



CODE OF PASSION

Instagram sensation Helen Downie (aka Unskilled Worker) is an artist with an Alessandro Michele-esque vision: "I'm not particularly romantic but I am nostalgic and I think that is where the sadness in my work comes from." He took an instant liking to her art and called her to his fall show. There, she drew his Gucci boys and girls, whose beauty nearly brought him to tears. And now, as well as having her paintings hanging on Michele's office wall, she will paint his Gucci, once again, in an upcoming exhibition in Shanghai.

MANIFESTO: How would you describe the subject (person) in your work? Describe their emotions.

UNSKILLED WORKER: When I paint fashion the emotion is taken from the sentiment that I see in the clothing and how I imagine the person feels wearing it. A story is built up in layers of chalk, pen and ink onto paper. I always do the eyes first and they look at me as I build the painting around them. At a certain point it is as if they are painting themselves. I know their names by the time I have finished. Sometimes they are people I have known in my lifetime who have come to say hello.

M: Have Alessandro Michele's new collections for Gucci inspired you in any way? If so, what

came to your attention first?

UW: I was doing a residency for Nick Knight's SHOWstudio, painting the Milan collections. I scrolled through. I don't really look at what the label is as I'm looking for images that move me to paint. There on the screen, were the most amazing pictures of boys and girls dressed as if they were embarking on mysterious adventures; time travellers not concerned with gender who had gathered their clothes from different places and eras. I painted *Gucci Boy* and fell in love.

M: What are differences between your illustration work for Gucci and other projects?

UW: Sometimes, everything seems to be creatively aligned. I have not been painting for so long. I am from London but started painting only a few miles away from a place in Italy that I know. Alessandro loves. When I paint Gucci boys and girls it feels more magical, there is something about Alessandro's creativity that takes me back to my childhood and the paintings I made of kings and queens, it is hard to describe. It has felt that way from the very first painting.

M: How do you feel about your collaboration

with Gucci and Alessandro Michele for the upcoming Shanghai project?

UW: To be asked to exhibit my work alongside Alessandro's and the other artists that are involved is a dream and sometimes it all seems a bit unreal! I loved making the 35 new paintings for the exhibition; it gave me the opportunity to really study Alessandro's vision for Gucci. Unravelling a code that seems to be held in his choice of patterns and form, I became obsessed in the detail. Such interesting, eccentric people appeared on the paper. I can't wait to meet them all again at the exhibition.

M: What is your take on Alessandro Michele's new creative position at Gucci?

UW: Alessandro seems to bring to Gucci a wonderful sense of warmth and charm in his creativity and attitude. It's what the whole world needs, an antidote to cold commercialism. Maybe it is a time when we do not wish for so many clothes but the ones that we choose and save for, they are special and we cherish, they become part of us. A return to the time when people remember the clothes they were wearing when they fell in love. These are the clothes Alessandro creates for Gucci.

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