

At 57, Suzi de Givenchy is living out all of

# Building Castles in the Sky

Suzi de Givenchy may have chiselled features, tall stature and an illustrious last name, but she never imagined that she'd become a fashion model. Even less so, breaking into the scene at age 52. But life, the Hong Kong-born and Long Island-raised de Givenchy proves, is anything but predictable. The year was 2019. Over casual dinner party conversation, she was scouted by Versae Vanni, the booking director of Next Management. "I did not expect it at all," de Givenchy reflected. "It felt like such a big jump from life!" Apart from a short stint as a showroom model for Liz Claiborne, de Givenchy had opted for a parallel path. She met her husband, the nephew and godson of the legendary couturier Hubert de Givenchy, moved to Paris, became a business partner and had three sons. Things, however, took a turn after her life partner's sudden passing. She recalls some of the hard-hitting questions that she was left with after the loss. "Do I exist living by myself and not as a couple?" de Givenchy wondered. "Do I exist as a woman and not just as a mother?" The serendipitous chance to model offered de Givenchy a restart. "I don't want to be a one shot wonder," she stated. "For me, this is a career and I really do count on being here for the long run." Today, the 57-year-old has walked the runways of Balenciaga, Off-White, Lemaire, and Helmut Lang. And in front of the lens, she's starred in campaigns for Schiaparelli, Net-a-Porter, and Boucheron. To top it off, the resilient model hasn't been lax in using her voice to shatter ageist ideals in fashion and beauty. "We shouldn't judge ourselves by the standards of other people," de Givenchy shared. "It helps to have representation

for younger generations. We can all be different and be ourselves." She has already created shifts in both real and reel life. On the Chinese social media platform Little Red Book, there was a post about her that garnered thousands of comments, with users reflecting on their own standards of beauty. "We [Asians] have different skin tones and we don't all have super straight hair," she said. "It's fulfilling to know that I can stimulate the conversation a bit." She feels a similar gratification when approached by younger women on the street. "When you're positive, people feel it," she shared. "Positive attracts positive." She also uses her Instagram to connect with and empower others. Harnessing her love for writing, she uses the platform to reflect on things that make her heart full. Beyond career milestones, it's the little things in life, like a children's book or a new bloom on her camellia plant, that feeds her soul. Behind her desk, she displays a small collection of postcards. According to her, some of them inspire mantra-like sign-offs that she leaves at the end of each post: "Embrace life, Love out loud and Build Castles in the Sky!!!". Contemplating on this, she shared some final words of wisdom. "There are times in life that are harder than others," she shared. "But you continue to do your thing. You dream."

Text/  
MADELEINE MAK  
Photos/  
SUZI DE GIVENCHY,  
MELODIE JENG and  
MARTS ROMERO  
and Helmut Lang

our supermodel fantasies.



# SUZI DE GIVENCHY





**MANIFESTO:** Was there a formative moment that sparked your interest in fashion?

SUZI DE GIVENCHY: I don't think I can say that there was a formative moment. In my life, it's always been little moments that have pushed me down a path. Life is like that. You get opportunities, you have experiences and you take what you want from it. Some people know at 16 that they want to be a fashion designer or an artist... I never had that. But I do have a positivity and a child-like outlook when I see things. What's always worked for me is to just let life come. It's the accumulation of little moments that develop a passion.

**M** What is your favourite part of being a model?  
SDG I love being in front of the camera and I'm more confident now walking for shows, but what I really love is meeting new people and working on creative projects. Now I feel like I have my place and that I have something to bring to the table. Another thing that really touches me is when younger people come up and talk to me. I feel like I've touched people just by being here and that feels very special.

**M** Have you had any meaningful interactions from this fashion month you'd like to share?

SDG At one of the dinners that I had during fashion week, I was seated next to Chemena Kamali. At the end of her first Chloé show, her son ran out to greet her. I told her that this part of the show stayed with me the longest. To me, it was perfect because it represented real life, a working woman in fashion. I just thought that was the most beautiful thing.

**M** Of all the runway shows or campaigns that you've done, which felt the most fulfilling?

SDG Recently, walking for Helmut Lang was so special because Peter [Do] is also of Asian descent. It was my first fashion week in New York, where I grew up, and I felt I did a good job. Plus, Helmut Lang is a European brand. Also, the Vetements show because I felt confident in my walk. I wore 10-inch heels! *(Laughs)* If that happened two years ago, I would just be like *oh my gosh...* but I pulled up my big girl pants. It was just great!



