



Olivier Rousteing on Disruption, Longevity and Resilience

The fashion wunderkind reflects on his eventful tenure at Balmain as the house marks its 80th anniversary, and he closes in on 15 years at the creative helm. **BY MILES SOCHA**

Olivier Rousteing's office high atop Balmain headquarters is rich in windows – offering lovely breezes and panoramic views of Paris rooftops – but rather poor on wall space for hanging pictures.

And so they're stacked on the floor and leaning against the radiators: here advertising images featuring Rihanna and Kim Kardashian; there a touching portrait of Rousteing with the late Karl Lagerfeld, who immediately clicked with the fashion wunderkind and took him under his wing.

One of fashion's longest serving creative directors despite the fact that he's only 40 years old, Rousteing was among the first to line up for Lagerfeld's pioneering high-low collaboration with H&M in 2004, and he cites Balmain's tie-up with the Swedish retailer in 2015 as a career highlight, not only because of the 99 percent sell-through but because it proved that he brought the heritage house cultural relevance, heat and currency, attracting new generations to a brand that's celebrating its 80th birthday this year.

Like Lagerfeld, Rousteing has chalked up a lot of firsts in his career: putting diversity and inclusivity at the top of the industry agenda; embracing and leveraging the power of social media; opening up fashion shows to the general public, and also linking Balmain to burgeoning pop-culture forces, whether it's music festivals, Barbie or Tyla.

Indeed, his instincts can be eerily prescient: Consider his rather low-key Balmain Sur Seine event in 2020 when he sent a barge down the Paris river loaded with athletic dancers and the singer Yseult, handily foreshadowing many key elements of the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2024 Paris Olympics Games – let that sink in – and sparking a trend to democratic, public-facing fashion spectacles.

He's upfront about the challenges he faced as a young Black designer thrust into the limelight of a predominantly white industry, taking some lumps for his first Balmain collections and pushback for his disruptive ways, from his very first selfie on Instagram to posing nude on the cover of French magazine *Têtu* in 2015. Yet he's grown into his role and attained greater serenity, proud of his resilience, consistency and loyalty to the house.

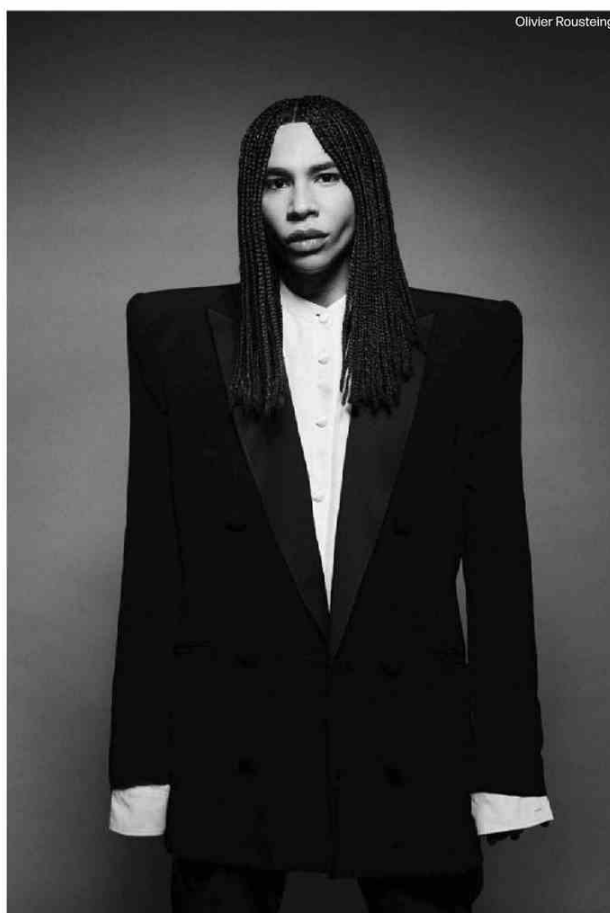
He's fond of saying, "I used to be a Balmain baby, and now Balmain is my baby."

Surveying the flurry of designer changes he's witnessed at other heritage brands, especially the unprecedented swirl of the last year or so, he observed that he's now something of an outlier with his longevity.

In a wide-ranging conversation with WWD, the designer opened up about his early career, his mentors, his sudden fame, and his yen for shaking up the status quo and moving the culture forward:

WWD: Take us back to the early days of your career, at Roberto Cavalli, and what attracted you to Balmain in the first instance?

