Mosh Pit, 2000, Dan Witz, The Garage.

HarDior, Dior Homme Winter 2017.

From Hardcore to HarDior

DAN WITZ

Words by Liucija Adomaite

All works by Dan Witz

What happens when a face is erased? When one becomes many? What happens when obscurity sets in? To find the answer I turn to Dan Witz, the Brooklyn-based artist behind the Dior Homme Autumn/Winter 2017 collaboration. His hyper-real canvases which caught the eye of Kris Van Assc depict the mosh pits of hardcore rock gigs, where every moment is rife with a potent collective energy. What that energy is capable of, we can only imagine. But in the chaos of the pounding noise, hundreds of faces morph to become a single mosh pit. La petite mort, one might say. But who dies?

On January 21, 2017 in Paris, a term that had never been heard before entered the global fashion dictionary. HarDior spoke directly to those suffocating in a reality where things are filtered through the lens of mediocrity. Kris Van Assche's HarDior is about those who push the limits of reality to find the unknown, about those who are born to do things the hard way. In the dawn of MTV these kids found themselves in never-ending raves filled with hot young blood driven by this sense of collective catharsis. In Kris Van Assche's words: "Youth and subcultures are a big source of inspiration; I guess in a way I am always looking for energy. Youth is about dreaming, believing, and it is therefore very stimulating. I find the times we live in quite tough, and fashion is one way of making people dream." And in the corner of this crowd, like many of us, stood kid Kris who almost thirty years later would bring this feeling onto the runaway. During our conversation, the now Artistic Director at Dior Homme confessed "I was more a new wave kid myself and back then there was no way you could be both. To be totally honest, I have always been more of the observing kind. I like to watch the raving crowd from the side-line."

And so HarDior took shape: infused with references to subculture, with music from Gabber to Candy-Boys, teenage years fused with the luxurious Dior legacy. Kris said: "Music has always been a key inspiration for my collections, and this time it was about the contrast between two music scenes from the time I was growing up in Belgium: new wave opposed to rave music. Back then, as a teenager, one had to choose between those two worlds since they were so different and had very different rules and dress-codes. It was therefore so much fun for me to be able to mix and combine those two memories. As a source of inspiration, this brought a lot of sportswear and bright colours to mind, and as this contrasts with the Dior Homme image, the tailoring had to be therefore really strong. This is where the idea of HarDior came from: it is about a sense of hardcore music but also about the sense of being very, very Dior". Contrast appeared to be this Dior Homme collection's driving force, taking something out of its context and inserting it into another.

Hardcore music was a key component that had to be incorporated through some other kind of artistic medium in order to truly fulfil Kris Van Assche's unique vision. And so he invited street art pioneer and hyperrealist painter Dan Witz to collaborate. Dan, who comes from the legendary lower Manhattan art scene shared with the likes of Basquiat or Keith Haring, is known for his anonymous hummingbird paintings. His fragile and detailed birds spread over the rough concrete walls of urban New York take us back to the late 70s: a time filled with chaos, cacophony and sweet melancholy. This time however, Dan Witz entered the rather alien terrain of haute couture

with his large-scale hyper-real paintings depicting the mosh pits of rock concerts. Dan's screaming mosh pits were taken out of the canvas and placed onto the delicate garments of Dior Homme. It was done in such a harmonious way that it became apparent that Kris Van Assche saw Dan not only as a collaborator, but also as the inspiration behind the collection. Kris revealed to me in an interview: "I learned about Dan Witz' work many years ago through my research on artists and music scenes. I like the way he applies traditional craftsmanship as a painter to these music and youth-culture scenes that can be quite rough and tough. He started as a street-artist and always kept a strong link with street-culture and I think this is one of the reasons why we connect so well. At a certain point, I had so much of his work on my mood-boards that it just made sense to ask him if we could reproduce some of it in our collection."

