

STEVEN TAI— THE HYBRID CRAFTSMAN

“Actually, I am thinking now - how did it really, really come to be?” Steven Tai’s creative mind, nurtured by the renowned Central Saint Martins, draws inspiration from the mundane to create a refined Autumn/Winter 2014 collection. The 29-year old, London-based Canadian transplant, describes the collection he presented at London Fashion Week as, “another type of insanity.” Three time-grueling techniques were applied to the garments; “eight movies with four interns” and later you have a majestic navy blue fringed coat. It all began with shredded paper.



interview - JANINE BARTELS photography - ANNA VICTORIA BEST styling - LUKE RAYMOND

all clothing (unless otherwise stated) - STEVEN TAI SS14
earrings (worn throughout) - MODEL'S OWN
skirt (worn as top) - THE CONTEMPORARY WARDROBE
shoes - ARCHIVE MIU MIU at ROKIT

LONDON, ENGLAND

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The interview was conducted in Park Theatre Café Bar neighboring his London flat. As we settled on the second floor I noted the books hanging by fishing line, it was a fitting environment as I was well aware of his love for books. Tai attended bookbinding classes back in Vancouver, Canada and applied the sewing techniques on his Spring/Summer 2013 garments. The creative process behind his collections blur the line between fashion and art, it becomes a question of: “Would you define a child’s cross stitch picture as art?”

“The garment acts as a vehicle for us to do more creative things outside of it,” he muses. Marrying the two disciplines, Tai collaborated with Spanish artist Lola Dupré for Spring/Summer 2014. He photographed England’s Eden Project and Dupré collaged the images, creating the pixelated print for his sporty collection. The effortless nature of his screen-printed garments caters to the steventai girl - a tomboy at heart. She has no restrictions, beginning with her wardrobe.

Steven Tai continues to relentlessly push the boundaries with his experimental textiles. “The [AW '14] collection feels more mature, it isn’t as loud or unwearable,” he said. “I think that is a great step in developing the brand.”

As I left Tai to finish his garments for Paris Fashion Week, I was impressed with how calm he was despite his approaching deadline - he had three days and nights. He had time. The garments would be frayed and stitched with precision, his craftsmanship would not waver. Steven Tai, as rare as his “fuzzy flower” embroidery (one of his three time-grueling techniques).

JANINE - It was a pleasure seeing you Tuesday at the Somerset House for London Fashion Week! Firstly, let’s talk about your AW '14 interactive presentation, ‘Knock Knock.’ The audience became apart of your presentation, moving forward or backward in front of the screen allowed them to zoom in or out in the video. It reminded me of a video game, as you intended! There did not appear to be a huge focus on the clothing, what was your intention in presenting your collection this way?

SIEVEN - It is always about exploring other channels of creative outlets, something I’ve brought with me from studying at Saint Martins. It’s a more about what you can take from the clothes as a starting point. I always use a collection as a way to do other projects. For example, last season, we were able to make another film that was vintage inspired. It didn’t really sell the clothes either but there’s value in the video itself and it’s an opportunity to do something fun.

JANINE - In the video, the steventai girl walks into her home, a modest space, with a bag of groceries and the stunning navy blue fringed coat from your AW '14 collection. The audience watches her lean against the kitchen counter reading a book, and can eventually direct her to the couch where she reads a letter or to look out the peephole in the door when a boy comes knocking. What was your inspiration behind the video? What is the girl in the video’s story?

STEVEN - The initial title for the video was Unrequited, in the sense of an unrequited love. We thought it would be quite interesting to have this girl in the film that is quite strong and

doesn’t need the guy. But on the other side, it’s also something that we all feel sometimes, coming from the other side of the relationship where you might not feel as desired. What’s interesting is seeing a story that is fairly linear but in the middle of it you’re kind of figuring out how it is coming together; piecing the puzzles together. It’s an experience that I think all of us have been through. Actually, I am thinking now - how did it really, really come to be? The collections concept was about shredded paper and then shredded love letters - and it just kind of fell from there.

JANINE - Drawn to unconventional textiles, you have used an array of materials in previous collections, from silicone to 795 pen nibs. Your AW '14 collection appears more conventional with tweeds, fringing, and eyelash yarns. Why did you pull back the reins? What did you want to achieve with this collection?

SIEVEN - This collection is another type of insanity. It was hard and possibly more costly than the other projects. The reason being is that we are working with developers; we want the quality of our work to improve. We have three techniques this season and one of them would be the fuzzy flower, I don’t know if you saw it on Karolina Kurkova?

JANINE - Yes I did!

SIEVEN - The fuzzy flower is a rare embroidery. We did our research and there is only one machine in China, two machines in America and two machines in India. It was difficult but we loved the technique and wanted to utilize it. For the second technique - the jacquard with the fringing - we worked with a French jacquard company. It is a one-of-a-kind stevetai jacquard. The last style is a mixture of nylon, plastic, and sparkling tweed. A huge component of this technique is fraying the fabric. It takes a tremendous amount of time; that coat you saw [in the video] was eight movies with four interns. Overall, the collection feels more mature, it isn’t as loud or unwearable, and I think that is great step in developing the brand.

