

MOUJIH



N° 42
NOV

WINTER'S
DREAM





Vera Wang has spoken out about childhood anxiety and has been lauded for her work involving mental illness among young people.

Pierre Bergé, who co-founded YSL with Saint Laurent in 1961, revealed that his partner was committed to a mental hospital for electric shock treatment.



THE COST OF CREATIVITY?

Words by Annie Darling

The notorious poet Lord Bryon once said: “We of the craft all are crazy.” Creativity has long been associated with mental disorder, but has the link between the two been heavily embellished?

A few weeks before unveiling his New York Fashion Week spring/summer17 collection, Tom Ford gave an honest and devastatingly painful account of his ongoing battle with depression, describing how he thinks about death every day. The Texas-born designer candidly told the Hollywood Reporter that he began experiencing these thoughts as a young child and admitted that he still struggles with self-destructive feelings.

On February 11, 2010, Alexander McQueen committed suicide, aged 40. The housekeeper found his body hanging in his London home days after the death of his beloved mother, Joyce, who had lost her battle with cancer. Could McQueen not bear to attend the funeral, which was organised for the next day? Maybe death seemed like an escape – a blessed relief.

Alexander McQueen's autumn/winter14 runway was dramatically dark, not unlike the late designer himself, who committed suicide in 2010.



Or perhaps not: In 2004, Joyce was invited by a British newspaper to interview her famous son, by then at his own label. In a quick-witted exchange, she asked him to name “his most terrifying fear”. Without hesitation, he confessed, “Dying before you.” One can’t help but wonder if, for his own mother’s sake, McQueen had just been biding time.

For centuries, there has been speculation over whether there’s a correlation between mental disorder and creativity. There’s no shortage of designers who openly suffer for their art and, for many, art stems from their suffering. Were the likes of Aristotle and John Milton right: Does angst really have creative perks? And, is it true that creative people are more likely to be mentally ill?

Clinical psychologist Dr Cheryl Arutt works with artists to increase their confidence, while identifying and modifying detrimental behaviour.

Many of her patients suffer the same “garden-variety issues” the rest of the population has, but there are significant differences. “It takes tremendous courage to make something from nothing and this is what artists do every day.” She continues, “It’s not unusual for people who are ‘outliers’ and don’t fit neatly within the bell curve to also have accompanying traits like emotional intensity, a voracious appetite for learning things that interest them, a powerful ability to focus on preferred tasks and a feeling of being different somehow... while these traits are not inherently self-destructive, they can be exquisitely painful.”

McQueen had a history of depression (he had attempted two overdoses prior to his death), as well as anxiety and insomnia, but he was confident in his phenomenal instinct and ability. This ballast freed him to improvise and take chances, says Dr Arutt. “The beauty of creative

artists is that their work allows them to act out in a way that is constructive.”

Violence and distress dominates McQueen’s collections. Models walked the runway with brown-red mud splattered across their chest as if victims of some terrible violence. As his career developed, he pushed fashion imagery further into the realm of fantasy: Women were caged in padded cells; half smothered or drowned, masked and tethered. Current creative director of Alexander McQueen, Sarah Burton, has stayed true to the late designer’s distraught aesthetic, recognising his dark dynamism and genius.

McQueen epitomises the ‘tortured artist’, a concept that has long been debated and an archetype Dr Arutt strongly disbelieves. “One does not have to be self-destructive in order to create. This is a myth. So many artists carry around a deep fear that if they ‘get well’ – master their inner critic, learn to self-soothe – they will lose whatever makes them special.”

Albert Rothenberg, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, agrees. “My specific research findings are that the three main cognitive psychological processes responsible for creative effects and creativity are all healthy ones. They require freedom from impedance by mental illness symptoms in order for creation to operate effectively.”

So, it’s reasonable to conclude that people who suffer from mental disorders are more likely to pursue creative careers because of their idiosyncrasies; however, their symptoms are not inherently linked to their capability. “Both solving and working through mental health problems, with and without medication, facilitates creativity,” concurs Professor Rothenberg.

“Needless suffering can be averted by separating out the thing we can help from the traits that make a person creative,” adds Dr Arutt. “A safe space can be created internally... rather than diminishing the artistic ability, this becomes a place to recharge, so the artists can visit those edgy places in their work without getting trapped there.”

Medical treatment also helps addiction, which can be both a symptom and cause of mental

illness. Yves Saint Laurent, Donatella Versace and Calvin Klein have all admitted substance abuse. Versace’s collections, in particular, feature clashing colours and eccentric patterns, which reminds one of a frenzied manic episode – or high. Such behaviour, including mania, is often thought to increase a person’s productivity, which Professor Rothenberg believes to be incorrect. Fashion commentator Carla Mouton disagrees. She’s been diagnosed with schizo-affective bipolar mood disorder and started her blog, Diary of a Warrior, earlier this year while undergoing treatment in a psychiatric hospital. “When I’m manic, I’m extremely creative. I can write the craziest things and I’m extremely productive and energetic.”

