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Future States

With a bold, fantastical exhibition at a museum in L.A., fashion designer Bernhard Willhelm predicts how we'll dress in 3000.

BY **CARREN JAO**

PORTRAIT BY **WILL ADLER**

(OPPOSITE) Bernhard Willhelm at home in the Beachwood Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles. (FOLLOWING SPREAD) Installation views of the "Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center.

As a creator of cutting-edge fashion that dares to poke fun at itself and the industry, Bernhard Willhelm doesn't seem the type to surround himself in nature, but he is and does. "I'm just back from New York, and I have to say I don't necessarily want to ever live in a city like that," Willhelm says, wrapped in a cashmere goat pullover while lounging in a log cabin atop L.A.'s tony Beachwood Canyon. He adds, "I much prefer California, because there are still a few trees once in a while. It's a very special light in California. I think the life here is much more healthy."

The relative tranquility of Willhelm's current surroundings complements the designer's soft tone, which often bears an air of puckish humor. "I came to Paris when Karl Lagerfeld was still fat and liked Baroque, so you see people change in Paris," he says. "I left Paris because I was fed up." To the fashion designer, Los Angeles offered a welcome change after immersing himself and his team in the frenetic heart of global fashion for about a decade.

At 42, Willhelm (together with his long-time collaborator, Jutta Kraus) is the envy of many young avant-garde fashion designers. He has served as artistic director for

Capucci, collaborated with Nick Knight, opened a flagship store in Tokyo, published a monograph, and staged exhibitions in European museums. Now, a new chapter of Willhelm's storied career is dawning—this time in California, beginning with the designer's first exhibition at an American museum. "Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger," on view through May 17 at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center, seeks to project a vision of fashion in the future.

"The question is, 'Will our planet survive humanity? Will we still be able to live on this planet in the year 3000?' I think, probably we won't," Willhelm says matter-of-factly. In line with the philosophy of the "freedom of the fool," Willhelm plays the irreverent jester to the kings of the industry, challenging the establishment to think differently, daring to burst bubbles with truths that are only admitted in private.

His exhibition is no less forthright. Rather than present designs that have already been shown, Willhelm is using the museum as a platform. "Our previous exhibitions showed older stuff, but this time, it's the latest of the

latest and the newest of the newest," he says. When the exhibition opened, the collection hadn't even been presented in Paris.

Instead of a monotonous procession of discrete artifacts, the show creates an immersive, absurdist view of the future. Twelve extra-flexible mannequins specially ordered from Spain arranged in a tableau present the fashion house's fall/winter 2015 line that utilizes prints from artist Rade Petrusevic. On either end, inflatable dolls with television sets affixed to their bellies broadcast video art by Geoffrey Lillemon. Every element is meant to evoke action for a dying world, Willhelm says. "Hope is weak, so hopefully these things are encouraging people to do something about it."

Just as the visionary has changed the whole fashion industry, so Willhelm seeks to move beyond ephemeral trends—and to provoke. "That's the thing with fashion," he says. "It works on your subconscious. What you thought was ugly might just be the opposite. You need a certain openness to like fashion. You have to try and try, and when it works, you can see there's an interaction with that person. It's what brings fashion alive."