In the most beautiful way, two minds created something unique. Together they drew a path from hardcore to Dior, joining two opposed concepts while creating one of the most important cultural and aesthetic paradoxes there is. Today I talk to Dan Witz to get to the heart of Hard culture; from his street art to the practice of realist painting; from the mosh pit to the runway. There seems to be this invisible connection between the two artists – two great minds who think alike. Kris Van Assche is quick to reply: "I had been drawn to Dan's work for many years so it is no surprise to me that he'd see similarities to his own aesthetic. I would go as far as to say that this is exactly the reason why I asked him to collaborate." Welcome to the land where things are real, raw, and real hard in their core.

Liucija Adomaite: Hey, Dan. Tell me about your journey from street art to academic painting since these seem two completely opposite sides of the practice. While gallery workspaces seem secure and comforting, the street environment seems bent against the law.

Dan Witz: I have had parallel practices ever since I started so it wasn't really an evolution. I think I used one to balance the other. In the beginning I used street art when the weather was nice and in the winter I'd be in the studio more. But lately I've managed to do both simultaneously as I've become self-supporting.

LA: In the late 70s you painted your signature hummingbirds, each taking two hours to make, which is extremely risky for a street piece. You said that New York was a rather chaotic place to be at the time and no one cared, so you could get away with it. I guess it wouldn't be possible today. In what ways did your style have to adapt to modern anxiety and the perpetual surveillance of today?

DW: Well the irony is that back in the old days I could sit outside and paint without being bothered by police or authorities because they had better things to do. But as the world has become gentrified, it has become difficult to put up my work in public areas without getting caught and prosecuted. As the years have gone by, I've had to develop techniques and strategies to get in and out faster and faster. And I've ended up making much more street art. So now in two or three hours I can put up six or seven of my paintings. What I'm saying is that I responded to those conditions and that actually inspired me creatively.

LA: Are you saying that you've never been caught?

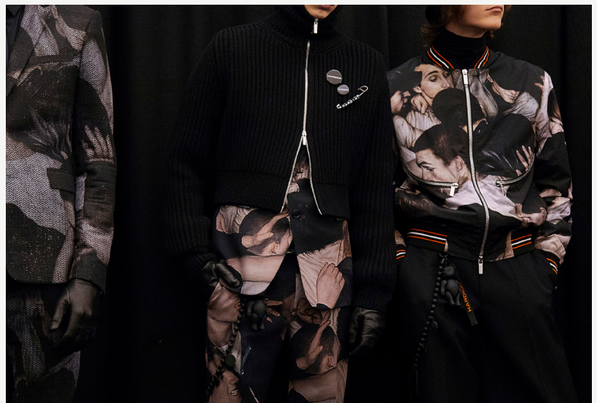
DW: Oh no, I get caught frequently – like a couple of times a year – but I don't get arrested. I've been lucky, but I've also been dealing with this problem for so long that I've come up with ways to talk my way out of it. My work isn't conventional graffiti or vandalism so the police will make a judgement call on the spot and then they have to make a decision on the severity of it. But then, they've looked at what I do and they end up posing for pictures with me. Sometimes, though, they're complete fascist assholes. But they recognise that – and I'm being honest here. They recognise that bringing a white guy into the police station isn't going to work out so well for them. It'd be a big pain in the ass. If I had brown skin, I would've been arrested many times.

LA: That's a sad thing to hear, though.

DW: Yeah, it's really sad and I'm not proud of it, but I acknowledge it. But you know, there's also the case that

Lotus Lounge, 2010, Dan Witz, The Garage.

HarDior, Dior Homme Winter 2017.



I can't travel to all the neighbourhoods I'd like to go to. Especially back in the old days, a white guy like me could not have gone to certain neighbourhoods where I would have wanted to do.

LA: Have you ever tried to?

DW: Well I always try to calculate my odds of success and I don't want to impose something unwanted on people, so that's part of the creativity: conceiving something that you can get away with. It's a continuing saga of risk and adrenaline, which I really enjoy. It makes it more vivid, engaging and interesting. I'm doing a piece this year that is really difficult and aggressive. It involves me being out on little tiny boats on this very turbulent river we have here, and it has a lot of guerrilla activity and frankly, I'm constantly worried about it. I work in a state of high anxiety – that's an essential part of my process.

