is much more intimate and immediate and it affects your health. When you wear something your ultimate goal is to look good to yourself and others, to feel good and confident, to feel cool or warm. But women especially also like to please—themselves

**Figure 3**

*The Tangent Flows*: buried dresses  
(silk, iron filings). Spring/Summer  
1994. Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan.  
Photograph: Chris Moore.

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or others. To please yourself is not that different, you are still trying to please. I don't want to say that this is just women, of course men are the same but perhaps it is more obvious with women.

How you feel is reflected in how you look, just like you feel about your food—you are what you eat. So can you say that you are what you wear? When I think of this, I always think of Japan. There is a real affinity with nature—the way they shape nature is so high-tech. So they can use bamboo for example but what they do with it is amazing.

One of the best ways of becoming much more in touch with nature is to now and again abandon our urban lifestyle. If you think about Japan,

they have limited resources and because of this, they had to become more inventive. One of the ways you can become more inventive is to reduce the number of ingredients you use. To say to yourself—I have these ingredients, what can I come up with? Japan has been successful because they always had to use technique. Technique is not just about being high-tech and digital, etc. It is much more about being creative, and how you use the ingredients, resources you have at your disposal.

SB: Looking at different ways of doing things.

HC: A lot of my work becomes a prototype or an art project. Some of the digital things I do take a very long time to develop.

I would love to take my digital dress idea further. I tried to work with magnetic fabrics—I am always interested in these kinds of ideas. It would be great to become affiliated with a lab, so that I could actually achieve this. A lot of the time I am using technologies that are not to do with fashion, and the people are scared of fashion. I find that northern Europe is much more open minded than the UK, in Germany, Holland or even the USA—the risk taking that used to exist before is no longer here.

My digital dresses would need a lot more time to be developed beyond an art project into a wearable object. I would love to do this, but I have no resources to pursue it. Then a big company can come along and take the idea and develop it much further and take it as their own.

This is not about my ego, but about making a dream come true. My goal is to actually make a real-life contribution, like somebody being able to open their jacket and see a video message from their child. Or to create a garment where lining or outer color can change. Or a garment that can interact with the environment. But an LED specialist is not a fabric specialist, and it needs large teams.

SB: You have generated more experimental fashion concepts than anybody else I can think of. Your shows have always been spectacles—is this something you feel you have to now do every time?

HC: I am a very curious person. I like to discover new things, constantly move on. But I don't want my ideas to just remain as prototypes. Then I am just somebody who is instigating ideas and other people make them happen. It has always been like that. Other people take the idea and perfect it, but why shouldn't I be the one who can make it real, practical?

A different structure is needed for that and that is important to me. I can be happy doing years of work, but I also want to evolve it. I can do that with my ideas around clothes but it is different when it is technology based, because the time scale is much greater, you need people and investment.

SB: The trouble is that there is so much work to be done—these concepts need several lives worth of work. But you've bitten the bullet more

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**Figure 4**

*One Hundred and Eleven*: mechanical motion dresses changing style from one era to another. Spring/Summer 2007. Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan. Photograph: Chris Moore.

than most designers. So, if you only have to choose one way you would like to move forward, what would it be?

HC: Motion dresses and video dresses. Those are the two I feel very strongly about. The video dresses were about climates—one was about the sea world, fishes swirling around which was about Summer and the other one was about Spring, so you had repeat cycles of opening and closing (Figures 4 and 5).

SB: It all started with remote control dresses (Figure 6), which were at the time very innovative ideas.

HC: Yes, it's where it all started. They were ideas I knew would not be real. Before that was the airplane dress which led to the motion dress. The next step is to actually have fabrics where everything is inbuilt. We had a very complex corset structure, which had everything happening on it, which controlled everything. It was a lot of work and it was really expensive.

**Figure 5**

*Airborne: "Video Dress"*  
(LED and crystal display playing  
changing imagery of Spring and  
Summer). Autumn/Winter 2007.  
Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan.  
Photograph: Chris Moore.

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One reason why London has always been creative, not just in fashion but in arts and culture, was because it was poor. And the weather was bad. There is a lot of money around in the society but not in the arts. So people had to be creative. And with the economic downturn, people may become more inventive. It's a good exercise, it keeps you flexible.

Isolation, as in Japan for example, is a key state for creativity and invention to take place. It is very important to spend time on our own, to think on our own, and be a detached observer of behavior ... For me they are very much related to creativity. And finally you need to communicate because you need to interact.

**Figure 6**

*Before Minus Now*: "Remote Control Dress" (fiberglass resin). Spring/Summer 2000. Courtesy of Hussein Chalayan. Photograph: Chris Moore.

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But ultimately I think that understanding nature, how we relate to it, and understanding our bodies better is key in making progress in terms of sustainability. I think we are detached from our bodies. It starts with food—because if you don't love food you don't love life. I don't know anyone who is interested in design and beauty who is not interested in food. It all goes together.

SB: Does fashion go with that?

HC: I think it should, because it is a way of living. It is about love for life. In order to understand your body, you need to spend time in water,

was all. But even today I hate the idea of depending on someone. But the only way to move forward is partnership. We need a great deal of investment. There is hardly any designer of my generation that doesn't have a partner. The idea of the partnership was to move on but not necessarily in expected ways. For example, we are only going to have a couple of shops.

SB: You were also designing cashmere a number of years ago for different companies?

HC: We had a licensing deal with a company in Italy and on the side I had to do consultancy otherwise we wouldn't have been able to survive. So I did three years of Tse Cashmere and three years of Aspreys and I learned a lot from both. It was a necessity. But it was worth doing.

SB: So you are "in" fashion in some ways?

HC: Yes, I'm not isolated in that sense, we have a following, etc. But it is more about not being in the culture of fashion but rather in the creative side of fashion. I don't go to every fashion event, but I love going to a good fashion show sometimes. But I don't live and breathe fashion. I have other interests as well.

SB: Your shows are spectacles; they get a lot of press.

HC: This can sometimes be hindrance as well. Referencing happens to us a lot. But it happens to other designers as well of course. We don't make huge profits but people do buy and wear our clothes and they keep them for a long time. There is a sense of timelessness to them.

SB: Slow fashion.

HC: That's a very good way of putting it.

I am interested in processes because processes inspire what we do. You can think of fabrics in a more creative way. Working with electrical wire is as important as working with seaweed. Or working with the two together. The choice that you make over natural substance could lead to a very innovative result. In itself, it could be creatively sustainable. So we should think of creative sustainability, not just logistic sustainability.

One of the most interesting angles in your [sustainability] concern is the whole idea of designers understanding how things work. Designers should look into physics, geometry, maths, drawing. Then think how and what we could be doing with basic ingredients in their raw form. Some things may seem irrelevant, but they are not.

A lot of the time, people cannot see how our realities are connected. I think that we need be re-educated to understand those connections and then maybe, we would be able to rebuild what we have around us.