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Glenn Martens Has Come to Save Us

His Artisanal debut at Maison Margiela was a gust of something — not so much fresh air as major food for thought, writes Tim Blanks.

By **Tim Blanks**

PARIS — Eighteen months ago, John Galliano showed his last Artisanal collection for Maison Margiela. It was an event that has already passed into fashion legend, so it casts a long shadow, and there aren't many people I can think of with the imagination, the spirit, the *iconoclasm* to confront such an overwhelming forerunner. But confrontation has always been what Glenn Martens does best. "The only critique we received when we announced that my first collection for Margiela would be Artisanal was, 'Wow! The balls he has to come straight after *that*!'"

But, as far as he was concerned, the lapsed time meant the slate was cleaned. The Artisanal collection he showed on Thursday night was assault and seduction, opulence and austerity, a spectacular walking contradiction and living proof that Martens is one of the most exciting designers working in fashion. Imagine a couture collection, the apogee of *luxe, calme et volupté*, made out of paper, plastic and paint. But the very contrariness of such a notion ensured that it was the consummate embodiment of Martin Margiela's ethos when he founded his maison nearly 40 years ago. Now as then, the name Margiela stands for an audacious, independent challenge to fashion orthodoxy. And it's something we need more than ever in an era when corporate behemoths still dominate an increasingly troubled industry.

Everything about Martens is a challenge. He even has a challenging laugh. Wicked, sardonic, it punctuates almost everything he says. His show invitation arrived in a box with an antique silver teaspoon. "Just me silently stirring my tea while judging you all," he wrote. He officially assumed the creative directorship of Margiela in January, adding to the responsibilities he holds in the same position at Diesel. Both brands are part of Renzo Rosso's Only The Brave group. When he came to Diesel, Rosso worried he'd be too radical. "It's too sexy, it's too much," Martens remembered Rosso complaining while we were contemplating his work in progress at Margiela a month ago. "He still worries. Now Renzo is saying, 'Too many ideas, too rich.'" [*Cue that laugh.*] "He wanted me to cut it in half. But I'd rather have too much than too little."

Which works, given that Martens once told me his favorite word was "opulence," not a word that naturally comes to mind when you reflect on Margiela's legacy, even if John Galliano, and before him Matthieu Blazy, insinuated a quirkily extravagant glamour into Martin's avant-garde vocabulary. But before Wednesday's debut, that was exactly what Martens told me to expect. Opulence à la Margiela. "It's going to be very intense. Really rich. But not glamorous."

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That was up for debate. Martens blew minds with massive metallic volumes when he guest-designed a couture collection for Jean Paul Gaultier in 2022. He recaptured that magic here with a dark fairytale confection spun from 50 kilograms of gold computer wire. But that effect was elementary compared to the bulk of a collection that relied on the alchemical mystery of fashion. Martens wanted nothing to be obvious. Even if you had the luxury of an explanation, it was hard to fathom the process which patchworked a second-skin suit from upcycled leather, embossed it and overlaid it with wallpaper so the effect was a decomposing *degradé*. A leather apron skirt (floor-scraping, a monumental Margiela archetype) was embossed and overpainted in an effect that reminded me of the mesmerising layers of a Mark Bradford painting.

Paint was famously part of Martin Margiela's repertoire. Remember the painted denims. Martens said the starting point of his debut collection was actually embossed Dutch, Flemish and Spanish wallpapers from the 16th century. The painting was one step one from that. "So we have a lot of canvases that we are doing fully embroidered, but then we paint on top in gold with this strange technique which glows. Canvas, leather, whatever. And then, obviously, thinking about the 16th century, we also think about draping."

With paint came plastic, the most polarising element in the new Artisanal. It was a garment bag, protecting the look underneath (though Martens was wary of that association because Demna had done something similar). It was a full dress with 3D flowers. "Plastic was a very nice thing that I'd seen passing by a little in Martin's time, but I was scared of it because it could also go Lady Gaga in a freaky futuristic way," Martens worried. "But I think we managed to give it a soul. It's almost plastic that comes from the 16th century, which I kind of like." In his collection, plastic was also a dome, like a bell jar, over Victorian and Edwardian silhouettes. "Whenever Gustav Moreau is painting or drawing chiffon, you actually only see the reflection. So that's where I came from. I was like, 'Okay, how can that reflection be made real because it's impossible to actually do it?' So then the only way I could do it was with plastic, because with the plastic, you have all the drapes inside, and then a dome outside, so you see your reflection." I mean, that *does* make sense when you're standing in front of the actual outfit.

And then paper joined paint and plastic. "The whole papering under the paper, or the paperwork that bonds things with paper," said Martens. "Impossible constructions." They were fluttering, but not fragile — paper where conventional couture would probably use chiffon or tulle. "I still really like to challenge construction," he added. "So there is a whole chapter of how these dresses are being held together. We don't understand how. *Et voila!"* The magician speaks.