LA: Do you feel there's a level of rebellion attached to what you do? Since its early beginnings, street art, though a part of the urban public space, has been considered completely outsider-ish. It goes against specific social norms and expectations. Do you see yourself a rebel?

DW: I understand that I'm working as an outsider. I put stuff up whenever I want and in that way I'm going against the stream of normal street art. One of my core beliefs is that when you make art that can't be owned, that's not for sale, that isn't part of the corporate marketplace, there's this shift in the way of thinking about art. I consider that to be rebellious. If there's no auction value or dollar amount that puts my work upon a hierarchy, it is just free. So how are you going to deal with that? It's a rebellious paradigm shift in the way of thinking about art that has come along in 20th century and is still very relevant. I know this sounds pretentious, but I believe it.

LA: Is the question of anonymity an important factor in your work? Do you think it empowers the artist or, on the contrary, does it destroy the classical notion of the artist as the genius figure?

DW: Well if you're not immediately identified as someone or some brand, perhaps you're experiencing a purer impression of your work. I mean when you see something and you're like, "What the fuck is that?" Then maybe later you think, "Who did it?" I'm not complaining about the artists who sign their work or promote themselves; they're sort of entrepreneurs of their work and I understand it's hard to make a living and everyone wants to survive. I mean, I'm not "The hummingbird guy" anymore because every two years I change what I do so significantly that people don't know it's me. I love to wake up in the morning and go to the studio where I'm not painting another hummingbird but where I'm doing something completely new.

LA: It sounds intriguing. What made you start painting mosh pits?

DW: Well, the kind of art I enjoy is traditional academic realistic painting and I bring that practice to my street art. There's a blend of the very traditional academic approach with this new urban art medium that I've always used. But as an academic realist painter I'm still pretty much a student.

LA: Your paintings have been compared to traditional Baroque paintings of great masters like Caravaggio, Rembrandt or Rubens, that emphasise exaggeration in motion, expression, composition and where the grandeur is the main element. Do you see your work this way?

DW: The most difficult and valued genre of academic painting has been the large multi-group scenes up until the 20th century. They were once the prize-winners at the salon but they are out of favour today. Those are the ones that you walk by in the museum and go 'meh' on your way to look at the Monet or whatever. I learn from that type of painting and update it with my own point of view. I don't use their sentimentality or their moral positioning or even their boring classical subtexts but I do use their visual tricks and expert techniques, because they can create light and space. So the mosh pits seemed the logical thing to satisfy that need of mine.

LA: It seems that mosh pits are driven by some sort of unleashing of inhibited aggression; an untamed violence. In your work I found something very honest, almost instinctive about them. How do you see the mosh pits as an observer, as a photographer and as a painter?

DW: I'm into the violence. There's a joy of exalted spiritual emotion just like in the Baroque paintings but there's also cruelty. Hardcore music itself is like a dance form and there's nothing violent to it. But it has that particular energy. I grew up in the punk rock scene of the 80s and early 90s and there was a lot of rebellion involved that really satisfied my post-adolescent desires. So I take that energy and insert it into a traditional, some say boring, style of painting.

LA: I have the impression that opposing ideas attract you a lot. Are you a man of antithesis?

DW: There are definitely a lot of opposites involved in what I do. You know, I'm really into wild early hip-hop graffiti stuff. That really changed my world and blew my mind. So take that aesthetic and put it right against punk rock, which is another competing ideology. I combine my need for the intensity and collective catharsis of hardcore punk rock scenes with different styles of realist painting. From these opposites colliding, my self-expression is born.

