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As told to Angelica Frey, 2339 words.

Tags: Fashion, Design, Beginnings, Inspiration, Process.

On how place shapes your practice

Fashion and Costume designer Sho Konishi discusses his relationship to his own creations, his sources of inspiration, and creating a new definition of failure.

What's your definition of fashion?

I made my own definition of fashion. Fashion is basically creating, collaborating with someone's life, in order to celebrate that life and then respecting the materials. Fashion is not just a movement, fashion is about people's lives. I don't need to make just garments. I don't need to make just clothes, fashion for me is more like performance art.

For me, every single piece I create is literally my baby, because I make stuff by my own hand. For some of the pieces, I could say I'm the only person that can design them because of how the fabrics hang around the body, how I see the beauty from the materials. I really feel like sometimes it's so difficult to explain to my assistant that I like one thing but I don't like what they just did: it's so difficult. It's more like an instinct, you know?

And do you have a muse?

I was doing my research in finding my muse when I found [the artist duo] Fecal Matter. They looked like aliens. When I saw them, I was like, *oh my god, this is my type of human being*. People are asking, "Do you make women's or men's fashion?" I don't fucking care. I don't care for genders, I don't care about body shapes, I don't care about races, I don't care about the color of the skin. Whenever I make something, I always dream of dressing someone who has a human body type, but it doesn't need to be a human being. I'm always imagining some imaginary creature who has two arms, two legs, standing with two legs, that type of vibe—I'm not into making anything for the animals. I like the human body shape. So maybe that's alien...

You design costumes, you design standard fashion, and you design straight up wearable art: how did it all come together?

I studied fashion design in Tokyo first, where I learned tons of construction techniques, how to create beautiful garments, how to do tailoring, that type of stuff. And then at the moment I also tried so many different fashion competitions. So during class, I learned how to make a basic jacket, how to make a wearable skirt, and how to make streetwear stuff. So that's something I had training in, but on the side, I was doing fashion competitions—around 40 competitions in two years. So I was constantly trying to create something very creative and I needed to find some unique ideas. So I was challenging myself, and over the following two years, I was making very realistic garments when, at the same time I was making something avant-garde. Then I moved to New York, and I was so into making avant-garde pieces, and wanted to find actual clients who'd need my avant-garde pieces.

So what happened next?

I found Drag Queens in New York City, which was a huge shock to me. I was like, "Wow, these people are very creative, they definitely need some special garments." I didn't know who they were, I didn't know the culture. So I just contacted them. "Hey, I'm making this type of avant-garde dresses, I'm wondering if you need some." And they're like, "Oh my god, yes, please." I was like, "Finally, I found someone who needs that type of crazy stuff." So since then I have been creating those kinds of avant-garde pieces for the queens. My first client was *Ru Paul's Drag Race* finalist KimChi.

And then actually I got my first magazine features and credits: the drag queens literally gave me the opportunity, I was like, "Wow, I didn't really expect that stuff." So then I was like, "Okay, definitely my skill, my style could be in an actual fashion magazine somehow."

And after that I moved to Paris, I studied haute-couture and high technology stuff. In Paris, I was making drag queen stuff, but people in Paris... they were not giving me the same reaction. The definition of beauty is "combining the technical side to impress fashion people."

They were like, "Oh, this is crazy, but it's not beautiful." Fashion for them is more like a historical platform. So there must be some balance between being creative and showing respect, namely knowing the product history, respecting legendary people. I have been back to New York since 2017 and it's my favorite city because of the people. I never really get the inspiration from architecture; I'm always inspired by creatures or people who have actual life, their ecosystem, their emotions: this stuff is so inspirational for me. New York City definitely inspired me a lot, and it's because of the people.

How did you end up creating costumes for the likes of Chloe x Halle, Saweetie, Spice and more?

It started with the 2020 VMAs, and the styling of Zerina Akers, who was working for Beyoncé but was, at that moment, working for Chloe x Halle.

During COVID I was like "OK, I'm no longer working for companies, I am no longer doing any client work, I'm focusing on education," but at the same time, the entertainment industry had to keep entertaining people. And after COVID Somehow I got the connections. They were "You know, the fashion maisons are not really working." That's why, I believe, I got so many opportunities as an independent, individual designer. They'd showcase to me Thierry Mugler's legendary pieces as a reference. At first I was "I don't know if I can do it," but I had nothing to do, so, like, let's try! So that's how I started, with research and the materials.

The Mugler pieces were made of actual metals, so that they can be just very stiff, my request was like for a performance: they needed to dance, they needed to move. So I'm not using actual metals, I used plastic-made kind of fake leather with a silver coating.

So, after that, many people started knowing me as an "Android" maker. You know, I can make anything if I really need to.

How would you describe your practice, as a freelance costume designer and educator?

I don't have a typical work day, so I don't really have days off: I always have a couple of projects going on at the same time, then I work with Japanese clients, so I have to account for the time difference when having meetings. Sometimes, I start with having a meeting in the morning and I'm having a meeting at 11:00 PM. I usually wake up around 6:00 AM and then just do my morning routine including checking all the emails and then checking all the social media. I go to my studio around 9:30 AM, and then teach my students remotely. After that, I start making stuff until I feel tired, which is usually around 10:00 or 11:00 PM. I don't really feel that's actual work for me: it's actually like a nice meditation for me-if I have freedom to do my creation, I don't really feel like it's work, nor do I feel any stress. I just keep working until I feel I want to go home.

