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# Mr. Normal

Thom Browne is well mannered, goes running every day and graduated from Notre Dame. And his shows are among the weirdest, most provocative and beautiful in fashion.



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MR. NORMAL

It's not fashionable at the moment to be hysterical backstage. - Gaudio PALLAU



# Mr. Normal

Thom Browne has emerged as a rare showman of American fashion with his extravagant runway productions that are beautifully surreal and usually demented. The designer, provocateur and businessman has a lot of ideas. But he won't tell you where he gets them. The nice Catholic schoolboy from Pennsylvania prefers to be seen, not heard.

By Jessica Iredale

Photographs by Mark Mann





**“**DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY there aren't more people who do it,” says Thom Browne, referencing one of his highly cultivated, well-publicized habits. ¶ He is not speaking about his daily eight-mile morning run, the same breakfast he eats every day, the abbreviated suit he has turned into his personal uniform — and business model — or the ritual of drinking a coupe of chilled Champagne most nights. No, he's talking about his biannual



FALL 2011

practice of staging elaborate fashion shows that depict women on their deathbeds; nuns ceremoniously liberated of their habits at the hands of two male models, and fantastically styled inmates at an insane asylum. Browne's runways are a glimpse into his vivid imagination — one that always has a whiff of the demented. ¶ On the four-



FALL 2012

city circuit of major fashion weeks, New York has never been home to the great showmen. That's Paris' gig, London when it's good. But for a long time in New York, Marc Jacobs was the only designer whose runway served to transport the audience into his fully illustrated and often weird world. Browne launched his women's collection for fall 2011, **and then there were two.**



SPRING 2014

## Mr. Normal | THOM BROWNE



FALL 2015

**A conceptual as I get, I will never compromise or jury-rig something together just to force shock value.”**

“For women's even more than men's, I think you have to do something that's really going to make people want to see what you're doing,” says Browne, who has been mounting theater-grade productions for his men's collections since 2006 when he put his guys on ice skates to show off their short suits in motion. The women's arena is more crowded, more serious, more competitive, though the designer professes blissful ignorance when it comes to what his peers are up to.

No one invited Browne to assume the mantle of fashion provocateur. He did it on his own, and it has proved wise. He has become one of the headlining acts of New York Fashion Week, backed up by a business poised for major growth potential.

Browne is still primarily known as a men's wear designer, having altered the course of traditional tailoring 10 years ago with his peculiar short suits. “Because of the nature of the business, I think women's will probably become the business,” says Browne, seated opposite a daybed in his 35th Street office that looks plucked from a reform school dorm room. The business is split 65-35 men's to women's, with 172 men's distribution points and 78 women's. There are 14 shops-in-shop in stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Dover Street Market, Isetan, Hankyu, Selfridges and Le Bon Marché, as well

as three stand-alone stores in New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong. The company declined to release sales figures (sources peg them in the \$60 million to \$70 million range) but noted that the business overall has grown by 400 percent in the last three years.

Browne wasn't immediately embraced by the women's market, which isn't used to designers wandering over from the men's world, particularly on American soil, and then wedging themselves onto an overcrowded calendar with a grandiose production. It can be construed as pretentious.

But interests were piqued from the very beginning. The craftsmanship and quality of the clothes are indisputable, even if Browne notes that traditional tailoring, his specialty, is a more challenging sell to women than men. “There's nothing better than seeing a woman in a beautifully tailored jacket or trousers or tailored dress,” he says. If the silhouettes are ultimately classic — sack coat, topcoats and tweed suits — the fabric treatments are outrageous. Tailored pieces have come in guipure lace with mink trim, organdy embroidered in Browne's registered tartan with mink and astrakhan, men's fabric trimmed in horsehair or sprouting 3-D flower appliqués.

Browne's fall collection, shown in the context of an antique morgue that preluded a spectacular display of Victorian romance and mourning, was one of the most lauded and talked-about shows of the week. It was more sensual than previous outings, with a larger emphasis on dresses, which Browne admits are out of his comfort zone. The show was a turning point of critical mass for him. ▶





## Mr. Normal | THOM BROWNE

**“Fashion needs people that are very clear on what they want to put in front of people. I’m very clear on this is what I want people to see. I think the idea of fashion and design changing every season is ridiculous.”**

Obsession is a word frequently associated with Browne and his personal and professional regimens, which have served as powerful press bait. As much as he is focused on routine and discipline, the real obsession is with image, his own and his brand’s, which are virtually indistinguishable. “Fashion needs people that are very clear on what they want to put in front of people,” he says. “I’m very clear on this is what I want people to see. I think the idea of fashion and design changing every season is ridiculous.”

