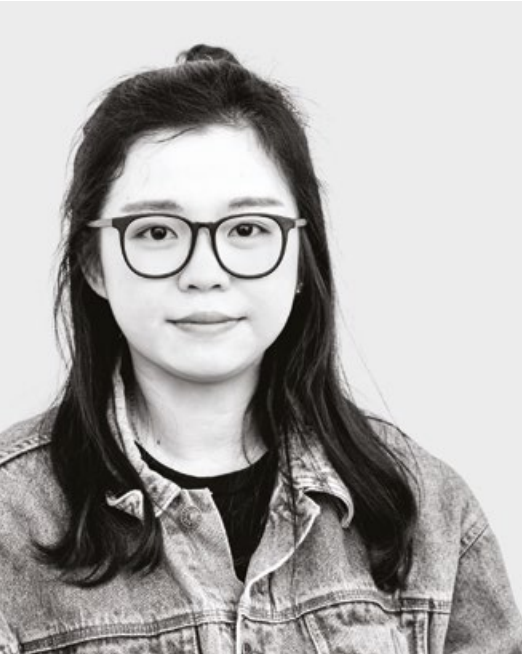


While many look at certain industry accolades – LVMH Prize semi-finalist, Forbes 30 under 30 honouree, and winner of the first Business of Fashion China Prize – as far-flung dreams, Caroline Hú managed to achieve them all within the first year of launching Reverie by Caroline Hú.

The Artist’s Way

Text/
MADELEINE MAK
Photos/
Reverie by Caroline Hú



CAROLINE HÚ



Through a hyper feminine lens, the Shenzhen-born creative captivates with her romantic garments of tulle, silk, and lace woven with techniques such as smocking, pleating, and embroidery. Think inflatable pillows and vintage crocheted lace that are draped to form voluminous gowns. Skirt sets feature tulle that is smocked to give the illusion of impressionist florals. But beyond the frills, Hú sees herself as an artist that uses fabric and fashion to translate her “art view”. “I am interested in the arts, not just fashion,” Hú shared. “I feel everything is connected.” While earlier collections for Reverie by Caroline Hú, which she started in 2018, made direct references to renaissance paintings, the last two seasons saw the Central Saint Martins and Parsons School of Design graduate get up close and personal.

She created gowns with bulbous silhouettes that experiment with layers of contrasting materials. Highlights from the fall-winter 2024 collection include a collage of handmade silk bows with jacquard as well as a floral print paired with tulle embroidered with black sequins in a geometric pattern. The darker colour palette reflects Hú’s feelings towards the current state of the world. “Nowadays, I feel many things are cruel: war, politics... too many things,” Hú admitted. “I really care about people and the world. I feel hurt, that’s why I try to build up this fantastical and romantic world. I’m not a very verbal person but I actually have a lot of stories and thoughts behind my designs.” Her unique fine art view also trickles into how she communicates her work. Throughout our conversation, the



designer unapologetically referred to her creations as *paintings*. Turns out, the rising talent’s father was an oil painter. She also credits her artistic leanings to a high school teacher who inspired an early love for ceramics. “Maybe after 10 years, I’ll want to become a painter. Then I’ll use paint to convey what I want to say.” But before that happens, she is making the most out of her highs and lows in the fashion world. Shortly after the success of Reverie by Caroline Hú, the pandemic hit. Left at a standstill in Shanghai, the designer made a last ditch effort in Paris. Luckily, big risks come with big rewards. Since spring-summer 2024, her presentations have not only been listed on the official Paris Fashion Week schedule but have also gained recognition from Hong Kong’s Fashion Farm Foundation. In May, her namesake label dropped a highly anticipated collaboration with Adidas. This saw the iconic *Samba* sneakers loved-up with dainty laced uppers and her signature smocked tulle. “Every time I *paint* something, I can feel whether it is what I want or don’t want to do,” Hú reflected. “I really trust my heart when I create something.”

MANIFESTO: What does your typical design process look like?

