

Photographs **Brendan Freeman**
Styling **Sophie van der Welle**



WORKS OF ART

*Unskilled Worker is one of Generation Instagram's most in-demand artists — no wonder Gucci has tapped her up for a white-hot new collaboration, says **Laura Atkinson***



This picture Dress, £1,750, bow, £315, and bag, £2,500, Gucci — the Unskilled Worker Collection.
Left Shoes and tights, Gucci

Right Ladybugs by Helen Downie.
Far right Shirt, £890, skirt, £1,100, headband, £235, and bow, £315, Gucci — the Unskilled Worker Collection



Gucci fans, a few words of warning. First, there is a brand-new limited collection about to go on sale and you will most likely want all of it. Second, if you manage to get hold of some of it, you may well be accosted in the street by its 52-year-old collaborator, British artist Helen Downie. “I will have to restrain myself from running up to people and saying, ‘I painted that!’” she laughs excitedly at the thought of seeing people wearing her art on the megabrand’s latest capsule collection.

If you are unfamiliar with Downie’s name, you will recognise her work. As the artist called Unskilled Worker, she has amassed a cult following, thanks to the ethereal paintings of wide-eyed characters that she posts on her Instagram (@unskilledworker) to her 214k followers. But if Downie is already a big deal to a certain switched-on audience, then she is about to get even bigger: the new 40-piece collection brings together one of the fashion world’s favourite artists (her) and the most talked-about brand of the moment (Gucci). The two have history.



Gucci’s creative director, Alessandro Michele, discovered her on Instagram in 2015. Since then, she has painted his collections (one of her pieces hangs above his desk in his studio) and now her artwork will appear on Gucci’s signature dresses, bags, T-shirts, hoodies and skirts.

It’s a canny move by the brand, which recently announced that 50% of its sales are made to Millennials, a generation who, unlike their Gen-X predecessors, put experience and authenticity at the forefront of their decision-making process when making luxury purchases. Downie is as authentic as it gets: success came late in life, aged 48, when she first picked up a paintbrush. There was no social-media campaign, no celebrity endorsements, no PR plan — just her paintings. “I never thought of it in terms of what looked good on Instagram,” she says in a soft voice from her home in south London. “I just knew I wanted to paint.”

Indeed, in a world of influencers desperate for likes, Downie’s is a particularly lovely story of how social media can be a driving force for creativity rather than



Left Helen Downie, aka Unskilled Worker.
Far left Bag, £1,690, Gucci — the Unskilled Worker Collection.
Rings, Gucci

just selfies. After spending her twenties and thirties “drifting about”, having her four children “at a very young age”, beating an aggressive cancer and giving up alcohol and drugs, she finally picked up a paintbrush after thinking about it “for a long time”. She describes her relationship with her art like falling in love and says: “Now, if I’m not doing it, I want to be doing it.”

She feels just as passionately about fashion; attending Michele’s first women’s-wear show for the brand was revelatory. “It was an emotional experience — the level of creativity and perfection. It was more akin to theatre; a full sensory experience. Every detail makes you emotional. I still haven’t got used to going to fashion shows.”

Many of the clothes in the new collection are intensely personal. A close relative died while Downie was working on the collection — her name is now on the back of one of the shirts. Prints, meanwhile, are based upon the “smell of your grandmother’s scarf” or a dress Downie owned as a child. A heady mix of nostalgia and creativity, then — something current Gucci fans will be familiar with. “When Alessandro asks to work with an



artist, it means he really trusts them,” Downie says. “It gives you a lot of confidence.” The result is pure Gucci — and it will no doubt prove irresistible to Michele’s Millennials, who will order it straight from their phones when it goes on sale on Gucci.com on October 11.

Gucci is not the only brand delving into the art world. Louis Vuitton most recently teamed up with Jeff Koons; Burberry currently has a photography exhibition in London, and Mrs Prada has her own 205,000 sq ft exhibition space. The business model clearly works. Last year, Gucci teamed up with another British Instagram artist, illustrator Anjelica Hicks, for a capsule collection — it sold out in a day. Other art collabs including Coco Capitan and GucciGhost have also been hits.

Downie herself is in awe of Michele’s vision. “Alessandro is like a hip-hop artist, using samples from a 1,000-year visual map. I will unpick those things he is sampling from and then bring them into my work.” Still, the idea of seeing people wear it will take some getting used to. “It will be strange,” she muses. “It’s like having an exhibition made into the most beautiful clothes.” ■

Gucci — the Unskilled Worker Collection, exclusive to Gucci.com from October 11. @unskilledworker



Above Dress, £1,700, and bow, £315, Gucci — the Unskilled Worker Collection. Hat and glasses, Gucci.
Top Downie at work.
Right Little Lallo by Helen Downie



HAIR: HIROKAZU ENDO. MAKE-UP: YAE PASCOE. MODELS: ZENWILSON AND SOPHIA SKLOSS. AT THE HIVE MANAGEMENT. ARTWORKS: @UNSKILLEDWORKER. PORTRAIT: COURTESY OF GUCCI