



Cotton denim overcoat Louis Shengtao Chen

Escape to Wonderland

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Louis Shengtao Chen’s work is a window to the soul: Introspective, subversive and surreal. The self-styled “people’s designer” is well on his way to earn that title by merit.

Louis Shengtao Chen never planned on starting his own label. Not to mention, do so at the height of the pandemic. Yet, in two short years, the fresh-faced Central Saint Martins graduate has emerged as a tour de force in womenswear. The tenacious designer found himself en route from Chongqing, the site of his blossoming design studio, to Paris as a semi-finalist of this year’s LVMH Prize. An accomplishment that the Beijing-born talent, who traces a love for fashion back to a childhood trip to a Chanel boutique with his mother, attributes to hard work and determination. “I just got the opportunity to start my own brand, I fought for it and I pushed,” Chen shared with a vivaciousness contagious even through a video call. He shines through his surrealist approach, one that is also a quirky mix of casual and formal wear. Past collections saw spiky 3D organza gowns and a sudden explosion of tulle blend with denim laser engraved with a lace-like effect and an electric blue double-breasted coat with slanted pockets. It is clear, through the way he describes his process, that the

theatrical glamour of his wares is an extension of his personality, or perhaps, his alter-ego. It might even be his medium to meditate on his personal existential journey. Let’s not forget, the blossoming designer and savvy entrepreneur is only 26 years old. His fall 2023 collection, *Raised by Wolves*, is inspired by the real life accounts of runaway youths, where he explores his own feelings on escapism. A turbulent experience in many coming-of-age stories that Chen doesn’t see as negative. “Wanting to escape doesn’t mean you want to run away,” Chen ruminates. “It’s about that wonderland in your imagination and having a goal to fight for it and take charge.”

MANIFESTO: Did your upbringing influence your career path?

LOUIS SHENGTAO CHEN: My mom is a woman with *sense*. She loves fashion and imageries. Even when she had less money to spend, she bought magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. I still remember the first fashion magazine I read. It



Wool tweed and polyester dress, and polyester gloves Louis Shengtao Chen

had a Chanel campaign by Karl Lagerfeld in it. He is still one of my favourite icons. I saw the campaign and realised how amazing that even in a still image, the clothes had movement. It wasn't like clothings on a rack in a shopping mall. I was fascinated.

M Apart from Lagerfeld, who else do you find inspiring?

LSC I got to work with many designers in my academic years and later for professional work. I found that every creative person has their own strengths and ways to logically understand what they want to do. When I worked with Jonathan Anderson at Loewe, he relied on fittings and seeing things in real life. He is sensitive to material use – he needs to feel it first. From Loewe, I learnt that there are times we can't just draw to design. You need more, like fittings or just putting things on people, to see how it behaves. For Lagerfeld, I love how he drew. Nowadays, designers can't create in that original way. When you sketch, you bring in a mood or character into the drawing. Lagerfeld did that successfully. He was a workaholic, working for Chanel, Fendi, Chloé and his own brand. He brought his fluent drawing skills into the respective house's DNA. I find that quite charming.

M You completed a BA in Fashion Print at Central Saint Martins. How did that experience influence your design process?

LSC As a designer doing my own stuff now, I have the knowledge of different techniques at my disposal. Instead of a trial-and-error process, I already know what will work with some fabrics. Like some polyesters will work with print. Some need to be acid-dyed. That's something I learnt from my BA. Also, I think I gained courage working with various colours and textures. You can clearly see this in every collection I've done so far.

M Tell us about your design process.

LSC I start with fittings, like "What can we do in 10 minutes?". I find that drawing from imagination is quite vague and bland. I spend a lot of time dressing people and seeing how others dress on the streets. I want to make everyday clothes. It's not an easy job. It's harder than just making a crazy, avant-garde piece. For that, you can rely on techniques and find an amazing pattern cutter to make an unbelievable shape for you. But designers need to also understand functionality. There is this tension behind every piece. I don't think my life goal is to dress stars or celebrities. I want to be the people's designer.

M You navigated being a young designer during a trying time which was the recent pandemic. What is your biggest takeaway from the last few years?