Olivier Rousteing: I started at 18 years old as an intern at Cavalli. I didn't finish fashion school because I was obsessed with discovering the world of working. My years in Florence helped me to discover the craft and how clothes are made. I worked so hard on understanding the process of



Olivier Rousteing

fashion, the product, the fabrics, and later, the importance of fashion shows and working with celebrities, too. It was a truly 360-degree experience and my mentor, the person who inspired me the most there was Eric Wright. He had worked with Karl (at Chloé, Fendi and the Karl Lagerfeld brand) so I learned a lot from Eric.

And then around the age of 23 I arrived at Balmain, and I came for two reasons: First because I wanted to go back to my country, France. And the second thing is because, I have to say, I loved the aesthetic of rock 'n' roll-slash-glamour that Christophe Decarnin brought to Balmain at the time.

WWD: Can you share a little bit about those years behind the scenes, what you learned, and what you contributed before becoming creative director?

O.R.: I was the head of the studio, which was really small back then, and (Decarnin's) right hand at the same time, sketching for him, talking to suppliers, checking the prices, working on pre-collections, which were new then. I was also speaking a lot with the top management on the vision of the house and the strategy to understand what were

the requests from wholesale clients. So I was trying to really connect the business with the vision and the strategy of Christophe at the same time, working with the stylist at the time as well, which was Emmanuelle Alt before she went to Vogue.

I loved this moment of my career because Christophe was such an incredible visionary. He trusted me a lot so I could work with the team freely... He gave me the chance to be the person I am. I was trying to make him proud, and I was trying to make the top management proud as well.

Managing the studio was really interesting because I was much younger than most of the people working there, and that was really hard to get credibility with the team that I was supposed to manage. I have to say it was hard being so young, being a Black designer, the only one, not only in the studio, but I think all of Paris.

WWD: It must have been a shock to be thrust into the limelight, and with so much responsibility on your shoulders. Was it a tough adjustment, or did you surprise yourself in your capacity to adapt?

O.R.: I was not expecting to be appointed creative director, and I never tried to

become the creative director. It happened, and that's what we call meritocracy, because I was doing basically everything, so obviously they trusted me. I asked my team first before saying yes, because I told them I wouldn't be anyone without you guys. And they said, "We trust you, take it!" And that's how we started.

I was already doing so many things I was not scared to do the collections. The only thing that I didn't know was what it means to be under the spotlight.

WWD: How do you feel when you look back on your early collections?

O.R.: There are some collections that I loved, some collections that I don't like at all, but I love my younger self. I think I've been really resilient, and pretty brave going through a system that at the beginning didn't really accept me as a 25-year-old head designer, and a Black designer in a really white industry.

I think what saved me was that I was so interested in the numbers and it was me that was pushing the business so far, because I was so disappointed if we were doing only 20 or 30 percent increases. I was like, "We should do 40. We should do 50." If ever there were questions, the answer came from the clients who supported me.

I was not scared before my first show, but I got scared after, because I was so young and maybe too fragile to face the critics. But after that, I started to enjoy it more and more, and I started to say, "You know what, that's how fashion is, it's OK." That makes you stronger.

I cannot look at my early collections without thinking what I had to go through. But I'm proud of what I built with that kind of disruptive glamour, while respecting the vision of the house.

WWD: When and how did you come up with the concept for the Balmain army?

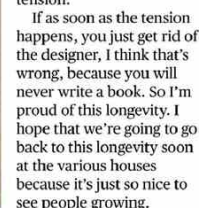
O.R.: When I started to have a lot of diversity in the casting, and when I started to play hip-hop music, some people started to question what I was doing, and saying, "Oh, is it really luxury?"

And then one day Rihanna came backstage and she looked at the casting, she looked at the fashion show, and she said, "I'm so proud of you. You're changing the rules of this fashion world." I told her the models were also messengers, carrying a strong message of inclusivity, of diversity, of revolution. And that's how it became the Balmain army, fighting against rules that have been imposed for so many years.

WWD: You've also been a pioneer in leveraging social media, opening up your shows to the public, embracing technologies like NFTs. What's your secret sauce?

O.R.: It was just instinct. My first selfie? I can't tell you how many calls I got from so many people telling me, "Can you please take it down, because social media is for cheap brands." And my retort was: "Are you happy with your e-commerce?" Because e-commerce was not supposed to be luxury, the internet was not supposed to be for luxury and now everybody's living on the internet. I challenged people to believe me that social media would be the future. It's better to be a pioneer than a follower. ►

Photograph by F. Beltran/Courtesy of Balmain



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