LA: The paintings are extremely detailed, especially the human faces. Do faces have some particular significance to you? It's probably the most significant body part in terms of human identity. What happens to the face when it gets blended in this act of communal catharsis, when it gets lost in the middle of this highly electrifying energetic field that is the mosh pit? What happens to the facial identities of people when you paint a mosh pit? Do they lose themselves and become a unit?

DW: Well in the Baroque period there was a strong feeling of community when the Romans were attacking, raping and pillaging. Those are the emotional cues and then there is the overall gestalt of the experience. I always zero in on a few people because they are so interesting. What I'm looking for is the overwhelming experience of looking at a painting. I love when I go to a museum or an art gallery and I find a piece that engages me for longer than ten seconds. I'm fascinated by the artworks that grow on you. That's my goal – to make artwork that you could spend some time on.

LA: When I look at your paintings they instantly remind me of those classical depictions of historical battlefields. They're full of action, motion and chaos. People seem to be completely absorbed. What's your view on chaos in general?

DW: I'm attracted to the concept of chaos a lot. I think it attracts a lot of sociological resistance, especially in the current climate, but I've always been interested in that. The whole punk-rock movement and street art comes from this uncontrolled urban dystopia. That's how I started in New York in the 80s where everything was falling apart and going to shit. It was violent and filthy and in a way quite beautiful. I truly romanticised that kind of chaos and I still do. I'm going to Detroit in a couple of days to do some street art in Flint, Michigan, which was on the news recently. I'm really looking forward to being in one of those failed American cities with their fibres of neglect.

LA: So this type of American-dream-gone-wrong dystopia is a real inspiration for you?

DW: I know that they call it 'ruins porn' here and I know it's not fun, and there's a lot of sadness. But I also find it irresistible. I was about to go to Detroit a few years ago, but then everyone from the street art world discovered it around the same time and I realised it was almost cliché to do this ruins porn thing. But Flint, Michigan is a place where they had poisoned water for quite a while and the government never told anyone. This is a sad American story illustrating just how we disintegrated as a country.

LA: That is just terrible, yet a great subject to work on.

DW: Yeah (laughs). We'll see how that goes.

LA: I'm thinking of a mosh pit as a very temporary, fleeting moment that you can't grasp or bring back home as a totem, unlike a Metallica concert shirt or a stain of spilled lager on your newly-bought jacket. And you do exactly that: you paint this very specific moment of collective euphoria on the canvas and hold it up against the actual

Big Mosh Pit, 2007, Dan Witz, The Garage.

ABC No Rio, 2011, Dan Witz, The Garage.

moment itself. What does painting do that the camera cannot?

DW: I'm glad you asked me this. Yeah, it could be a snapshot. If you look at a photograph with a mosh pit and it has a certain value. But if you take one moment and sort of massage it into an alternate reality, it makes you open your eyes. So the photograph provides the information and I just use photography as a tool. I'm much more into Photoshop: I think it's just as amazing a medium as oil painting. I'm not interested in being hyper-realistic or photorealistic. I'm interested in the opposite, which is a sustained reality of a type of painting that doesn't exist in photographs. With my paintings I try to bring you into the space. In order to keep you in that space I have to compose them, and so the elements don't come from the same photograph. So I have a clear structure and I try to make this circular composition with an alternate reality, which is much more vivid to me than any photograph I've ever seen.

LA: How did the collaboration with Dior happen? What was your initial reaction? I'm guessing that you haven't collaborated with fashion houses before?

DW: Actually, I've been approached by them before. They're always looking for ways to nourish their brand and associate it with something current. But I never took it seriously. Then Dior got in touch with me I was sceptical and pretty much turned it down, but I mentioned it to my wife and she was like: "Well this one you may want to think about". She knew what Dior was more so than I did. I mean I didn't know what it was at all. I thought it was something tacky, probably, as my limited knowledge of couture wasn't always positive. But then we had some friends of ours who knew more about it, and they were like: "Oh no, Dior is really something," "They're really cool," "There's this history," and "This is not a bad idea". I was lucky because I'm really not usually inclined to do things like this as it creates a noise in my head that I really don't need.

