

Anderson Apotheosis: JW Remodels His Own Brand

Days after his debut for Dior, the designer speaks exclusively to Tim Blanks about rebooting the JW Anderson label with a supremely idiosyncratic cabinet of curiosities, from garden tools to diamonds.

By Tim Blanks



It's no wonder "in a weird way" is one of Jonathan Anderson's favourite expressions. It seems to be how things happen to him. In the two decades since he graduated from the London College of Fashion, his career has traced a surreal arc from idiosyncratic independent to fashion figurehead. Last week was his debut at Dior. This week he relaunches his own brand with a completely new concept.

On the surface, the two exercises couldn't be further apart. In a weird way, they couldn't be closer, joined at the hip by Anderson's own obsessive, compulsive drive. "I love work," he crows. "I could do 24 meetings in a day. I love doing what I do. Is it scary? Of course, it's scary." But there's never a moment when he manifests nerves, even in the hours leading up to his first show for Dior, when industry anticipation was running as high as I can ever remember it, even as he had hundreds of balls in the air with his own brand JW Anderson.

He acknowledges the risk of stopping JWA, slowing everything down and then rebuilding it. "Maybe I'm maturing as a person," Anderson rationalises. "I like to be able to prove something. If I don't feel like the underdog, I will never work. So, in a weird way, we had to rebuild a platform to become the underdog again. Why? Because, if not, I can't get up in the morning."

He spent a good year or so analysing what those impulses actually meant. "I was thinking of Terence Conran. I love Shaker furniture and I'd been doing some research for myself on how it arrived in Britain through Conran. It became such a trend, and then infiltrated into design systems." But if Conran revolutionised the way people thought about their homes in the '60s and '70s, Anderson's ambition is more humble. "I think it's maybe how people see their desk or their coffee table. For me, it's more about the storytelling that you can do with an object, more of an intimate kind of thing, like, I bought this stick chair, and look at this amazing wood, and it's made in this country, and the guy only makes two of them a year. It's a nice story to tell, which is not just about how much something costs."

He listens to people like Adam Curtis, the documentarian guru of pre-apocalypse. Curtis's "Hypernormalisation" is his favourite documentary. "I've always wanted to meet with him. We were talking about everything. He thinks we're heading towards this time... it won't be about modernity, as in new fashion or new art. It will be heading towards a different time period, like when Gothic Revival, which was ultimately from 13th century architecture, came to dominate the world in the 19th century."





Anderson's own project tends to the kind of connoisseurship that shaped the golden years of the *Wunderkammer*, the 1700s, the 1800s, before museums became receptacles of human civilisation, when wide-eyed, well-heeled aesthetes would collect extraordinary *objets* for their own cabinets of curiosities "as a way to showcase... a fascination with the diverse and sometimes bizarre aspects of the world." (Thank you, Wiki).

Anderson had an early education in such a magpie sensibility. His grandad would take him antiquing when he was a kid. At university, he worked in Sam Roddick's visionary sex shop Coco de Mer. "In a weird way, Coco de Mer was a very good example of a curated fetish shop," he recalls, "where you could buy anything from Betany Vernon's sex toys through to a first edition of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover.'" His other job was working at the equally curated store 202 Westbourne Grove, where he observed how the buyer would acquire a mirror for €2000 (\$2,360) and pass it on to customers for £70,000 (\$95,000).

The major criterion for his own collection is that everything has to have a story. There will be around 560 items when the website launches on September 1. And once something sells out, it's gone. Maybe 200 items will carry over, but seasonality is less of a concern. "Instead of discounting things, we just keep them until they sell out," Anderson says, "and then we replace them. Because I feel like it's hard having a small business. It really is difficult. I feel for every single person who starts a business, I'm fortunate to have LVMH, but at the same time, we're still a small business with the pressure of a marketplace that is just collapsing. So I'm thinking, 'Let's get the Murano glass guy to make the hardest thing that shows his skill, but in something which looks timeless. Or let's get the best person in the world to reissue the Charles Rennie Mackintosh stool.'"

Translation: The "Murano glass guy" is Marcantonio Brandolini and Anderson has charged his company Laguna-B with creating pieces in an opaque green glass which they don't usually do. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh stool is recreated by a Mackintosh conservator in the black-stained oak he favoured, also available in white and a natural oak. Understandably not cheap, given the degree of expertise involved.