Toby Bateman, sales and buying director at Mr Porter, compares Browne’s impact on men’s fashion to Hedi Slimane’s tenure at Dior. “When he first [redefined the silhouette of the suit] the industry didn’t quite know what to make of it, but gradually this aesthetic got taken up by more and more men and more and more designers,” he says. “However, it’s not just the fit that counted but also how, via the fabrics and the detail – particularly his signature red/white/blue grosgrain – showed that even when you use something as classic as a gray flannel cloth, a man can still look and feel edgy or individual rather than feel ‘uniformed’ by his suit. This is clever.” Bateman says Browne’s collection is a strong performer for Mr Porter and is growing at a fast rate across categories.

Though his image is calculated to the extreme, Browne’s collection is anything but a vanity project. “As conceptual as I get, I will never compromise or jury-rig something together just to force shock value,” he says.

Uniformity is the core of his aesthetic. Aside from his workouts and possibly bedtime, he is never not dressed in his essentials: slim-fitting tailored shorts, a

deliberately rumpled oxford, tie and blazer – the adult equivalent of a school uniform. The staff does the same while on the clock, which makes his showroom feel like Pink Floyd’s video for “Another Brick in the Wall.” Asked if employees are encouraged or mandated to wear the look, Browne smiles and replies, “I want the people that are here to want to wear it.” But do they have to? “I want them to want to wear it,” he says. “I’m sorry, I feel very strongly about that.”

He needn’t apologize. It’s his company, his rules to live by. “I got started because I wore this and I loved it,” he adds. “And the idea of people seeing it on the streets – it’s free advertising.”

Perhaps that statement reveals more about Browne’s savvy and state of mind than any direct question about his creative process. He claims his drive and direction are divined completely from within. He is Warholian in his reluctance to attribute influence. Asked how he arrived at his standard of execution, in terms of producing a collection and a show, he says, “I instinctually know it.” A survey of past reviews reads like an encyclopedia of film, literature, art and classical music references projected onto the clothes. Browne shrugs. “There are some writers that insist on being specific,” he says. “It’s like, ‘I’m not saying that, but if that’s what you saw then, great. I love that.’”



FALL 2006

**T**HE WHOLE THING IS A BIT confounding, especially because in person, Browne’s regular-guy disposition is at odds with the eccentricity he projects. His attitude is actually quite casual. “The first time we went to Japan, people thought, ‘Oh my god, he smiles,’” says Browne, smiling. “Yeah, I am very easy-going, but with work I am strict and scheduled. **I like people and things to be a certain way.**”

One can guess that the discipline was ingrained during more than a decade as a competitive swimmer, including his college years at Notre Dame. Anyone familiar with the sport knows it requires dedication. “I was talking with my sister this past weekend about swimming,” he says, referring to one of his six siblings. “It is such a commitment. She refuses to let any of her kids swim. We were in the pool six hours a day for 12 years of our life, and nowadays it’s even worse. It’s like gymnastics – if you’re not going to make it to the Olympics, you’re really wasting your time.”

Browne grew up in Allentown, Pa., attending Catholic school through ninth grade and then again at Notre Dame, a fairly wholesome place where most of the students resemble each other. “At Notre Dame you’re either going to be an attorney, in business or a doctor,” he says. “I had no interest in being any of them.” That said, Browne wasn’t tailgating at football games in neat, cropped trousers and ending his nights with a glass of Krug. Those tastes developed later. He floated for a few years, consulting in New York, working as a production assistant on films in Los Angeles and dabbling in acting, while making custom suits with his friend Johnson Hartig of Libertine.

The Catholic traditions still resonate in Browne’s uniform designs, his consistent show themes and sets that, in addition to nuns, have included pews, coffins and the afterlife. Asked if he regularly attends Mass, Browne says, “No, but I still love being Catholic. I love the religion being used as a reference.”

Devout when it comes to aesthetics and discipline, Browne is not completely inflexible. He and his boyfriend Andrew Bolton, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, recently got a puppy – a miniature longhaired dachshund – which is challenging his daily routines. At home, he and Bolton “watch the most inane TV,” he says.

