

working in WONDERLAND

The worlds she creates are fantastical flights of fancy – think wall-climbing cabs and freshly baked bi-planes – and she’s worked for the loftiest of fashion brands, from Valentino to Prada, yet there is still something nicely down-to-earth about set designer Shona Heath. She tells *Selena Schleh* about joyous quests for ‘sticky foam’ and plasterboard and how to make things last in today’s culture of throw-away images

Shona Heath’s whimsical, magical worlds have graced the glossy pages of fashion bibles *Vogue*, *W Magazine*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *LOVE*, and filled the windows of world-famous stores, from Harrods to H&M. She’s the fashion industry’s go-to set designer – and yet, you’ve probably never heard her name. While the spotlight shines on her collaborators – creative luminaries, such as photographer Tim Walker and stylist (and new *British Vogue* editor) Edward Enninful, Heath works quietly in the shadows. And that’s exactly how it suits her.

“If you’d asked me ten years ago [if set designers get the recognition they deserve], I’d have said no,” Heath muses over the phone from her Shoreditch studio. “But now I feel like I’m really lucky to be doing a creative job that I love, and if you want to be shouted about you have to change your role slightly, and it gets more into art direction. That’s still creative, but I don’t want to be stood behind a computer editing pictures. I like the hands-on crafting and physicality of my job.”

Magical trees and melting Perspex

Heath’s love of handicrafts started from a young age, thanks to her creative mother. “I’d watch her making clothes and hats and stained glass windows, and think I could do anything she could. Sew, glue, build, paint the sitting room...” After studying fashion and print design at Brighton University, she started designing costumes for music videos. Unaware that there was such a job as ‘set designer’, she fell into it by accident in 2001, helping out her friend Cathy Edwards, then-fashion editor of *Dazed & Confused*, on a shoot by creating a set made entirely out of paper. “I put my phone number at the bottom of the page, and the calls just started coming in – it sort of snowballed from there.”

Paper is just one of the materials Heath fashions into fantastical scenes for her luxury brand clients; in her deft hands, fibreglass could be transformed into a fleet of ornate black cabs driving up the side of J. Crew’s London flagship store; or polystyrene into a baguette bi-plane for Hermès’ 2009 campaign (the wheels themselves were made from actual bread – baked to order in a Paris boulangerie). There’s a whiff of mad scientist – or meth lab cook – in her methods for creating such visual wonders as iridescent ‘night-blooming’ flowers, a window display for McQueen Parfum at Harrods. “I wanted to make it all in wax, but the fire retardancy criteria at Harrods is so outrageous you can’t use glue, or any solvent-based paints, and you can’t use power tools in the window to put things together,” remembers Heath, “so we ended up cooking up Perspex in mini-

ovens and melting it to make it looks like wax.”

‘Elf ‘n’ safety hurdles aside, Heath finds shop windows the most challenging environment to design for: both in terms of the scale – “because you’ve always got a mannequin in there, and that puts an inanimate object you wouldn’t choose into your world” – and because, unlike fashion editorials and ad campaigns, there’s no filter. “You can put the things I make in front of the camera and once they’re photographed they look like magical, otherworldly things, whereas in a shop window it’s very different. I’m always trying to make sure the magic is there, so that people looking in are thinking: ‘how, why, what?’”

When it comes to achieving the ‘how’ on large-scale installations, such as the magical tree which spread its glittering, votive-bedecked branches over the front row for Dior’s 2017 spring couture show, Heath turns to London set builders Andy Knight. With 30 years’ experience, they’re well-tuned to her surreal aesthetic and the

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structural challenges that come with her predilection for “fine lines” (“I’m always asking them to make things thinner”), plus, they act as a useful check-and-balance on Heath’s wilder ideas. “I’ll want a twelve-foot wall of glass, and they’ll say, well, that’s going to fall over, unless you have panels; and do you want them every four foot, or every three foot? You reassess the design to answer the structural problems.”

At the other end of the spectrum is a world in miniature, complete with tiny gardens, hidden inside a 17th-century casket – an embroidered ▶



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1/Harper's Bazaar editorial, photographer Tim Walker
2/Pirelli 2018 Calendar, photographer Tim Walker

box where girls would secrete love-notes and keepsakes – which Heath and her team are painstakingly building in her Shoreditch studio for an exhibition at London’s V&A museum.

Expanding Alice and twisting Bosch

Where does she get her inspiration from? The “sinister staging” of Powell and Pressburger’s silver-screen classics, such as *Black Narcissus*, are “a big influence” – but mainly, it’s raw materials. On trips abroad, Heath makes a beeline for hardware stores where she ogles plasterboard and Plexiglas: “Like a seamstress would look at buttons and ribbons, I look at my craft. It’s just a bit bigger and more industrial.” She has a passion for “weird fabric shops, not luxury ones, the kind you see in Shepherds Bush, selling end-of-the-line