Andrew Bonacina, formerly director/curator at the Hepworth Wakefield museum in West Yorkshire, is putting together an art programme that, in some JW Anderson stores, might mean one single expensive masterpiece, in others, a series of mini-exhibitions of up-and-coming artists throughout the year. That was one thing that always struck me about Anderson's curation of art in Loewe's stores. The selection, say, of a piece of Matthew Ronay sculpture in London or the glorious wall of Howard Hodgkin in Madrid suggested a personal engagement that would be hard to quit, if ever the day of disengagement should come. "Loewe will exist in part of my vision for as long as it needs to, you know," Anderson says now, "but in a weird way, what I realized is when you leave something, it's very difficult. I was trying to comprehend leaving something which I had built in my vision, like I built the entire aesthetic, right down to the Craft Prize, around all the things that I love. The good thing is it'll go, you know, and we will continue with JW, doing the thing that we've been doing, which is putting art into British institutions. We just helped put a painting of Andrew Cranston into a museum." Or, as CEO Jenny Galimberti puts it, "Loewe was him, and so now this is him."

And gloriously, perversely so.

"Everything has a little weird meaning to it," Anderson says. "I think it is just as accurate as when I did the ruffle shorts. It's the same energy, because ultimately, the ruffle shorts were in a wool that was made in Britain that I was completely obsessed by, which was the same wool that was on the little coat on Paddington Bear when I was a kid. So that threw me into *the thing*. And now it's, What is that in a tea cup? What is that in a pen? What is that in *honey*?"

It's like Citizen Kane and his sled named Rosebud, the single plangent memory that unleashes a lifetime. Except that with Jonathan Anderson, *everything* is Rosebud. The tea cup is by potter Lucie Rie. His





collection of her work is one of the world's best, so this launch of a couple of her original designs, coffee cup as well, 3D-printed from her archive in the Sainsbury Centre, is probably his pride and joy. Wedgwood said no when Rie originally proposed these designs decades ago. Anderson has all the original correspondence. It took him a while to convince the company they'd made a terrible mistake. "I know that I want a set of Lucie Rie," he says now. "I've made them in a selfish act for myself." They're expensive — a cup and saucer will retail for £1000, and only a hundred will be made. They'll probably sell in minutes, such is Rie's audience of collectors. The profits will go to a foundation to preserve the legacy of Rie and her partner Hans Coper, to produce a catalogue raisonné, and to provide grants for young artists.

The pen is made by YARD-O-LED, who are the oldest penmaker in the UK. They've also remade a mechanical pencil for JWA. Originally invented and patented in the early 1800s, it's engraved here with an Oscar Wilde quote: "The secrets of art are best learned in secret..."

The honey is from Houghton Hall, the stately Norfolk home of the Marquess of Cholmondeley. "Someone I always adore for doing random things is Giorgio Armani, he did honey once," Anderson free-associates (free association is one of the singular pleasures of this particular project). "So when I was at Houghton Hall, and I was meeting with Rose, they had honey, and I was like, Okay, I love her, and I love them both, and I just think they're so chic, and I was like, well, I want the honey, because maybe if I have the honey, I would feel like that. And it's all that thing, it's sort of odd, our relationships to certain things, going back to Warhol. And Warhol, for me, as cliché as it will always be, is one of the most modern thinkers in the last 500 years, because I think he was able to do this. And at the same time, it was always sharp." The jars of honey are capped by squares of traditional honeycomb-patterned Norfolk linen from a weaver named Max Mossdrop. (You can really go down a rabbit hole with this stuff.)

And that's Anderson's ambition with his project. It's the power of the object to hold layers of meaning, be it a Marilyn portrait or a jar of honey: Now *that* is fetishism at a cargo-cult level. Or, muses Anderson, "In a weird way, it is about obsession. Warhol was so powerful as the starting point of object, obsession, fame. I remember when I was very, very young, I was obsessed by Andy Warhol to the point where I wanted to buy the wallpaper of the cow. And when the internet started, there used to be online websites where you could do that. Never did, obviously, but I think that will always be in me, this search to find things you know or to bring things together. You know, that's why, in my house, nothing never stays still. It's like a never-ending project."

And there's the core of the quest. As it was with Warhol, where someone paid hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction for a collection of the artist's cookie jars, the power of curatorial personality — Anderson's in this case — infuses and elevates banality. Nothing clarifies that notion more for me than the collection of garden tools on offer at JWA, 200 in all, spades, trowels, hoes, immaculately refurbished by another of Anderson's gifted obsessives whose tool collection had reached a scale where his wife was begging him to divest. A common garden spade, oiled and gleaming, makes me want to get out and dig, but it would also make a perfect Duchampian readymade. Anderson does have a track record with Dada and surrealism, after all. There's a complementary collection of antique watering cans. Don't bother trying to find a logical connection between them and Dean Sameshima's luxuriously embroidered "Anonymous Faggot" jumper or "Anonymous Trade" sweatshirt. You're inside someone else's head here.