“Housewives?”

“We have our moments,” he says.

Browne doesn’t cop to having any design heroes, though his own foray into fashion was made possible by two titans – Giorgio Armani and Ralph Lauren. His first fashion job was in the Armani showroom, where he displayed an aptitude for merchandising the collection, which caught the attention of Alexander Vreeland and Glenn McMahon. Ralph Lauren spotted Browne wearing one of his idiosyncratic custom suits and installed him in design at Club Monaco.

“To create the worlds that they have created is incredible,” the designer says of Armani and Lauren.

In 2009 Browne sold a majority stake to the Cross Company, a Japanese apparel business. He maintains that they have given him a long leash when it comes to pursuing his unique endeavors. Staging fashion shows of his scale is not inexpensive. “They understand that everything is done really well here between myself, Miki [Higasa, who handles his public relations and show production] and Trino [Verkade, executive vice president],” he says. “They’ve been so easy and supportive in that way.”

He’s also taken significant steps to invest in infrastructure. Six months ago, Browne purchased the hand-tailoring facility run by his longtime

tailor Rocco Ciccarelli, who is the closest thing Browne has to a mentor. Ciccarelli took an interest in Browne’s unusual proposition for a man’s suit when the designer was just starting out. “It wasn’t odd for him to have someone like me come to him, but he didn’t think it was going to last,” Browne says. “I guess my conviction was what convinced him.”

When Ciccarelli was looking to sell the company but retain his legacy, Browne was the ideal buyer once he was financially capable. In July, to christen New York Fashion Week: Men’s, Browne introduced a new collection of made-to-measure suits produced in Ciccarelli’s facility, where he can ensure the highest level of production, as well as keep things made in New York, a concept in which Browne is deeply invested.

Eighteen months ago, Verkade joined Browne’s company in a consulting role from Alexander McQueen. Under her stewardship, Browne launched his first pre-collections, which have had a huge impact on sales. Her involvement has allowed him to focus squarely on creative. He no longer has to convince Bergdorf Goodman to let

him install his signature slatted window blinds in his shop-in-shop, although he likes to be present in the showroom to advise retailers on their buy. He’s interested in expanding his license portfolio, which is currently limited to Dita for eyewear, which Browne says has been hugely successful. Future opportunities include fragrances for men and women.

Accessories, shoes and handbags will remain in-house, where Browne is developing those design teams. The women’s collection is small, but growing. “I have the perfect bag that I’m dying for girls to wear,” says Browne of the Mrs. Thom doctor’s bag.

Browne seems intent to build his business, to set more plans in motion. Expanding his own retail presence is top priority, as is working on an ad campaign, once that becomes financially feasible. For now, his marketing budget is his runway shows, the primary source for the carefully curated images he dispenses through various channels. That includes social media, though the concept of Instagram, Twitter and Facebook seems to rebuke Browne’s code. He insists otherwise. “There’s nothing worse than people that fight moving along with the times,” he says, stating that he has no interest in social media for personal use. “I want to take advantage of what’s going on today, but I want to do it well.”

There’s also Browne’s work for other labels, including Moncler Gamme Bleu and Brooks Brothers’ Black Fleece collection. Browne was enlisted to launch the latter in 2007 and Brooks Bros. said last month that this fall would be its final season. Black Fleece had been Browne’s biggest platform, gaining a following with Brooks Bros.’ customers and inspiring slimmer, more modern cuts to the company’s overall assortment.

The party line stated that both sides had reached a mutual decision to take a break from the line, ceasing production without closing the door on a revival. But Browne sounded disappointed. “In the future it could come back, because I think people are sad to see it go,” Browne says. “It fit within the world of Brooks Brothers really well.”

Perhaps there’s another iconic house for which Browne might like to work? “There’s one very specific brand that I would love to design,” he says. “It’s mostly women’s now, but I can see men’s, too.”

That’s all he would say. ■

MODELS: ALECIA MORAIS at THE SOCIETY, SANNA BACKSTROM at ONE MANAGEMENT, MARI AGORY and VIK KUKANDZINA at MUSE NYC  
HAIR: LUCAS WILSON, RO MORGAN, ALBERT VASQUEZ at SUSAN PRICE  
MAKEUP: HIRO YONEMOTO at ATELIER using CHANEL LES BEIGES



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FALL 2012

Runway photographs by David Turner, Kyle Erickson and Peasho Antonov