LA: So how did they manage to convince you?

DW: I happened to be in Paris for another show I was in and I went over to Dior and met them. I met the director, I met the guy who was doing the designs with my paintings and then I saw how cool they were and what deep integrity they have as artists. They were very honest and genuine people, especially the designer Kris Van Assche and the people who were on the team. But if I hadn't been in Paris that week and we hadn't met, I don't know what would've happened. So I wasn't really going to do it. And there were some negotiations with lawyers and contracts, and I hate that stuff. My default setting is just to go "No, I'm not doing this, this sounds weird." But they were really sweet and patient. So basically, three days before the fashion show, me, my wife and kid get to go on a business class trip: they've put us in this five star hotel which was insane, and the next thing I know is that I'm in the middle of this crazy fashion show in Paris, which is a thing of art in every sense. And all of a sudden there are thousands of people in the audience, the music, the flashlights, and they're walking down the runaway in clothes with my paintings on them. It's surreal (laughs).

LA: Did the fact that they were transferred from the canvas onto the garment change them in anyway? Did it interfere with the whole perception of mosh pits, being represented on Dior's runaway?

DW: Well, exactly, that's the thing. The way they used the palette, the design, the style in which the cloth draped, expressed exactly what my paintings were supposed to do. Like you were describing this face here and some violence there; they did it perfectly. Even this muted colour palette they ended up choosing. It was super cool. And you know, I never like when I see my work reproduced or reused in any way, but this time I was blown away and I'm completely aware that it was only because I was lucky to have the right people guiding me. On my own, I would have screwed this up for sure. I mean the money was good and all that, but I gave up worrying about money long ago, because that doesn't work. If I worry about money it doesn't help and if I don't worry about it, well that doesn't help either. So it kind of evens out at the end of the day (laughs).

LA: You mentioned earlier that your wife told you to consider the offer, that Dior is special. Did she like the show?

DW: I'm not ambitious enough in a career sense, that's one of my problems. But I go to these trips a lot because I get to take my wife and kids with me and my intent is to make an interesting, cool life for us on our limited budget. So I'm like great, we are in Paris, they dressed us in Dior clothes which fit like nothing else, but it was mostly for her. Before the show they had this celebrity thing where they all go out on the floor and meet each other and everyone's looking at you and there are all these famous people. I've been around a lot so I'm not too amazed by stuff like that, but it was insane with all the paparazzi.

LA: Like that musician, A$AP Rocky – they took a picture of you together. I must confess, I don't know the guy, but apparently the world is going mad about him.

DW: Well neither did I (laughs). But yeah he's huge. And everyone loves him, my nieces, nephews, and actually when I met him, he was super cool. Boy George was there too and he's like some kind of spiritual titan. And anything Dior does, they're going to choose deeply soulful people. They're not going to choose idiots. So anyway I'm meeting all those people, photographers are taking all those pictures and I could look over through the bleachers and there's my wife, and my kid who's like "What the fuck!" and I have my witnesses with me. If no one had seen me like that, it would have been like it didn't happen. It's amazing that my family was with me.

LA: And now your kid has quite a story to tell his friends.

DW: I bet he does (laughs).

LA: So would you do this again?

DW: I will certainly consider that with an open mind. I sometimes think if this is a sell-out thing to do, to give up your identity and integrity to this commercial company. Some people might say it's selling out, especially when I have this kind of reputation as a punk-rock rebel as you were sort of referencing. But all through the experience, there was never a moment where I thought that. If I did try to sell out, it would suck.

LA: Yeah, selling out sounds against the nature of what you do.

DW: Yeah, well, I'm conscious of it. There was never a moment where I felt stupid. I mean I had to pose for pictures and stuff and I used to avoid that because I'm a street artist and all that, but I gave up on that a few years ago and now that I'm older I don't really care how I look. I simply don't give a shit about my image anymore.

LA: That must be a liberating feeling. I still have some work to do there.