



“You have to keep the DNA and push the boundaries”

TAILORED APPROACH NEIL BARRETT

Fashion designer

Neil Barrett’s aesthetic is deeply rooted in tailoring. His meticulous eye for fit predates the launch of his eponymous label in 1999, as well as his time designing for Prada and Gucci. Even as a student at the Royal College of Art, he was ahead of the game, having witnessed his grandfather and great grandfather at work at their tailoring company.

Though Barrett never dreamt of taking over the family business in Devon – he originally had his sights set on city life – he certainly inherited a traditional work ethic which is integral to his brand. “They used to fine-tune every request and really satisfy the client,” says Barrett. “I think that fine tuning and an understanding of why you are doing something were things I learnt as a teenager.”

Striking a balance between desirability and practicality is essential to his Milan-based label’s success. “I am acutely aware of what I wear and why I wear it, and that goes for my clients’ clothes, too,” says Barrett. He cites four defining fits: super-skinny, skinny, slim

and sport, each personified by one or more celebrity muses. “I have this Japanese footballer [Hidetoshi Nakata] for the skinny fit; Ewan McGregor and Jamie Dornan for the slim fit; Jake Gyllenhaal for the sport fit; and, for the super-skinny fit, my Japanese journalist friend who is now a TV presenter.”

The designer’s client list reads like a celebrity who’s who and includes his long-time friend Justin Timberlake, whom he dressed for the singer’s 20/20 *Experience* world tour. He wears his own menswear to road-test the fit, and relies on female friends to model his women’s collection, which debuted in 2006. “It’s a woman who understands the fit, the details, the workmanship of menswear,” he says. “If they understand all of that, they’ll understand what I’m doing with the women.”

Barrett uses the runway to experiment with tailored sportswear, believing that suiting should stay off the catwalk to avoid repetition. This break from tradition was something he instigated at Prada, bringing “sport fabrications into tailoring, and tailored fabrications into sport”. He still uses neoprene in his collections, as it prevents creases in garments and helps hold their structure. His suits may not get a front-row showcase, but Barrett is continually

improving their fit; these subtle tweaks can only be noticed first-hand by his clients who come back season after season.

Barrett is, by his own admission, a perfectionist who sets himself lofty challenges. “You have to keep the DNA and push the boundaries,” he explains. Evidence of this approach can be seen in his spring/summer 2016 menswear and womenswear collections, which began as a conundrum: “I asked myself, ‘How does my client who doesn’t necessarily wear a pattern, wear a pattern?’” The answer was a collection inspired by masculine prints from around the world, notably a hybrid of camouflage pattern and keffiyeh check from the Middle East. For his autumn/winter 2016 show in Milan, Barrett spun this imagined sartorial stubbornness around to accommodate the man who doesn’t want to wear colour. The result: dark brown sheepskin jackets accented with earthy hues and brightened with a solid cadmium red or cobalt blue colour-blocked jumper.

Through challenging his audience, Barrett tests himself. “It is about raising the bar season in, season out,” he says. “You are only as good as your last collection.”

Story by JANINE LEAH BARTELS