

Revolution, Not Evolution

Jorg Hysek explains the ethos behind HD3

Bill Prince

Capture, Raptor and Idalgo hardly sound like typical examples of Swiss watchmaking, but in Jorg Hysek's hands conventions are rarely followed. This 'Trilogy' of futuristic and rather gothic concept watches is a result of the bullet-headed, frequently barefooted designer finally shedding the constraints of his eponymous brand and teaming-up with his wife and an old employee to be as different and radical as they dare. *QP* asks Hysek where he fits in an industry defined by tradition.

As watch collections go, it's not one likely to quicken the pulse of many enthusiasts. True, it comes in its very own steel attaché case retrieved from a fireproof metal locker, but the contents are only remarkable for their seeming disparity. There's a nice 1970s Rolex Submariner, granted, but then there are also several quartz children's watches designed to look like Lego. There are a couple of Tiffany pieces - a ladies' Atlas model and an elegant Streamamerica - but also some 1980s-looking things from Dunhill and Hugo Boss. Nothing, in short, to suggest the owner was anything but a mere dabbler in the horological world.

But look more closely and you discover some of the key attributes that have made their designer one of the most acclaimed in the watch business. There are the hinged lugs on an early Seiko Kinetic for example, presaging a fascination with what some regard as extreme ergonomics. A nearby Sportura, meanwhile, features one of the earliest deployments of rubber and metal together in a bracelet - another facet of this man's skill at introducing materials from mass production to luxury pieces.



The HD3 Capture tourbillon watch (approx. SFr.189,000) - Valérie Ursenbacher's contribution to the Trilogy.



The HD3 team: (left to right) Fabrice Gonet (hired by Hysek at just 17 years old, and an associate of Hysek's Team Styling creative agency by 2000), Valérie Ursebacher (promoted to the head of Team Styling creative agency in 2000 at just 24 years of age) and Hysek himself.



Fabrice Gonet's Raptor has a tourbillon component that flips up to reveal a digital display - a decidedly 21st century hybrid of opposed disciplines (approx. SFr.230,000).

Three decades might seem a long time in the fast-moving world of industrial design - and looking again at some of his earliest creations, it is - but there is no doubting the fundamental narrative to Jorg Hysek's work. Work that has taken him from the arid 'evolution, not revolution' environment of an in-house design studio to producing radical new pen and watch designs bearing his own name, and onto his latest incarnation - the design collective he has christened 'HD3', meaning high-definition trilogies.

HD3's first watch collection, known collectively as 'Trilogy', was launched at Basel last year. Each piece is limited to 33 pieces and reflects the fundamental design philosophy of Hysek. "The job of the designer is to be different. Everything is already on the market in one way or another, but to be different? To make a surprise? That is the job of the designer."

Faltering start

We are talking in the temporary HD3 design studio in Morges, a little way along the lake from Geneva, where Hysek and his team have based themselves following his withdrawal from the Jorg Hysek brand last year (he retains a design responsibility, but

chooses to play no active role in the business). A tall, tanned, bullet-headed man dressed today in a tangerine sweater, white jeans and Puma Speed Cats (in contrast to the bare feet he famously sports at the Basel fair), Hysek was born in East Berlin in 1953. His grandfather had been a painter and artist and Jorg seemed destined to follow in his footsteps - until, when he was seven, his family moved to Geneva where his father had a jewellery casting business.

"I studied Sculpture at the Central School of Art in London," says Hysek in his heavily accented but far-from-halting English. "When I returned to Geneva, I told my father that I wanted to finish my studies in Rome. I was 22, 23, and my father said that if I wanted to do that, I must do it myself. Of course, I had no money so my idea was to work a small job for one or two years. And if you are a designer in Geneva what do you design? It's not as if I had an ambition from a little boy to design watches; if there was a car industry in Geneva maybe I would have designed cars..."

Fortuitously for a transplanted East German with no family history in Europe's horological heartland,

"For me, the evolution is to mix two ideas, taking a stand-out watchmaker's movement - a complicated movement - and putting it beside electronics. That is an evolution happening very fast."

what started out as a hobby drawing "completely different" watches went hand-in-hand with the Swiss watch industry's move towards quartz movements. By the mid-1970s, with nothing of real interest going on inside, watch manufacturers were spending more time and money producing visually arresting case designs. Not that Hysek's earliest ideas ("Crazy, for that time") met with much approval. "I showed my drawings to Patek Philippe. They said no, but they knew a lady at Rolex design department and they sent me to see her."

Hysek was hired, but apart from an evolution of the Oyster bracelet (earning the aforementioned Submariner a starring role in the History of Hysek collection), the precocious youngster produced very little in his three years with the company. "There was no product coming out," he says. "I could spend three weeks



HD3's gyroscopic-tourbillon concept watch, Vulcania, named after the island in Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Its feasibility is still under consideration.



making a drawing and no one was coming to look at it. After a couple of years I said, "There is no chance for me here."

So Hysek took his show on the road, travelling from factory to factory pedalling his own designs - drawn with a rare degree of draughtsmanship that he believes remains at the heart of his ability to sell an idea. "At Rolex, I had time to learn to draw watches very well. Whenever I presented my designs at a factory, people were always impressed by the quality of the drawing. Today, even with computer-aided design, you can present your ideas [as drawings] and if they are good, fine; and if they are not, well it's only a drawing."

