

Theo Fennell

James Gurney talks with one of London's best known designers



The eponymous store and plc, along with the A-list parties and clientele, almost certainly qualify Theo Fennell as “establishment”, a label he does, however, wear lightly. This is perhaps because Theo Fennell is established in a space that did not really exist when he started out – a few years ago, jewellery designers in England simply did not expect to achieve the profile and status that it is possible to attain today.

There is, of course, a price to pay for such conspicuous success, and it is clearly visible when Theo talks about his activities. It is not that he shies away from the boardroom side of the business, though that it is only to be expected. He does in fact seem quite at ease dealing with the detail of Theo Fennell plc. It is more a preoccupation with the danger of becoming just another brand, ready to have its DNA cloned and replicated across the globe, complete with appropriate packaging and restrictions. This is a path that it will become increasingly hard to avoid since the commercial pressure on him to follow this route can only increase, whether his future designs succeed or fail. Such worries are, however, only the downside of the standing that Theo Fennell has achieved. The positive side is that he has freedom and resources to drive ideas forward that are simply beyond the means of less established designers. Jewelled eyebrow rings make the point perfectly – who else could offer such offbeat items and still be taken seriously when it comes to diamond and emerald collars at the £100,000 mark?





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But it is with watches that Theo's unique mix of corporate clout and outré style makes the most noticeable difference. You need heavyweight credibility to persuade Franck Muller to collaborate with designs exclusive to your outlet; simultaneously you need a certain style to have expert collectors queuing up for them, safe in the knowledge that these watches are no mere branding exercises where maker logo Y is replaced with seller logo X. This acceptance by the collectors is one proof of the extraordinariness of these projects. Interestingly, the buyers seem content to hang onto them for the moment, as very few are appearing at auction or elsewhere.

Another positive mark is that some of the ideas behind these watches are included in the repertoires of the various Muller clones that appear. The key to these collaborations is that Theo Fennell is able to add an extra touch – a difference – that would not seem credible coming direct from the brands. Look out particularly in this respect for a collaboration with Jaeger-LeCoultre this summer. The Theo imprimatur seems to allow rules to be broken without being discarded.

This excitement at breaking – or at least bending – the rules lies at the heart of the dilemma touched on earlier. These are rules that govern brand identity rather than simple questions of what succeeds or fails as a design, territory that Theo would rather not find himself in as far as his work is concerned. Whereas 30 or 40 years ago the design of, say, a pair of shoes or the cut of a suit might be approved of simply as good in itself, today the conditioned reflex is



to admire the brand as much as the article – “that’s a nice pair of Gucci’s” – a phenomenon that he dates from the ‘80s.

This is not to suggest Theo is a complete Luddite regarding this: the difference made by the big brands over the last decade has been enormous, particularly in terms of raising expectations in this country; Bond Street’s metamorphosis over recent years has made it a far more vibrant and exciting place. It is that he senses a gap to filled, a space for local alternatives to challenge the multinationals and provide a spice that would otherwise be lacking. According to Theo, the carefully considered global approaches of the major companies have to be countered with “a pimp mentality – a get out there and get noticed sense of hustle”. This is where having the resources

at hand that exist at Theo Fennell counts. In other countries, local alternatives tend to be thicker on the ground and more accepted. In the UK, a greater effort is required to achieve the acceptance needed.

To return to the hustle idea, it would be too much to describe the Anglo watch collection as only driven by a pimp aesthetic (if such a thing exists). However, the watches are not exactly on the quiet side either. The Saxon watches, yet to leave the drawing board, ratchet up the volume level yet louder. What is noticeable is the standard of finish and movement that Theo Fennell obviously believes is required. Despite their looks these are serious watches. This is deemed essential – there is no reason why local should come second to global in any respect. ◯

The Black Knight is just the latest of a series of watches that have sprung from the partnership between Franck Muller and Theo Fennell. A collaboration with Jaeger-LeCoultre is soon to see the light of day, while the future holds the enticing prospect of a link with Roger Smith, one of the brightest stars of current English watchmaking.

Further information: Tel: 020 7591 7000, www.theofennell.com