I'm very easy going. But since I have a studio, tools-wise I prefer to have my sewing machine, needle, thread, that's it. And then one thing I always need is the body form, that's it-a human body form or someone physically present: then I can start making stuff. But what I prefer is playing some music or playing some podcast or making some noise. I hate silence.

Same. I work with the radio or an old TV show in the background. What do you listen to?

I'm not into music. I'm listening to whoever the client is I'm working for. So right now it's like, "Hey, I'm going to play this music because I'm working for them." So that's research, but I prefer some noise or talking. If I have someone working with me, I constantly keep having a conversation while I'm making stuff, that's my favorite. If I feel something is "work," then I want to finish and go home. If I have a conversation with my friend or client while working, then it doesn't feel like work and then I can keep going for 24 hours.

I always dread the practical type of work. I like the research phase. I like talking to people, but then when it's actually nose to the grind, I said, oh God, no.

I feel like that's extra work, the paper stuff, that kind of stuff. I'm so bad at it. I'm going to start freaking out, oh my god, I am having so much stress...

So how do you cope with exhaustion and burnout?

I feel like I am a very emotional person to be honest. I laugh so hard. I get so mad at some point, I cry so hard, I've become a very emotional, openly emotional person since I moved to New York. So before that I was holding everything as a typical Japanese person based in Japan. But ever since I moved to the US, I've felt like I'm allowed to express myself, that I'm allowed to show my emotions. Anytime I'm so stressed about work, about friendships or whatever, I always talk to my roommates, that's why I love living with roommates because I was like, "Hey, can I just have a minute, I just want to talk." And then whenever I say something terrible, or not appropriate, I start apologizing internally. I'm like, "I'm so sorry. This is something too extreme. I shouldn't do that." And I'm like, going through all this emotional load. And then after the conversation, I'm like, okay, I'm [re]charged.

And so now that you learned how to release emotions, when you go back to Japan, are you able to do that there too? Or do you revert to your old patterns?

Last year I went back to Japan for a couple months for the Paralympic games opening ceremony, when I designed the costumes for the featured performers. That was my first job in Japan as a fashion designer. So I went to Tokyo, and people are thinking, "Oh, this guy is based in New York." So I thought I could have a little bit of special treatment as not your typical Japanese anymore, but still I was so stressed with so many different small things. So for example, I needed to go to a meeting, right? And then that was a creative meeting. I was like, "Okay, I'm going to dress like this [gestures at his own outfit], all in black." So I just went and they were wearing very formal stuff. And I didn't know. And they did not even say hello because they thought: "Who the fuck is this guy? What's this outfit?"

I'm on the minority side because everyone there is doing something similar and if one person is doing something different, that's not okay in Japanese culture. So then, I tried so hard and then they appreciated that I tried. But in the process, I was so in shock, I was struggling. I didn't even know how to talk, how to start emailing.

I know what you mean: I am from Southern Europe, but lived in the US for almost 10 years. And every time I come back to my home town, it's always a shock.

Yeah. That was literally a shock. And also, I don't mind how people see me, but at the same time, how they start conversations about my people, well that does *not* sound ok to me. So maybe the idea for a Japanese person is to point out and then make fun of fat people, and that's the majority opinion. I don't agree. And because I'm an honest person, whenever I hear something that does not sound OK to me, I say things. And they'd go like "Oh my gosh, you are so crazy, you are so aggressive." But I'm just saying, I have my best friend who is maybe plus size, maybe bigger than you, but they are beautiful. They're my friends. I don't accept the fact that you make fun of those people—that's like my sense of justice, and I am making it my struggle as well.

You can think I'm annoying or extra. But I love my people. I love friends. I luckily have so many different types of friends, so whenever you talk about people, maybe you don't have that type of friends, but I do have that friend. So this is enough reason for me to protect them and start having arguments. That's why I love education: because I believe in the next generation, I'm hoping the next generation is going to accept something new.

Speaking of hopes and other people's prejudices, when do you know when to quit or give up on something?

To be perfectly honest, being a fashion and costume designer is not my dream. To me, It's a part of the process of being happy. So, even if people say, "Oh, you don't have talent as a designer," at some point, I will be totally fine because I'm going to just switch my career to be happy. My main life goal is to be happy. Failure is definitely whenever I see my people being sad or I'm being so depressed or sad—that's a failure of my life. If any of the designs fail, that's totally fine. That's a part of the process for me to grow up.

Sho Konishi Recommends:

Forest: Especially in my hometown in Kochi

Artist: Christopher Marley" especially his insects art work

Beers: BUD LIGHT big cans in NY, ASAHI beers if I am in Japan.

My lovely pets "Daifuku" a French bulldog, "Benten and Spencer" ball python snakes

Alexander McQueen not just as brand, as a fashion artist, I love him as a creative person

Name

Sho Konishi

Vocation

fashion and costume designer

Fact

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