upholstery”, and is fascinated by colour and pattern on a large scale. The internet, too, is a rich source of references. “I’m always Googling things like ‘sticky black foam’ and the most random and wrong things come up.” Someone who shares Heath’s interest in the surreal and the fantastical is her long-term collaborator, photographer Tim Walker – the pair have worked together for the best part of 18 years, and produced some of fashion’s most iconic images. “He’s a very nice man,” she deadpans when asked about their relationship, adding, “we’re very lucky to share a complete library of references. We both have a love for nature and storytelling, fantasy and surrealism.” That long history of collaboration has produced a kind of creative shorthand. “Normally you waste a lot of

time trying to explain to someone what you’re going to do. I don’t need to prove to Tim that what I do is going to work – I just need to do it.” The pair recently teamed up on Pirelli’s 2018 Alice in Wonderland-themed calendar, featuring an all-black cast including Whoopi Goldberg as the Duchess and Naomi Campbell and Sean (P Diddy) Coombs as the axe-wielding Beheaders. The result is vintage Heath-and-Walker: all warped perspectives, walls tilting at alarming angles, a chaotic dreamscape littered with outsized playing cards and spindly gothic trees. In a recreation of the famous ‘drink me’ scene, the giant Alice, played by Sudanese-Australian model Duckie Thot, sprawls on the floor of a doll’s house, her puffy blue dress rucked up around Amazonian thighs, cartoonishly huge platform shoes resting on the ceiling. Bringing a fresh twist to a classic tale that’s already been reimagined numerous times, was “quite a challenge” remembers Heath. “[I asked myself], ‘how do I make this picture not look like it’s been done a million times?’ How do I make Alice’s dress not look like Alice’s dress? I found it difficult, but I enjoyed it because it felt like it had meaning, and that we were making some good comments and progressing something within the industry that needed progressing.” Pirelli came off the back of another Walker shoot that challenged fashion’s status quo, this time by casting unusual beauties – models with alopecia and the genetic disorder ectodermal dysplasia. The editorial, published in *LOVE* magazine and recently exhibited at Netherlands museum Noordbrabants, came about when art collector Nicola Erni commissioned Walker to do a shoot on any subject – he chose a twisted tribute to Hieronymous Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. “The definition of beauty was definitely pushed from the idea of a tall, skinny, beautiful thing,” says Heath, “[the models were] different shapes, sizes, colours, but still otherworldly.” Projects such as these, which initiate debates and “are making cultural steps forward, even if





they're tiny" have a longevity to them that Heath sees as a welcome riposte to the increasingly throwaway nature of image-making. She references not just the "millions" of sets which she has built, only to be trashed "because the photographer doesn't like it, or it doesn't go with the clothes" but the photographs themselves, which are becoming "smaller and more swipeable, almost reduced to stamp size." She's also witnessed first-hand how the insatiable demand for content has led to a watering-down of creativity as well as budgets. "There used to be, say, six definitive Prada images that were shot, and they were the be-all and end-all of the season. Now, that's not enough with all the platforms you need to put it on. You need to produce more like 500 images. So there's not as much energy going into [making] an interesting creative image, which is possibly why things have got a bit safer."

Seeking stories in Sanderson flora

As a result, Heath finds herself increasingly drawn to live and larger-scale projects. Set design for theatre or ballet are two avenues she'd like to explore, "if the right project came along". And she's already dipped a toe into the world of movement and choreography; last year, she and her husband, photographer Tim Gutt, embarked on a "purely personal project, free from advertising constraints, art directors, stylists" where they took "a bunch of people and some clothes to a crazy place we found, friends cooked on a camp stove, we took some crazy pictures and

1/Check-mate, model Edie Campbell photographed by Tim Walker, for Vogue Italia, 2015
2 High-Style, Malgosia Bela, photographed by Tim Walker, for Vogue Italia, 2010

WHAT INSPIRES Shona Heath

What's your favourite ever ad? The *Subjective Reality* campaign for Miu Miu's fall/winter 2015 collection, shot by Steven Meisel. I really believed this one.

What product could you not live without? Nivea moisturiser.

What are your thoughts on social media? I want to be able to be positive about it... but I'm still waiting.

How do you relieve stress during a shoot? Laugh a lot and never sit down.

What's the last film you watched and was it any good? *Jumanji 2*... Hilarious.

What's your favourite piece of tech? My iPhone. I love the camera and its accessibility. It is a notebook for me.

What film do you think everyone should have seen? *Little Miss Sunshine*.

What fictitious character do you most relate to? I don't really relate to anyone female, but I like *Danny, The Champion of the World's* dad. Actually, I think he might be real...

If you weren't doing the job you do now, what would you like to be? A full time, amazing, five-star mum.

Tell us one thing about yourself that most people won't know... I have one really long toe (apparently so did Cleopatra!)



"There's something about the storytelling in the floral patterns that I'm mesmerised by. I would love to use them in a very surprising and interpretative way."

produced an enormous body of work", publishing the results in a coffee table book, *We Went and We Were*. Using people in the same way as props in a set was "fascinating, and comes with an element of danger, failure and lack of control, which I love." Having already worked with a roll-call of top fashion brands, what would be her dream commission? Heath rather surprisingly cites an old English fabric company, Sanderson, which she remembers her mum buying offcuts from. "There's something about the storytelling in the floral patterns that I'm mesmerised by. I would love to use them in a very surprising and interpretative way." Long may Heath continue to construct her weird and wonderful worlds.