LSC My best takeaway is knowing how to plan. Every new designer will have the hunger and dream. But to be successful, planning is the most important. For example, is the budget meaningful? Can this help the business be sustainable? How can I take charge of my role in a team? Making plans is something that you have to do when you start your own business, it's not something you do as a student. At school, you have a week's deadline for a project, you don't have time to make a plan. You just do it. With the two collections a year I do now, there are extra pieces to think about. There are pop-ups and collaborations. I also have two PR teams, one in Shanghai and the other in Paris. We have to plan for all of this. Otherwise, it is impossible.

M Your design studio is in Chongqing. What has this experience been like?

LSC I like it! It's a very original way of working. You don't feel the pressure to socialise with people. You don't have to dress up to go to work. It's purely a fashion time portal in the middle of nowhere. Now we have more than 10 people working on the new collection. More interns and seamstresses, it's quite a big team! It's not like we do a collection, have a break and then do another. We don't have a break anymore. It's work everyday. I remember five or six years ago, I still didn't believe that fashion design could be a professional job.

M Your studio evolved so quickly. And your brand is doing so well now...

LSC What *well* means to me... financially, we are in good form. Am I still as energetic and motivated everyday? I think it depends, if I'm being honest. You can't say you're an animal – full of energy or inspiration all the time. That's a lie. No one can do that. Especially as a creative person, you need to have a break. But you also can't just be a dreamer. You have to face the merchandising challenges and look at the data. The numbers. I don't think a lot of upcoming designers do that. But for me, I have the responsibility because I oversee a team of people.

M You seem to pull a lot of inspiration from Western pop culture. For example, your fall 2022 collection referenced *Sex and the City*.

LSC I think most of my inspirations are not from specific countries. It's not just that I'm

Chinese so the oriental style is more attractive to me or that I lived in Europe so European culture is more attractive. I find this idea quite common among Gen Z designers. We have that cultural confidence about who we are and where we come from. It's not like 10 to 15 years ago, especially among Chinese designers, where they fight or try hard to prove themselves. Nowadays, we don't have to do that. I don't need the validation. A lot of my inspirations relate to my emotional experiences. It's a very intimate and immediate thing. It's very freeing.

M Congratulations on being a semi-finalist at this year's LVMH Prize. What does this recognition mean to you?

LSC As a designer with a brand that is only two years old, it's very overwhelming. Travelling to Paris and seeing the showroom with panellists like Anna Wintour and Kim Jones, it was refreshing to see them judge a collection differently from how buyers do. They care more about the entire atmosphere, the merchandising and the creativity. There was also a great selection of brands across menswear, womenswear, and gender-fluid silhouettes. It was not a competition. It was a stage to communicate and share our work.

M What an experience it must have been to be amongst other emerging designers from across the world. What was your biggest takeaway?

LSC I found it interesting that everyone works in a different way. No one designer was similar. Everyone is so independent and confident about what they do. Some designers are very tailoring and technique-focused like the Japanese brands that are so precise about every single detail and stitch. Other brands are very avant-garde and sustainability focused. Paolina Russo, whom I knew from school, took natural dyed yarn and weaved it in a 3D reflective way. It's very different from what I do. This doesn't mean I have to do it in this way. But, it's more about broadening my awareness about how to make fashion happen in different ways. For me, it is great to explore their world. It's fantastic, an opportunity like this.

M How did it feel to see Russo and celebrate each other's evolution?

LSC It was very fresh! Three years of the pandemic was so hard. I didn't think I would see anyone outside [China] for the rest of my life. (*Laughs*) Seeing her and everyone else standing there with a selection of their proudest works... I was so happy. It was so great to even talk.

M Your recent fall 2023 collection, *Raised by Wolves*, takes inspiration from the 1999 movie *Girl, Interrupted* and a photo series by Jim Goldberg. Tell us about these inspirations.

LSC That book [by Jim Goldberg] documents hundreds of abandoned teens who later renamed themselves. There is a certain way teenagers showcase their rebellion. One boy said that taking on a new name means beginning a journey as someone else. The collection is about this idea of conflict in oneself, when you are not sure who you are or which direction you want to go. It's about the imperfections. This juxtaposition or contrast, it is something I do every collection.

M The collection utilises denim to mimic the look-and-feel of a fur trim on a coat. How did this idea come to fruition?

