

CHAPTER



The World According to

We asked Michael Hainey, Thom Browne's old friend and one of America's foremost journalists, to catch up with the designer who turned the men's world upside down.

Interview by MICHAEL HAINEY

Photograph by ZOLTAN TOMBOR

Thom

Browne



I met up with Thom Browne on a cold, January winter day, the sky as gray as one of his suits. We were in his office, high above the Garment District in Midtown Manhattan, seated at a small table in his marble-clad office, where his long-haired dachshund, Hector, paced at our feet, his nails click-clacking on the terrazzo floor, before ultimately jumping onto the small table that was between us, and proceeded to curl up next to my tape recorder, falling asleep.

My wife and I have known Thom for decades. He and I attended university together, while my wife used to call on him when he ran Armani's New York showroom many years ago, before he launched his own line in 1999. There were slim years in the beginning for his line, and many days when he wondered if the line would survive. But all that changed a little more than a year ago when Ermenegildo Zegna acquired the company for \$500 million and cemented Browne's place as a designer whose name, and influence, will endure.

When I sat down with Thom, he had just returned from Paris men's week, where he had shown his most recent collection, not in a runway show, but in what he called a TK—a scene of men with animal masks sitting down to feast on a table-sized cake that was a man in a Thom Browne suit.

As I walked in, Thom pointed to me and said, "There's the coat that started it all."

I gave him a confused look.

"Your coat," he said. "Remember Thanksgiving?"

I did. The last time I had seen Thom Browne was in November, when he had invited my wife Brooke and me to his apartment overlooking Central Park West, in order to watch the Thanksgiving Day parade with him and his partner, Andrew Bolton, who is the curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was a bright, chill, crystal-blue morning, and my wife and I both bundled up in thick wool coats, me in a green Harris tweed and her in a big houndstooth-patterned coat.

He said, "Remember how much I was admiring your coats? I based the whole collection I just showed on them." He paused for a moment and called in one of his designers to have him look at my coat. "Look, here it is. See?"

After the designer left his office, we sat down. I asked Thom about the show in Paris.

MH: *You've always been an exception to the rule in the fashion crowd—you don't just do a runway show with dull-eyed models sleepwalking down the catwalk. You create theatrical experiences; you give us scenes that allow us, the viewer, to find the meaning. I think you are the only designer I know who has attendees walking out of one of your shows arguing about what you want us to think. Does this desire to stage a story come*

from your life before you were a designer, when you were an actor?

TB: Very loosely, indirectly. You know, even growing up there was always a part of me that loved stories. My sister and I did plays. So there was always that thing in me. I love doing it and I love that clothing piece of it. But I like the idea of story.

MH: *What I've always loved is that you show the clothes as part of an entire world that you have created. That is a testimony to your ability to conceptualize. These are not just clothes detached from the sketchbook, they exist as a whole, with a story.*

TB: For me there has to be, because I believe you need to make things more interesting to people because I think there's so much out there that you have to give them more. I like to push it in a way that it almost is a lot less commercial because I want that piece of what I do to make this more interesting. I feel I have carte blanche to really just do go as far and push it as far as I want. Because in a way it's really just making the classic ideas of what I do that I don't show more in a show. Interesting.

MH: *Everything you put out there, each of these shows is so cinematic. Do you ever think you would direct a film?*

TB: I would without having to pronounce that I will, someday. I would love to. Yeah. Because you know, I always feel like each show is like a small little story that is directed



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and produced for people. So yeah, I think in a small way I'm doing a movie four times a year and it'd be nice to be able one day to have the luxury of the time to actually do it and give it justice.

MH: *You and I've talked a little bit in the past about films that influenced you. One of the ones that I own I think is always there for you, and maybe I'm wrong, but there's always that level of suspense and kind of sexiness but suspense and little bit of danger, it's Hitchcock.*

TB: I would say more Kubrick, because I like the quiet, almost awkward sense of things sometimes not happening. Like when you watch *2001* and it's weirdly like “What is going on?” And it's also a bit boring. I like movies where there's almost not so much happening, but visually you just really get drawn in. They have intrigue.

MH: *Well you defy expectations, right? I'm thinking right now specifically about that show you did in Paris two or three seasons ago where the set was guys walking through those doors into different rooms. It left me with an enormous amount of tension.*

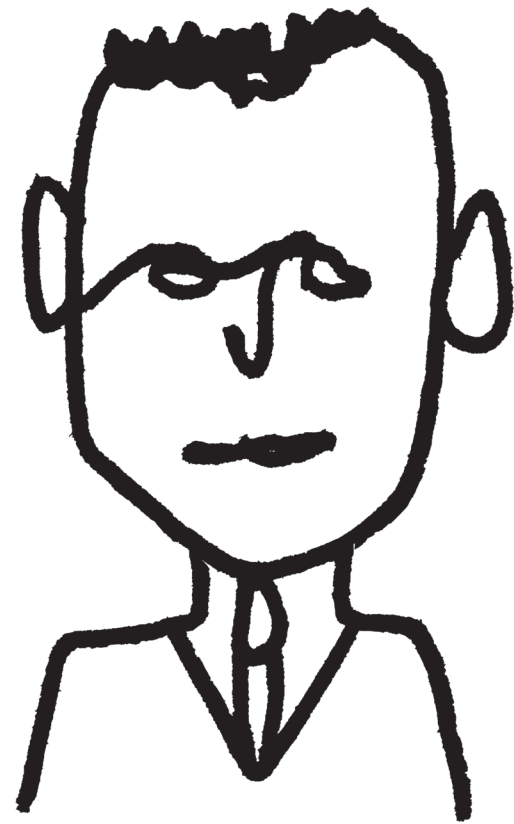
TB: There was even just the ridiculousness of tying guys to the structure and blindfolding them and putting them in little bonnets. I like messing with people's expectations.