"I needed to find a vehicle that was everything that's personal to me, no matter what it is," Anderson explains. "It's a weird obsession. It's ultimately me selling myself as these are things I like." And not just that, but things he always wanted to do. Like chunky gold jewellery. Or *real* jewellery, which comes to JWA courtesy of a gemhunter named — what else? — Classical Gem Hunter. There will be diamonds. "I just want five pieces per store, and we do them on beautiful chains. Or a beautiful ribbon. We don't





need to remake that idea. You just have to bring it to people, and show that I'm obsessed by this person who finds things. It's not about ownership. It's more about, *'Here it is and I think it looks great.'*”

Anderson casts his mind back to the spade guy. “There is no point in over-complicating it, you know? So, in a weird way, the JWA becomes a seal of approval. It's like, we approve this product, we approve this message. It's a fashion royal seal.” He laughs. “I'm hoping that people are going to look at it and have this fetish to want to buy it.” The obsession carries through to the packaging: the boxes, a year in the making, have an aristocratic heft (that royal warrant thing again), everything else comes in potato sacks, or it's wrapped in the paper used to wrap fish and chips in seaside towns. “But by redoing it, you kind of get this preciousness.”

He feels there are kindred spirits for his concept. “Just maybe not in fashion. I think Rose Uniacke is very good at how she creates. And there are places in Japan that I go to. I have no idea of their names.” Uniacke is a significant namecheck because her shop on Pimlico Road, a kind of interior designer's row in London, will be a neighbour of Anderson's latest outlet, which is maybe his clearest statement of intent with his brand revamp, because it will be the closest to the kind of world-building that is second nature to people like Uniacke.

In the meantime, everything is changing in JWA's universe. The logo has been tweaked to chic. Every store is being completely renovated with softly opulent Uniacke velvet walls defined by a dado rail where all the merchandise will be suspended, Shaker-like, on pegs. That dialogue between excess and austerity is particularly Andersonesque. Architects Sanchez and Banton are of Jonathan's generation, but more commercial than fashion. They're good at practicalities, tight and tidy, so there is a solid functionality in fittings. Shelving is hung from the pegs along with everything else. It's all for sale, and customisable.

As the concept rolls out globally, each shop will ultimately be its own little world, shored up by the work of local artisans. But the corner store in Pimlico will probably be the one where JWA's idiosyncrasies find their fullest expression. In summertime, there might be garden furniture. Or asparagus. Jonathan is obsessed with asparagus. He also loves the idea of someone marching in and ordering six stick chairs for their dining table. “This, for me, will be the day that I open a bottle of champagne. Because that's exciting to me. And then, at the same time, they can buy a beautiful cashmere sweater that says ‘Anonymous Faggot,’ as a kind of conceptual act, a fashion object, an art object.

Or maybe they'll be drawn to explore the rest of Anderson's offering. Oh look, a stork scissor from Ernest Wright in Sheffield. Didn't they stop making those a century ago? Good lord, is that a Lucie Rie teacup? And what the hell is coffee-tea? (It's exactly that, a hybrid created by Postcard Teas that's the make up of tea but the taste of coffee.)

The big question is on its hind legs, begging: what's the object that speaks to Anderson the most? “The handwoven damask silk shorts,” he answers instantly. “I was restoring a Chippendale chair and I needed to get fabric for it and I was looking at the Dumfries House renovation because Prince Charles had commissioned all the artisans in Britain who historically would have made things like the type of silk Chippendale would have used, the exact silk that I'm obsessed by. We found the supplier and I said, ‘OK, we need to order this fabric, in the three colours, a blue, a yellow, a green.’ For me, this is as fetishistic as anything you can get. It's expensive because it is incredibly difficult to do. It is what you would use on walls and chairs, and I love the idea of the walls, the chair and the guy on the chair in the shorts, with the slipper.”

The fetishism extends to the label on the shorts. “When I first started my brand, way before it became a brand, I used to sell jewellery in a shop called Toosee, and the very first label that I ever had was a copy of a Paquin label from the 20s. I had bought this black blouse by Paquin and inside was a triangular label which was the standard way of doing labels in the 20s. And when we were researching this project, I thought we should go back to this original label, when I was not what I am today.”





For the look book, which will be the way most people encounter his re-brand, Anderson selected a 35-strong cast of longtime collaborators and people he admires. People curation: quintessentially Warholian. So there's his partner, artist Pol Anglada, and collaborator, director Luca Guadagnino. There is artist Enrico David and musician Oliver Sim; actress Hailey Gates, and the dancer from Anderson's Drink Your Milk campaign. Bella Freud he met years ago at a party when her father Lucian asked him for a cigarette. There are also instructive little videos matching Anderson's characters with his various objects. Joe Alwyn clearly knows his way around a honey dipper.

"I need to learn here, and I need to re-learn what I love in myself," Anderson muses. "This project feels honest to me. This is exactly where I should be right now. Yes, JW Anderson could do a fashion show. And we may do a fashion show when I feel like there is a need to do one. But I don't want people to be like, 'Oh, another fashion show.' I would rather someone goes in and is, like, 'Why do I feel the urge to buy a pot of honey?'"

Joe, pass the dipper please.