JANINE - In past collections you have collaborated with artists; for AW '13 collection you worked with Italian sci-fi illustrator Franco Brambilla and for SS '14 with Spanish artist Lola Dupré.



skirt (worn as top) - THE CONTEMPORARY WARDROBE

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she collaged imagery, creating a pixelated print for the collection. Your garments become a canvas for artists. Do you believe that by combining art and fashion you blur the boundaries between the two disciplines?

STEVEN — The line is already blurred even before the collaboration. Now that we're a brand we don't admire artists from a far, we have the ability to connect with them. The garment acts as a vehicle for us to do more creative things outside of it. In the past we collaborated with Lily Kamper, a jewelry designer, and she designed backpack hardware for us. It was a case of: 'We love your work, let's do something together.' Even with the Lola Dupré jumper collection, we wouldn't have a jumper collection if it wasn't for her work — it inspired us.

JANINE — Could you elaborate further on the Lola Dupré jumper collaboration? You worked with Swarovski crystal, correct?

STEVEN — We did work with Swarovski. It was our first step into pre-collection — it was a toe in the pond. The collaboration stemmed from working together on Spring/Summer '14. We met virtually and I loved her work, and we were able to develop a print together. We went took a picture of Eden Project and sent it to her, she collaged it and sent back the physical artwork. I love what she does and I wanted to have an opportunity to show off her work in its pure form, which is why I allocated a special project for her. It felt like it wasn't a true collaboration until we also used her artwork itself.

JANINE — When are the jumpers available to buy?

STEVEN — We are going to setup online in May but they are also available at Holt Renfrew in May and in Bricklane.

JANINE — Why did you decide to photograph the Eden Project for your collaboration with Lola Dupré? What was it about that location that was suited for the collection?

STEVEN — We had started looking at glitches and pixelation in technological devices and were drawn to the Eden Project because it is a beautiful symbol combining technology and nature.

JANINE — Going back to art and fashion. Do you label your work as fashion or art? I know it's a loaded question!

STEVEN — I am unconscious of what we do. I realize this now, clothes have to be sewn and worn. Commercialism is engrained in us. However, I think our process is heavily based on craftsmanship, with the embroidery, picking, and laser cutting, and mixing that with the technology. Would you define a child's cross-stitch picture as art? That is the blur. What we put into it: the hours, the labor, the love for it, and the creativity behind it. But it is the result that is ready to be consumed.

JANINE — Books are influential in your creative process. Shredded paper was inspirational for AW '14, this is unexpected coming from a book lover. What triggered this idea?

STEVEN — This collection started with the artist Vlatka Horvat. Her work is beautiful, she cuts photographic images and will even use the backside of a photo. When you see her art you will get it.

JANINE — Despite being a book lover, technology has

a strong hold on you and your work. Do you think that print is at risk of becoming obsolete? Explain your reasoning.

STEVEN — I still read novels, I still like to hold and feel the book. When you're looking at an electric tablet or at a screen you are used to processing the information a lot faster and it registers less, where when it's a paper in front of you your brain shifts slower. Nothing beats the smell of a freshly bound book — it is so lovely.

JANINE — Your SS '14 collection was one-of-four collections to be showcased in VFiles debut fashion show. The fashion show's audience consisted of users of the online network. VFiles is about developing a subculture and combining the new and traditional fashion world. What is your opinion on the shift to online consumption — an online shop versus boutique, the ability to feel the clothes before buying?

STEVEN — I don't online shop and I don't understand how people can do it. I probably shouldn't say that as we sell to online shops but I think it is a completely different generation shopping online. The physical feeling of the clothes has more to do with the past. It was once about the garment: how it is constructed, the inside of it, what it means, and the concept behind it. If you browse online shops like Net-a-Porter or scan Instagram street styles, it's not so much about the garment but about the look of it or person in the outfit — it's not about the clothes but the lifestyle it is portraying. Technology deemphasizes what the clothes are about; it's more about the hype. I am sad that we don't get the same kind of attention for the clothes anymore. But to hate it and sulk about it all day is not going to beat the system; it's much better if I can accept it, understand it from inside and out, and be able to do something that works within the system. I have a couple of ideas but I haven't executed anything yet. Hopefully, you will see something soon!

JANINE — I am looking forward to it! I love that your mom is your style icon, and that she is influential of your tomboy aesthetic. What is it that attracted you to women's wear over menswear? Is menswear something you would like to explore?

STEVEN — Definitely, it is only a fact of money and just how much sleep I can actually live on. I think it is probably because women's wear is more versatile for me, I think there is more of a fantasy within it and you are free to create your own narratives. Anyone can say the opposite for men, but it just depends on how they think.

JANINE — What can we expect from steventai this time next year?

STEVEN — Already! Well, a new studio space. We should be having our own catwalk shows by then or if not, certainly a regular presentation.

JANINE — Are you going to try to include your interactive presentations and still have that aspect?

STEVEN — I will try. I have always had an idea for a catwalk that I want to implement but it would cost so much money. Conventional catwalks are fun but if we're putting in the effort to make something that we love, it will have to be something different.

