

90s Love: Todd Oldham Exhibition at RISD Museum



When prepping for the debut of his spring line in 1994, iconic apparel designer Todd Oldham did something a bit unexpected. Searching for inspiration, he set wood chips on fire in a metal trash can and photographed the wild blaze. The hot result was *Flame Ensemble*, a dye-sublimation printed stretch flannel dress paired with matching boots. Its polyester velvet was made by ski-fabric makers and the footwear was anointed with jeweled spiders on the zipper pulls.

This type of out-of-the-box creativity is evident throughout the RISD Museum's *All of Everything: Todd Oldham Fashion*, the first major exhibition to focus on the playful aesthetic of the artist's 1990s fashion career. The raucously colorful show features more than 65 full ensembles made using an assortment of unexpected materials: ornate Indian fabrics, intricate beading, Swarovski crystals. For instance, *Love Ball Dress* — a piece constructed out of fuzzy pipe-cleaners — was made in honor of the first New York AIDS fundraiser held in 1991.

"We're always throwing curveballs," Oldham recalls. "I felt I had something new to say in this medium that had juxtaposition and duality — not a normal approach to fashion, come to find out."

One of the most stunning visual gems is *Fluttering Flower Ensemble*, a printed satin coat with applied floral decoration and printed knit cashmere hot pants. Seamstresses interested in the technical side of design will be pleased to examine the layered fabric. It's Chinese silk embroidered in India, which was photographed and made into sublimation papers. The team then die-cut polyester organza flowers and stitched them onto polyester fabric before it was printed, so the transfer went right through and then it ghosted.

"On the body, the pattern doesn't look disrupted; it shimmers," Oldham writes in the artist statement. "Because the pattern matches up, it doesn't become visual chaos. This was one of the few times I thought we did something that hasn't been done before."

Oldham is definitely a designer of the people who's slipped into many mediums. Before high-def

television made its debut, he hosted "Handmade Modern" - a DIY home furniture show that aired on HGTV. In one episode, he makes a leather-studded ottoman with the help of Joan Jett. The pair added circumferential studs to give an alt edge to the piece, which Joan later took home. And those keen to early MTV programming might remember when he hosted "Todd Time," a three-minute segment included in the popular "House of Style" hosted by friend and mega-supermodel Cindy Crawford. The soft-spoken Oldham was always disarmingly congenial, which made for mighty revealing interviews.

Oldham retired from his wholesale business in 1999. The revelation that he was done with his haute couture fashion house actually occurred while he was making a green satin shift that Crawford would wear in a spring line. The designer felt as though he simply wanted to spend his limited time elsewhere. But he hasn't stopped working creatively. In fact, he's now some of the brains behind Kid Made Modern, a line of DIY home projects. His lessons inspire children to mash together discarded home items to make beautiful, functional works of art. Some of his colorful books even inform readers about mid-century visionaries such as Alexander Girard, Isamu Noguchi and Verner Panton.

But luckily for die-hard fashion enthusiasts (or those who simply enjoy a pop of color), his wonderful '90s apparel designs live on in Providence. "I am most flattered RISD is celebrating my fashion days," he says. "I had such fun making the clothes and the great pleasure of working next to amazing artists along the way."

Hurry down to the RISD Museum! The exhibition runs through Sept 11, 2016.