

Like finding a lost wedding ring

Yohji Yamamoto in conversation with Ligaya Salazar

LS: I have read in many interviews of yours that you have a real love of the city, of the urban environment. So really the first question is how do you feel about exhibiting your work in London – a big metropolis like Tokyo, and quite an unusual and interesting city?

YY: My first impression, when I was young and I visited London, was that this country is close to Japan, because it is an island and people's attitudes are very similar. They appreciate gentlemanship and sportsmanship, and they appreciate principles. That was my first impression: close, familiar island people there. But actually London is a city where my spoken English does not work – the only city.

LS: Really?

YY: Yes. I have an apartment in Paris, so I feel I can easily fly or take the train, stay in London two nights, it's quite easy. But just arriving in London, the English accent confuses me. It takes more than three days to get used to the intonation and the accent, so I need at least a week to enjoy London.

LS: I do hope you will enjoy London when we work on the exhibition. I would like to ask you whether, apart from the similarity in spirit and manners, you feel an affinity with the mood of the city, in terms of its fashion, in terms of its attitude?

YY: Yes, when I visited I was only looking for Vivienne Westwood's so-called 'World's End' shop, a bit before I came to Paris. I was looking for excitement, so I used to travel a lot, and in London, I just wanted to see her shop and also the punk movement, and it was very inspiring.

A country like England, it has a very dynamic or exciting history. And one point that I'd like to talk about is so many countries, poor countries or developing countries, speak broken English. They are all operating in English, but England itself has been losing its industry. I don't exactly remember how many years ago, young student graduates from art schools had no industry [any more], no company to get into, to work in, in England. They have to get out of England, they have to search for a job in another country. Does this mean that England's own history is finished? Can you tell me any specific industry still around, that's exciting in England?

LS: In England? No, I think there's a lot of brain drain, as they call it. Definitely within the fashion world. The problem is also, I think, that people – or at least a small minority of them – would really like to build their own brands in the UK, but it is very difficult and very expensive for them to produce anything there, so they all end up leaving. I think you're right; there is very little real industry any more. The ones that are still there very much rely on international business, like Harris Tweed, which has an international department that works with all kinds of designers. So it is really the middle that is missing.



Yohji Yamamoto preparing the line-up, Date XXXX, Photography Donata Wenders

White silk hat and black twisted
silk dress with sequinned panel,
Spring/Summer 1998, Model
Maggie Rizer, Photography Inez van
Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin



YY: Japan has become exactly the same as Britain. Now, we are losing almost all the industry.

LS: This leads me on to a question about your relationship with industry in Japan. I am going to Kyoto later to meet some of the suppliers that make the fabrics for your collections, and I think it is very interesting how you relate to supporting that particular part of Japanese industry. How do you feel about these small industries? As you have always produced in Japan, are these relationships very important to your work?

YY: Maybe I'll be the last designer who cares strongly about 'Made in Japan'. If I stop, maybe young designers cannot afford to do business 'Made in Japan; because it costs a lot, because a Japanese man's hand has become the most expensive in the world. So, it's my duty – not duty, it's my desire to protect these small Japanese traditional techniques. They are almost all family factories, very small, but they still keep on going and struggling to find a new way, new customers or new items, not only the kimono. Maybe I can say this because I am Japanese, because I was born in Japan, so I naturally work with Japanese craftsmanship.

The most important thing is to keep going, otherwise it will disappear. If we stop, if designers stop, these companies have to stop, because the kimono business has no future. We have so many second-hand kimono shops in Japan. It's a new thing, but for kimono makers, it means their new collections do not sell well. Japanese people don't wear the kimono unless it's a special occasion. For weddings, young people often wear rental wedding dresses, rental kimonos – they rent everything. I'm not against that, because they are young, they don't have much money, so they don't need to buy.

LS: But it means that for these industries, your business and what you do is very important – to develop a different production strand in a way, so that they don't have to purely rely only on traditional output?

YY: Yes.

LS: This relates closely to another question I wanted to ask you. Over the years, a lot of people who've written about you and your work have tied it to a particular Japanese aesthetic. But sometimes you have disagreed severely and stated that your work is not Japanese, that you are creating something that has a universal aesthetic. So bearing in mind your relationship with Japanese textiles, how do you see this now? Has your attitude towards being associated with Japan changed over the years?



Silk and wool pleated dress and velvet hat, Autumn/Winter 1999, Model Audrey T., Photography Craig McDean



Red and black velvet dress and red velvet hat, Autumn/Winter 1999, Model Audrey T., Photography Craig McDean