If mental health can, in fact, be detrimental to creativity, how are afflicted fashion designers, including McQueen, so successful? “Mental illness symptoms in the mentally ill do not operate all the time,” clarifies Professor Rothenberg. “Those modern creative persons who have been mentally ill were not symptomatic during the times of their really creative work.”

Take Balmain’s former creative director, Christophe Decarnin, for example. Renowned for his strong-shouldered jackets and embellished mini-dresses, the French fashion designer left the label in April 2011 and was reportedly hospitalised following a nervous breakdown. His resignation followed John Galliano’s alcohol-fuelled anti-Semitic rant, which he later attributed to addiction and depression.

Three years later, fashion designer L’Wren Scott committed suicide in her Manhattan apartment. There was also, of course, freelance stylist Isabella Blow, who bought McQueen’s graduate collection in its entirety. Her spontaneous sense of style and unconventional wardrobe reflected her chaotic, and somewhat tumultuous, personality. The two were inseparable for a while; then, as his fame increased, less so. She also suffered from depression, and killed herself in 2007.

What does this tell us? The fashion world can be wondrous and liberating, but ultimately, a designer’s role is to sell. Gifted designers are quickly elevated to lofty heights by big name brands, often very early on in their careers.

They’re offered illimitable budgets; appointed to inject attitude into otherwise dusty international heritage brands. But, these impassioned artists are usually used to working isolated in their atelier. As aforementioned, creative types are impulsive and audacious, yet in this circumstance, responsible for millions of dollars worth in sales, as well as the livelihoods of thousands who depend on their every creative urge and whim. In an industry based on perpetual judgment, it comes as no surprise that the pressure becomes too much. Mouton can sympathise with couturiers like Blow, Scott and Decarnin. She, too, has been suicidal. “Sometimes I would be too cheerful, and other days I cried myself to sleep,” she admits. “Your mind takes over, it’s like you’re thrown into a room and your dark side takes over your life. Not caring about your work, family, being aggressive or doing stupid things.”

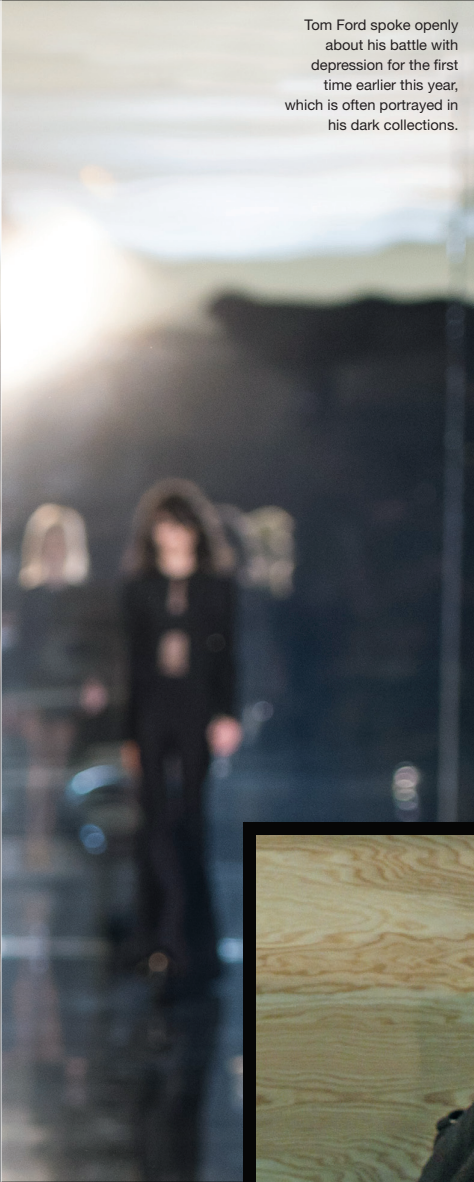
Is there evidence that creative minds are more likely to develop mental disorders in the first

place? Professor Rothenberg is adamant that there is no genetic link between inventiveness and mental health. “Creativity is developed starting in adolescence through nurturance and experience. Intelligence is transmitted genetically.” Mouton, on the other hand, believes “mood disorders are definitely connected to creativity”, while Dr Arutt says that environment factors relating to creativity can trigger a dormant gene. “For example, you may have the genetic potential to be seven feet tall, but if you are malnourished that will never come to be.”

One thing’s certain: We need to encourage discussions about mental health. Mouton is already frustrated with the stigma and statistics. “It [mental health] needs to stop being a hush subject. One in every four people in the world has a mental illness. Talking about it helps, and when you feel like you’re not allowed to talk about it, it become you and takes over.”

In a 2016 survey for Parent Zone, rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers have

Tom Ford spoke openly about his battle with depression for the first time earlier this year, which is often portrayed in his dark collections.



At the height of her 18-year drug addiction, Italian designer Donatella Versace unveiled countless collections on behalf of her namesake fashion brand.



After spending 16 years as the creative director of Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs later revealed he became depressed after leaving the fashion house in 2013.



Images courtesy of Antonio de Moraes Barros Filho, Ian Gavan and Venturelli at Getty