**M** Was walking for shows the most difficult aspect of the job when you started?

SDG Yeah, 'cause the runway really is about the walk... but I've learnt to just be nicer to myself. I'll never walk like a giraffe like those girls do so beautifully. If I did that I would just roll on the floor! *(Laughs)* I can practise so my walk gets better but at the end of the day, this is me. You hired me because of me. I will do my best for you but I can't be anything other than myself. This realisation has given me power.

**M** You recently also posed nude for a campaign. Tell us more about this experience.

SDG It was very liberating. As soon as I saw the set, I knew it was going to be cool. It was an office space and there were people working next door! It was the funniest thing! *(Laughs)* When there is a good vibe on set, you don't even think about it. You go with the flow. Plus, if I'm on set, there is a reason for me to be there. They know my body isn't going to be like the other two 18-year-old models. I don't stress about my body anymore, it is what it is!

I was a little bit afraid though when I posted it on Instagram. I was afraid that people wouldn't understand but the responses were mainly positive... I know



it was the right decision to do it. In my little way, maybe I'm changing how people think. Of course, I don't have the same reach as supermodels, but I'm happy with the little handful of people that I can help.

**M** Even with your positive outlook on life, it requires a lot of energy to push yourself to be out there. How do you keep yourself grounded?

SDG I think it's just my upbringing and life. I have three kids. I was married. I know where I come from and I don't forget it. When you have to adapt so much, especially as an immigrant, you face situations where you don't have a choice... you just get up and continue.

**M** We read that one of your goals is to be the face an international beauty brand with an Asian reach.

SDG This is something I thought about in the beginning. But then I realised, this idea of an *ideal beauty* is deeply ingrained in China. Maybe it won't be me but instead the next generation who gets someone who looks like me in a campaign. I'm trying to be realistic... but if it does happen, I would love to! I think to have an older woman like me or who is different from the ideal beauty would be so powerful. That would mean that we are progressing. Maybe it will happen when I'm 70! *(Laughs)*

**M** What do you wish you saw more of in the industry?

SDG I wish there was even more diversity and that there isn't this token older or heavier person. The casting at Helmut Lang was great. My recent Lacoste show too. But the thing is, the fashion industry makes small steps... that's just the way it is. There is also this fad of 1990s supermodels coming back. It's great but I would love to see more campaigns with women who are a little bit more representative of everyday people. It's more approachable.

**M** Going back to the Helmut Lang show. What about the experience made you feel that they took diversity seriously and not just as an afterthought?

SDG Already when you go for the fitting, there is a diverse group of people who greet you. Peter has a circle of people that he works with who are Vietnamese like

he is or Asian. The casting is also really diverse. I felt very comfortable... there were no judgements. I was also invited to the dinner after the show. I think it was the first time I was at a fashion dinner where I was with all Asians. It was so lovely to be with people like me. It felt like I was embraced in this community and it was very special.

**M** Of the many brands that you've collaborated with, we've yet to see a full circle moment with Givenchy. Would you be up for it?

SDG Sometimes, I feel it could be too cliché. At first, what was important for me was to build my own image and my career independently. When you have confidence, you have power and I needed to feel more power within myself and my place in the industry. It's not all about age but for a woman of my age, this was important. I needed to know my place. Now I've learnt that it's not only what the brand can do for you but what you can do for them. We're all bringing something to the table. So Givenchy, why not? It may be great for them too!

**M** What is something you've learnt about yourself in recent years?

SDG I've learnt so much about myself in this industry and that's why I'm so grateful to be here. For one, I've really learnt to let go. If an opportunity doesn't happen it's okay because something else will come. Also, I've learnt that I am worthy and I do have something to bring to the table. I'm stronger than I thought I was and I have that confidence in me... I just needed to let it out.

**M** What's a perfect day?

SDG Everyday is kind of perfect 'cause I'm alive and I can have another experience – there's always something wonderful that happens. But I guess when it's been raining non-stop for 10 days and then it stops, that's a perfect day! *(Laughs)*

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