Mightier than the sword

Hysek's first solo success came when he turned down a job in the design studio at Ebel, preferring instead to make a contract-with-royalties arrangement he prefers to this day. With the success of his Ebel Shanta, other commissions followed, with official recognition for his work arriving in 1984: he won a Grand Prix de Genève for a cuff watch designed for Vacheron Constantin. This led to further commissions to design watches for brands as disparate as Seiko, Dunhill, Hugo Boss, TAG Heuer (its popular Kirium, no less), Breguet (its Marine), and Tiffany.

It was while developing a pen for the New York jeweller that Hysek suffered the kind of rejection that many would conclude was failure and the man himself describes as

"destiny". He had been asked to design a pen - specifically one that dispensed with the irksome clip. It was with the bright idea of mounting the clip on a separate, leather sheath that he presented to Hermès, the Parisian saddlemaker-turned-luxury house. "I was convinced they'd think it was the best idea they'd seen in their lives," he says with a grin. "So I went to Paris, presented my drawing - and they said no! I was totally shocked. I went outside and said to myself, 'You did really shit.'"

Another piece of bad news further aided and abetted Hysek's decision to go it alone: "I was working for a French jeweller at the time, who went bankrupt three weeks before Basel. We had been hired to build their booth, so I said I would take it. We went there and put one pen in every window. It went like that..." Hysek's meaty forearm describes a near vertiginous incline, near the top of which one should imagine the Jorg Hysek brand resting.

The tips of his fingers, however, are reserved for HD3, the design collective he has established with his wife Valérie Ursenbacher and Fabrice Gonet, following his withdrawal from Jorg Hysek the brand. He had grown tired, he says, of the fulfilment side, much preferring to develop the two-pronged design offensive enshrined in HD3's business plan: on the one hand, produce limited numbers of upscale 'designer watches' ("It's easier," he says simply); on the other, develop aesthetically

(Top) The rose-gold variant of Hysek's Idalgo model, to be launched at this year's SIHH (approx. Sfr.120,000; available in Summer 2006). Idalgo's display gives the impression of having two movements, whereas in fact it has one, the XT-2 calibre - the very first to be developed by HD3 Complication, and based on the ETA 2892 movement.

(Centre) The Idalgo in palladium. Double-faced dial framed by an over-sized golden case with fine regulator adjuster visible on the face side. The double-faced display reveals an innovative conceptualisation: a jumping (or 'flying') hour aperture, 180° retrograde 60-minute hand, 360° seconds hand, large date display and second time zone.

(Bottom) The Idalgo's caseback allows an enticing glimpse of the exclusive XT-2 calibre - effectively one movement split in two.



The dual-rotor auto-winding mechanism in the Idalgo, in which the small rotor helps to speed-up the movement of the larger one. Thus, the main rotor requires less of a wrist movement than usual to get going.

aggressive ways of pushing new technology. Both strands, it should be said, are brought together brilliantly in the Trilogy.

Future proof

With input and encouragement from the others, each member of the HD3 team has designed their own watch, and in keeping with Hysek's 'be different' ethos, each is as extraordinary as it is unique. Outwardly at least, Valérie's Capture is the most conventional-looking; a handsome yet feminine circular case that deploys a mirror to display the movement within. Fabrice's Raptor, however, could only have been designed by a man. It is a monolith of a watch; one that plays with luxury and technology by combining a tourbillon with a quartz movement within a chunky, rectilinear case. Jorg's Idalgo, meanwhile, is perhaps the most spectacular of them all, featuring a movement that has been sliced laterally and displayed side-by-side.

Each, in their own way, goes to the heart of the challenge that Hysek has set all three: the challenge of creating true luxury in a market place that routinely thrums with the forced excitement of yet another mass-appeal 'designer' item. "From the beginning,

Launched in a limited edition of 11 last December, the new platinum edition of Capture - displaying a femininity that could only be brought to HD3 by Ursenbacher's involvement.



the idea was to do a designer watch but at a high level," explains Hysek. "But for me the evolution is to mix two ideas, taking a stand-out watchmaker's movement - a complicated movement - and putting it beside electronics. That is an evolution happening very fast.

"People growing up today have another approach to watches," continues Hysek. "Today, the mobile phone gives you more pleasure than the watch. And that's the danger the Swiss industry faces; that it will lose that business, because the people who are making the mobile phones have the distribution, the technology... everything. So I think the mobile phone has the bigger chance of becoming the general product for the people. In my view, the watch people have the wrong approach. High-quality complications, I would say, are a hobby. OK, with the Chinese we have more rich people in the world today, which is why volumes grow, but do you want to produce cars only for collectors? It's the same thing."

Which leaves HD3 at the nexus of future-proofing the tools of timekeeping. Or sitting pretty on a low-volume, high-yield business, depending on which side of the argument you sit. For his part, Jorg Hysek does not seem unduly concerned either way.

"For us, it is not a big problem. As designers, we move with the world. And HD3 is a typical designer brand. We have the liberty to change things tomorrow. But the people who produce the big brands - I'm thinking about Omega, here - for me, that's exactly the brand that one day will find it very hard. The product itself is working OK, but one day you won't need it to work OK. You don't need an Omega. It's a typical marketing product. There is no reason to have an Omega simply because Cindy Crawford has one." ○

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