

GENIUS IS BORN CRAZY

The Coolest New Gallery Is Your Local Celine Store

Written by Rachel Tashjian

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Feel free to try anything on,” a salesman in the midtown Manhattan Celine store told me one afternoon this summer. “This is the only museum where you can touch *everything*.” A few moments later, he made good on his word by slipping over my shoulders a sequined kimono that Celine’s creative, artistic, and image director, Hedi Slimane, made for his spring 2020 women’s collection with the artist Christian Marclay, who tangles up the relationship between visual art and sound.

The Marclay jacket is just one of many art-world crossover projects Slimane has undertaken since taking the reins at Celine in 2018. For his spring 2020 men’s collection, the designer worked with five artists, putting David Kramer’s meme-isms on tees and straw bags and turning one of Darby Milbrath’s millennial fauvist paintings into an embroidered varsity jacket. Although these collaborations are presented without the usual fanfare, they are more than mere dalliances.

Slimane has also installed a formidable collection of contemporary art throughout 10 of his stores. If the designer made music a part of Saint Laurent’s DNA during his tenure, now he is putting contemporary art at the center of the fashion pop-cultural-industrial complex. The evidence is right there in the stores.

As I checked out the Marclay in the mirror, I could see behind me a sliver of a sculpture, by James Balmforth, which Slimane commissioned earlier this year: stainless-steel cubes that Balmforth cut into with a thermic lance to reveal the bubbling slag. At the brand’s SoHo store, a sculpture by Virginia Overton—a polygon of plywood planks grooved with straight lines that merge further and further into a chaotic grid—hangs near a big wall of shoes.

In fact, the clothes in a Celine store these days are displayed with more gallery pretension than the art: At the Grenelle location in Paris, a big black column by artist Theaster Gates is plunked down next to a Slimane-designed chair. Back in Midtown, a piece of reflective glass nestled between hunks of sandstone and volcanic rock, constructed by Mexican-born artist Jose Dávila, is often used as a mirror by customers trying on loafers. In Celine’s Tokyo outpost, a giant copper-enamel-and stainless-steel form by artist Elaine Cameron-Weir hangs down the center of a spiral staircase like a freshly sloughed skin. It’s a titillating monument for a store: One snake’s trash is an artist’s erotic treasure.



Davina Semo's *We Don't Win Anymore* (2016) adorns the shop in Paris's Champs-Élysées neighborhood.

Putting art in a retail space isn't a Slimane invention. But neither was slim-cut denim—and Slimane created a revolution with that. Head 11 blocks north of Celine's Midtown store to The Row and you'll see Julian Schnabel's plate pieces suspended above the handbags. Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel have tasked the famed interior architect Peter Marino with filling their stores with art as part of ambitious redesigns.

What sets Slimane's curatorial efforts apart is his hands-on attitude: He collects "as an enthusiastic fan," says artist Oscar Tuazon, whose sculpture *Mobile Floor*, a repurposed shipping container that takes on a mysterious monumentality, was commissioned for the dressing room of the Paris Grenelle store. He adds, "He's an ardent fan of youth culture, and he takes it really seriously and passionately—as a participant rather than as an outside observer."

Slimane has purchased or commissioned some 26 pieces of art for Celine stores—mostly sculptures—much of it by young or mid-career artists. Like a hipster Albert C. Barnes, he collects with little interest in the market. Slimane is doing the art-fair circuit and frequently visits galleries in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, refining his taste the way any other collector might. "That's what makes his approach a little different than a more impersonal collaboration," says Tuazon.

Slimane does not work with an art adviser, as many high-profile collectors do. Some of the artists are friends; others say they've never met him. Slimane is a self-serious guy, and on the surface the collection he's building is filled with neo-brutalist stainless-steel-and-black-slag cubes. But if he can be inscrutable, his retail army sets the tone of the stores with a friendly mien that contrasts delightfully with that of cold front-of-gallery employees. At Celine, they stand ready to decode the

art and get you into that sequined jacket. And the artists concur: "Contact is welcome," Tuazon says of his piece. "It's not fragile." Try laying your hands on the art in a New York gallery.

Balmforth went further, saying that he relates strongly to fashion's "direct and nearly constant engagement with" the human body. "We make material things and engage with material things so that they will in turn remake us in some way."

The makeover has never felt so cerebral.