MH: *Has your creative process changed since you sold to Zegna? Do deeper pockets change how you work or what you create?*

TB: It actually makes me want to be *more* conceptual and *more* creative even in regards to how to grow the business commercially because I want to take what we've done and challenge everyone. I say "Let's not do it like everybody else." I feel like there's a way to do things in a lot more interesting ways that just haven't been done before. And it's very easy to dumb down and spoonfeed people. It's nice to be able to start thinking of doing things differently. This year, we're using it as a re-set on everything. Like, I've been wanting to do a co-ed show for a long time. Now we will. Now you'll see how the collections connect. You know, I think people want to see things done differently.

MH: *Sometimes I think you are crazy like a fox. You once said you believe ignorance is bliss. But I think you are one of the smartest people I know.*
TB: But I am very true about that statement. What I mean is, it's not good to know everything about everything. I don't want to overthink things. I am actually thinking a lot about something that is very instinctual. But I am very honest when I say I do feel like ignorance is bliss because we do, especially in fashion, think too much. People over-study, over-reference. And that is why sometimes fashion is not interesting. Because we've all seen it too much and now we're seeing it again.

MH: *And your eyes have gone dead to it.*
TB: I think so.



MH: *It's the over-referencing that keeps you from making something new. You're saying you seek to keep a fresh eye.*

TB: That's what happens when people overthink it. It's very intimidating when you know so much because there's a lot of good things that have been done. So if you don't know all of what has been done, it frees you up to do anything.

MH: *You once told me that when an idea comes to you, you like to find where the tension is inside of the idea, where the conflict is, and then explore that space. You said your creativity is grounded in exploring tensions.*

TB: It's interesting to me to take an idea that people think that they know and then push it in a way that they just don't understand why they don't understand it. Sometimes that's the most provocative thing to do. It's very easy to do something shocking and like they're right, but to take something so small and especially when it's something that people really feel like they should understand but for some reason they don't—and it drives them crazy. *That* is interesting.

MH: *I've sometimes explained your work to people by saying: it's like the Magritte painting: This pipe is not a pipe.*

TB: Or look at the reaction to Maurizio Cattelan's *banana* in Art Basel/Miami Beach. I love the idea of something so simple and it just drives people crazy. You get the last laugh.

ILLUSTRATION BY MISHA IOUKHNOVETS

MH: *What I love is that you've made people argue over a suit, made them have to decide what "is" and "is not" a suit. Do you see your work as fashion?*

TB: I still don't think of it as fashion, but people think that everything that I do is fashion. I see it all as classic, really beautifully made clothing.

MH: *What would you define as fashion?*

TB: My shows, I mean, the conceptual ideas that I do in my shows—that I would consider fashion.

MH: *We've talked in the past about your paintings. And I'm seeing here in your office some of your work. You've told me you like Edward Hopper and that John Singer Sargent is an influence. What do you like about Sargent?*

TB: They're beautiful images. Sargent was the first painting—his *Madame X*—that I remember seeing. It was at the Met Museum and I was with my mother. But you know, I'm more instinctual in what I like. I mean, you know, I love Milton Avery and I love Norman Rockwell as well. Not the magazine covers. The deeper works. But what I really love most is cubism and post-cubism.

MH: *How does Andrew's work influence what you think about?*

TB: His work makes me appreciate the world of fashion a lot more. You know, he really has made fashion intellectual for people. And I see how he approaches it and I see how he takes subjects and then turns interesting

subjects into the most intellectual shows. That is an amazing thing, to watch it come to fruition. It's made me see, too, that ideas come from everywhere. That's why, working with everybody here, I tell them, don't be afraid to tell me an idea. Because how many times have stupid ideas become great? That's where the idea for the unicorn in the show last year came from. It was like a two-minute conversation. I said, I kept seeing something like a war horse, but it needs to be like fantastic, like a unicorn. And then all of a sudden a unicorn happens. I love that way of creativity of just free flowing ideas. There's so many shows and so many collections that have come from the most ridiculous, simple ideas. That's why sometimes I don't like to talk about my collections because sometimes I'm not telling the truth when I talk about it. I don't want people to know why everything is what it is. I think it's so boring when you have to spell it out. I know it drives people crazy. But sometimes the reality is not so interesting. And it's also the artist's prerogative.

MH: *I think you are right to hold back. The journalists just want to take your magic and consume it and spit it out. Then where are you? Speaking of critics, do you ever get tired of people always referring to your signature silhouette as "the Pee-wee Herman suit?"*

TB: The suit being described that way? Yes. Because that's ridiculous. And with all due respect to Pee-wee Herman it has nothing to

do with him. He was actually nasty about it. He once said something like, "I've been doing this for twenty years prior to him."

MH: *I find it interesting that the culture has in a way caught up to where you were when you started—you were designing looks that were gender-neutral a long time ago.*

TB: I just thought it was interesting to push it in that way. Society has moved, but we still take it for granted in New York and LA.

MH: *Your shows, as we've said are so psychological. I'm wondering: do you have any recurring dreams?*

TB: Recently, I've been seeing my mother and father. And in a recent dream, I don't remember if it was my mother or father, but I looked at them and I said, I'll see you soon. I remember waking up and thinking like, that's weird.