CAROLINE HÚ: Normally, I would have very random sketches and after, I love to drape on the mannequin. We always drape the shape by ourselves and not through a patternmaker. I love to use real material on a real person or a mannequin. When I have a nice shape, I take photos and redraw what I have created on paper.

M Smocking is one of your signatures. What about this technique speaks to you?

CH We use a smocking machine that is very old. When you put fabric under it, it creates pleats. I will put different layers and colours into the machine. When it comes out, it becomes paintings. Because the fabric shrinks, it’s very hard to control and it takes a long time to get the right colour or pattern.

M So smocking reminds you of painting?

CH Yes, it’s about painting and also the layers. Sometimes, I’ll put on more than 10 layers!

M Your fall-winter 2024 collection channels some complex emotions. Tell us about this.

CH It’s about distance between people. For example, I stay with my husband, we are very close. I am happy to share all that but I still need my own space. Yes, the process was very emotional for me.

M We also noticed bows, something we haven’t seen in past collections...

CH It’s a jacquard fabric that we made holes in. The bows were used to tie it together. We had a two-metre long fabric but after each bow design it became smaller. That’s what I wanted to play with. It’s not a traditional cut but we played with the fabric to turn it into a dress.

M Since spring-summer 2024 you’ve introduced pillow-like elements in your work. What does this aim to convey?

CH It’s also me using fashion to represent distance in relationships. When I want to say something in my collection, I try to put a lot of messages in the technique or fabric. Sometimes, I don’t think people can understand it if I don’t have the time to explain it more. So I created [this design] to make it easier to understand. I also didn’t put padding, I put air [into the pillows]. That’s why I would say the relationships for me in this collection are not *heavy*... I just need a small breathing space for myself. I think this relates to everyone.

M What does the Adidas collaboration mean to you?

CH I think this is a really good opportunity for me! Nowadays, it is not easy, especially for independent designers. Last year, Adidas decided to sponsor us with 25 pairs of shoes that I just remade and showed in the spring-summer 2024 collection. After that, I posted a few of the sneakers on Instagram. People loved it and it had a lot of likes. This got back to Adidas and they thought it’s quite a nice idea for an official collaboration.

M Talk us through how the Reverie by Caroline Hú codes were infused into the *Samba* designs.

CH It connects with the idea of distance in relationships – it’s all about layers and covers. That’s why one style of the *Samba* has a lot of lace covering it but I didn’t change the shoe pattern. I just covered it with lace. For the other, I put smocking fabric on top. For me, it’s just texture and it relates to my show idea.

M Did you face any hurdles in the design process?

CH Yes, this is our first time designing shoes. With clothes, I can drape it by myself but shoes are very hard. Every time I have an idea, I have to explain it to the factory and then they bring the idea to life. This makes it complicated.

M Can we foresee more collaborations with Adidas in the future?

CH I have already talked to them and they are open about designing clothes or socks! Hopefully, we can see more styles and products in the future.

M All your collections also feature upcycled fabrics. Tell us more about your practices.

CH In my studio we have a lot of boxes separated by colour. Every season we put leftover fabrics into these boxes. Next time I have a show, I will go back to see what fabrics that I like. We also have a sponsorship from Sophie Hallette, makers of French handmade lace. Because their lace is very expensive, they send us their leftovers. We combine it all into our collection because it’s still delicate and nice even if they are just small pieces.

M Why is upcycling important to you?

CH Because I care about people and the world we live in. I think everyone needs to know and care about this. As a designer, I really hate when people use the recycling idea to create a project and ask people to buy something. I feel the design comes first. When people love a design they will pay money for it. Maybe after, they will want to learn more about the brand, then the fabric and the recycling practices.

M You’ve been spotlighted as a rising talent by many organisations like the Fashion Farm Foundation. How has this impacted your journey?

CH They are all really important to me. Maybe not just for me, but for all independent designers. It’s not just about cash flow but all designers need opportunities. When you have a brand, it’s not that you have a good design and people will see it... you need someone to help let more people know about you.

M What do you wish for the industry?

CH I think more support for young designers. They all work very hard and I can see a lot of very talented designers. They just need the opportunity and support.

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