

Benetton 40th Anniversary.

By Richard Mason

Cape Town, October 2006. In a dream, the mind is free from reality's constraints. Curious fusions are possible. We can each be man or woman or beast; each fly and walk and speak in tongues; visit Europe, Antarctica, Asia or a thousand other as-yet-undiscovered continents. Dreams teach us to embrace the inexplicable, to believe in the barely realized visions of our waking selves. We encounter strange laws, new ways of living and being. Images and textures morph and fade and reform again, surprising us and making us question the very nature of things.

This collection – Benetton's first catwalk show – is inspired by dreams, and designed to inspire them. It is presented not in the traditional confines of Fashion Week, but in one of the world's foremost temples of contemporary art. The clothes are a form of cultural offering, a celebration of the legacy of the past and a statement of optimism in the face of an uncertain global future.



The traditional Benetton emphasis on wool, colour and fine tailoring is reimaged here, given fresh life. We see an emphasis on the movement and texture of woven yarns to convey exuberance and harmony; on the optimistic use of pure colours to lift the spirits. The effect is a projection of an idealistic faith in international unity and the possibilities of fashion as art.

The company's philosophy has always been rooted in an informed consumerism, its aesthetic ambitions calculated to evoke a utopian rainbow at the end of a storm. Benetton's futurist hopes recall the philosophical aims of the Bauhaus and De Stijl artists, who felt design could unite the world via an international visual language.

Forms and colours evoke pre-modern traditions from Japan to Scandinavia; vibrant yellows, oranges, reds, greens and turquoises are emphasized by their juxtaposition with neutral shades. The possibilities of wool – to stretch and morph and wrap in softness – are freely explored, and expanded by adventurous detailing. Silhouettes are exaggerated, hugging the body and masking it, making shadows unrecognizable.

There is a sense of fantasy about this collection, a relic of the dream state. The flash of light on ice, a gold chain on a labourer's neck, the cut of a soldier's uniform as he runs through the snow are reinterpreted here, with playful seriousness. Touch the iron chain and it transforms into lilac mohair. Reach for the Swedish sunset and find a patch of yarn.

When we wake from dreams, there is nothing left but the memory of them. We will look at these clothes and wander off and their images will linger with us, slipping into the past – but will they stay there? Perhaps. But there are other possibilities, too. For as Victor Hugo knew: 'There is nothing like a dream to create the future.'

RICHARD MASON

Richard Mason, 28, was born in South Africa.

When he was 18 he started his novel *The Drowning People*, a true literary case translated in more than 20 languages. In 2004 he published *Us*, his second novel. Mason studied at Eton and Oxford. Now he lives between SouthAfrica and the UK, his adoptive country.

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