Oh, did I say it was the plastic that was polarising? The show was masked from start to finish. Every kind of mask: visceral and delicate, dystopia/utopia, Tobe Hooper and Guillermo del Toro. In the days when fashion was a Face — Naomi, Kate, Christy, Claudia — Margiela decided no face. Celebrate the craftsmanship of the garment. "So it's not about the person, it's about the structure," Martens said. "Which I definitely bring back a lot, because I think those silhouettes are for me about craftsmanship and beauty. I don't want the model to take that away." A fierce — and perversely fashion — paradox that the faces under those masks happened to be the customary catwalk cuties.

It was that kind of gambit that suggested there was always something predestined about Martens' arrival at Margiela. It makes more sense than most of the Big September Shuffle. He interviewed for the job ten years ago, before Galliano was chosen. Now he says, "I've worked in so many different houses with so many different types of DNAs, but Margiela was already much more in my own DNA anyway." Delve into his tenure at Y/Project and there are Margiela-isms everywhere. But Martens felt he really needed to stake a personal claim to this first collection, so he took himself off to Venice before Christmas to draw the whole thing. Then his grandad died and he had to come back home to Bruges to be with his bereft grandmother ("She's 97. They'd spent 80 years together!") and that's where he spent two weeks researching, sketching, massing his ideas: Gustave Moreau, van Eyck, Flemish Primitives like Memling (the Memling museum just down the road in Bruges). "And then I gave the drawings to Andrew, my

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head designer, and when I arrived mid-February for the first meetings of the atelier, they had the whole collection with colours, with the mood boards, with the lineup from one to 45. And now it's 49 because, of course, during the process, you open up things."

I wondered if that fortnight steeped in personal loss in grey, gothic Bruges influenced his collection. "I guess I got to feel a bit of gloomy Belgian vibes," Martens mused. "And of course I always like to connect back to my hometown. It's not only me, it's also the roots of Martin. I feel there was always cheekiness and fun in his collections, but there was also always melancholy. The silhouettes were quite gloomy." A passage of medieval Madonnas, shrouded in jersey, were a plangent expression of that sentiment.

The idea of beauty emerging from something unexpected seems particularly Belgian. "It is not fun in Belgium," Martens agreed. "It rains every single day, there's no nature. It's one big village. So you have to have a bit of irony to make this joyful. That's why we also take ourselves less seriously than most people. I think we find a lot of happiness in the unexpected. Martin definitely did, through conceptualism, and through maybe turning lows into highs, which I guess I do also. But I think that's definitely a survival instinct."

Martin was obviously the presiding spirit here, with John's ghost hovering at his shoulder. "John is a genius," Martens said, "and we love his collections, but I'm so different to John as a storyteller. You know, he really brings people into a whole world that he's creating. And I think my approach is a little bit more *brut*, brutalist. It's a word that Martin apparently used all the time." In a *metier* that is so often judged by money spent on fabric and time spent on making, there was something consummately, Margelianly *brut* about a pair of jeans bought for €1 ($1.17) and overpainted in white by Simon, a young German in the atelier. A knit top, purchased for €4, was overlaid with paint-soaked paper to create a *papier maché* effect, then studded with "jewels." Try this at home, kids.

"Every single thing we do here is very much based on concept first," said Martens. "It was a very Martin approach. He, and the Japanese before him, brought in a way to see clothes differently. It's really about the concept. How do we construct a garment? How can clothes be built in a new way? Before him, it was more about the tailoring and the craftsmanship. He also did that, but the way he created his world came from an alternative spectrum, which a lot of designers of my generation have engaged in. I think it's more exciting. I love a great blazer, but I love to challenge my creativity. Otherwise, I would have just become a tailor. That's why I think I fit quite well here."

If the collection he showed on Wednesday suggested the breadth of Margiela's "alternative spectrum," Martens also has a commercially minded canniness that questions how far he can go. "I don't think we're going to go back to this whole 'intriguing garment' idea. What Martin was doing is not something I can do anymore. We've ended up in an era which is much more shallow and superficial." He wonders how many clients there truly are who would accompany him to the outer limits of his creativity, however magnificent it looked on Wednesday's catwalk. His work at Diesel has radically moved goal posts in that area of the fashion industry, but what actually sells is another story altogether.

Martens rides that train of thought a little further. "One of the founding house codes that we have is called the *décortique*. All the seam allowances are visible, the linings are opened up. John embraced it a lot. It's not the easiest thing commercially to sell this outside of Paris, or maybe New York and London. I'm still debating how I'm going to do this in the ready-to-wear, because I do like this idea of one concept over the full collection.