LSC Two years ago, I started with a very casual approach to denim, like washed denim and patterned denim. It was more about the fabric and less about the silhouette or the clothes itself. Starting from the last collection, I wanted to forget that *this is denim*. I wanted to focus more on the conflicting *Raised by Wolves* theme of bourgeois yet abandoned pieces. So just like past takes on shearling, fur or tweed, we did it in denim. What I really liked about the last collection is that it used the function of denim to showcase what I think about luxury. Denim doesn't have to be casualwear, it can be very bourgeois. This is also quite a challenge. Denim has a lot of potential and limitations. Sometimes the stretch is very unpredictable. When you wash it, it's not the same. It's like chemistry, nature, and everything in between.

M There are also subtle nods to botanicals such as a sensory petal neck detailing on a top. Tell us a little more about this.

LSC It is the idea of petals and laser cuts. Machinery and craftsmanship mixed together. It represents both the organic world and the machine world. This season, you see a lot of wide petals as embellishments. These petals are not made with silk or fancy fabrics, they are made of shirting fabric like what you would wear at work. Very normal fabric. It's not something you think of as couture craftsmanship but I made it in a more old-school couture style. I like this balance.

M Black has a more obvious presence in this collection versus past seasons. You mentioned that it was a bit challenging. Why?

LSC I always feel black is so distant and dangerous to me. I never wear black. It's not like

Cotton denim overcoat [Louis Shengtao Chen](#), calfskin leather Amblem Grommet belt [Ambush](#), and calfskin leather Slash Flare boots [Alexander McQueen](#)





Cotton and polyester top, and polyamide skirt Louis Shengtao Chen, and calfskin leather Slash Flare boots Alexander McQueen
Hair HIM NG; Make-up CATHY ZHANG; Model XIN QI AT MNG ASIAN MODELS

I choose to not wear black, but when I wear it I feel I can't handle it. I feel it pressing down on me. In the last collection, I used black because it made sense to the storyline. The idea of making black but making it the Louis Shengtao Chen way, which is, you see black but you feel a more curvy, feminine and erotic attraction. Black as embroidered sequins and black coated in a rubbery texture. You feel more sexuality or the idea that you don't have to hold back. You are already charming and gorgeous. You can pull it off.

M You used 3D-printed mannequins in your fall 2023 campaign. Why not real models?

LSC I love models. I love how the body presents garments but this time, I wanted to do something different. I always want to do something surreal. It's similar to Martin Margiela's concept in the way that when you give life to something still and non-biological, such as a 3D-printed face, it becomes erotic. You put your creation on a sculpture. It also becomes more like a sculpture.

M You mentioned surrealist influences, is there a specific muse or artist who inspires you?

LSC I really like Man Ray and Hans Bellmer. When surrealism started, it was a bunch of guys who recorded women in drawings or photographs. It was about the male gaze. I'm a male designer and I'm doing womenswear. I don't want to be like them, taking control of females by dictating what they should wear or who they should be. I'd hate to do that. With every collection, people ask, "What type of women am I dressing?". No, I don't think this way. That's why I think I am a surrealist fashion designer. I'm a modern way of surrealism, not like them. I'm not putting a cage over a female. It's a new male gaze that is more free and friendly.

M One of the 3D-printed mannequin looks like you. What is the story behind this?

LSC At the beginning, the art director wanted me to wear the clothes for the campaign but no. (*Laughs*) We then decided to make the sculpture a bit like me. They scanned my face and added more feminine characteristics to the nose, lips and bone structure. It was just a fun and joyful decision. I don't try hard to be like, "Boys like me can wear clothes like that" or think too much about genderless fashion. I don't think that's the focus of what I do. It's more about releasing who you are right now, and I represented who I was at the time of that fall 2023 collection.

M What is something unique that your brand brings to the Chinese fashion scene?

LSC Something I already started proving is that you can do fashion no matter where you are. For example, I was in London and Paris before but now I am doing avant-garde fashion in Chongqing. Location doesn't stop you from where you are going or your naive sense of creating and remaking beauty. Sometimes, younger people ask me, "I tried so hard to get into school" or "I fought to get this job" but "I didn't make it and I'm so depressed". I tell them, it's never about who you are working with or what kind of environment you are living in. In my story, I proved I made it. I made it as a semi-finalist of the LVMH Prize two years after starting my brand. And I'm the first designer to have a background from Chongqing. I can be very proud of this.

M Is there anything you want to say to younger designers who want to follow in your footsteps?

LSC I would say, don't. Create your own path. I didn't plan to become who I am. I didn't plan to make a brand and present shows in fashion weeks. It's just hard work. There is no other way to achieve it. Just because you work hard doesn't mean you will get there, but you won't if you don't.

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