"But it's a different era. It's 2025, you need to fill in many more functions and many more markets. The greatest thing that I have in this situation is that I learned so much from Diesel. You need to be a conductor, more than just like an independent designer. Of course, here it's very 'independent designer' because a lot of the creativity will come from me, but I'm very aware of the demands. I have a team of 200 people here, who all want to buy an apartment. And I have a president, Renzo Rosso, who wants to

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buy a third helicopter, and he needs another boat [*the wicked laugh reaches a crescendo*]. I need to fill in the request. Again, I think I'm a very directional and independent creative director, and I know a lot, and I'm not apologetic, but I like to have a boss. I need to feel like I was a good boy. I guess it's some kind of top of the class syndrome. I was the head boy, always first in my year. I like that. If they give me a target, if they tell me, 'This is what we have to reach,' then I'll be, 'Okay. I'm going to do this, within my complete craziness, of course, and being unapologetic and really pushing what I want to do creatively.' But I also need to respect the brand's requests and the board's requests."

So the show ended with a few black columnar looks that could optimistically be described as more classic because, Martens said [*cue signature laugh*], "I need to sell one thing." The looks were kind of severe compared to what had come before. "It's basically a little transparent elastic, and then the whole drape is attached to it, so you feel like the drape is really stitched on your body. You're not really sure how it stays, but when you move, you can feel it. It's a bit digital, a Bosch kind of vibe, hell and heaven together. What I quite like about it is the contradiction."

When I day-tripped to Paris in mid-June to see how Martens was doing with Artisanal, his sardonic laugh had a nervous edge. "I'm starting to feel the first collection is always the most difficult one, the moment where you create the tone of voice for the rest of the seasons and the years or whatever. So now I start feeling it a bit, which makes me a bit less joyful than normal." Good. Nerves are a necessary antidote to arrogance. But what Martens showed on Wednesday did suggest a blueprint: unexpected beauty, no compromise, no boundaries and, most of all, a fearless faith in fashion's power to transform not just clothes but the people who wear them. If Artisanal is Margiela's heartbeat, Martens now has to make sure it pumps blood through the arteries of the whole house.

"What's really nice with Artisanal specifically, is that it's really a creative exercise," he said, "which, in theory, has no commercial need or value. And historically, the Maison never had a really big structure to sell couture, which now we are trying to build up. But yeah, at the end of the day, it is really a creative exercise, and it's really there to lay the foundations of the artistic world of the Maison. What I would really like to do is reflect the reality of the street in the house, and I think the ready-to-wear now will have a bit more of that connection."

Martens feels a major part of his mission at Margiela is to reclaim the brand. The archives have been thoroughly "shopped" by so many other designers. "I'm definitely not here to celebrate Martin," he insisted. "I'm here to celebrate a new house, but that's part of the reclaiming." He hasn't spoken to Margiela yet, and such is the enigma of the man that he's not even sure if he's even ever met him. Martens is, however, a friend of the makeup magician Inge Grognard, and she is close to Margiela, so close in fact that when she sent him a pic of herself eating mussels on holiday in the Seychelles, the other pair of feet in the photograph were Martin's. It makes perfect illogical sense that in an age of mass-revelation-by-social-media, the man who maintains his privacy with such astonishing thoroughness that his heir apparent doesn't even know what he looks like should be the prevailing fashion icon of our era.

Hand on heart, I'm a huge fan, through Y/Project, Diesel, Gaultier Couture… Martens is the answer to a fashion maiden's prayers. So what does this new role offer him? A whole *house*, for a start. "I never had a team, to be honest," he said. "Y/Project was 20 juniors going mental, screaming at each other and having the best fun." When he left, they gave him a border terrier puppy. Martens has named him Murphy, and he is his prime responsibility now, even as he contemplates his new creative directorship. That aside, there's the opportunity to be a little more *luxurious*. "I've never had a fabric more than €18 a metre in my life," he marveled. "You know, this is like *€80* a metre. I'm like, 'Can we get this?' And €80 a metre is like *nothing* here," which means the kind of craftsmanship he's been craving. The details, the finishings…

They were all so *grand* and perversely couture-y on Wednesday night that it's useful to be reminded how committed to plain old humanity Martens is. "We love Dior and we love Chanel or whatever, but

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Martin was a guy who was making shows in primary schools or in five different bars all over the city. I think this is a connection that we have to reinforce, and it starts from HQ." His location was a cultural centre in the north of Paris, one of those glass halls that the Industrial Revolution revelled in. Martens said it does a lot of good work with street kids. After the venue had been selected, he also found out it was the last place Martin himself ever showed, which was an odd kind of kismet. Stellar soundtrackist Senjan Jansen supplied the Smashing Pumpkins' "Disarm," not Martens' usual style. At Y/Project it was classical; at Diesel, it was trance and techno. "Which was not something I was going to do with couture," he said. "I wanted to make people a bit more emotional. So I was a little bit, let's go for something that I'm not so comfortable with, which is this kind of straight music."

The thought of Martens deliberately sitting himself out of his comfort zone — the Pumpkins will be forever Dries — at such a critical moment in his career seemed perverse at first, but I obviously underestimated his ability to reclaim the moment. Some of his audience exited to enthusiastic clapping from the white coat-clad Margiela team. That was either a "thank you" or a "fuck off." The thing with Martens is you'll never really know. (The teaspoon stirs. GET OUT!) The rest of the audience walked into an ocean of balloons. He was nowhere to be found, but somewhere he was laughing.