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Hedi Slimane gets Creative at Celine

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Not content with shocking the fashion industry with his radical takeover of Celine, Hedi Slimane is tearing up retail – turning the French house's stores into intriguing brutalist salons.

It's midnight on Sunday in Paris, in a basement club called Le Dandy, and the team from French fashion house Celine are celebrating. The third band of the night are playing – Brooklyn punk-funkers Bodega, who provided the soundtrack for the menswear show earlier that evening. The artist David Kramer is here with his wife – Kramer's nostalgic, witty, Technicolor paintings featured on the show's invitation, and slogans from his work such as, "I have nostalgia for things I probably have never known," were transposed on to the clothes and floppy straw baskets in the spring/summer 2020 collection.

Dressed in jeans, boots and a white T-shirt speckled with holes, Hedi Slimane, Celine's creative director, takes photographs of the crowd, a collection of models, friends and co-workers, who are all enjoying the chance to cut loose into Monday morning as Bodega tear into last year's excellent single *How Did This Happen?*

While his aesthetic is instantly recognisable – lean, sharp, rock'n'roll – Slimane has always relished the chance to open up his vision to other contributors and points of view. "He has developed a very distinct visual vocabulary," says LA-based sculptor Oscar Tuazon, "and I think it thrives in contrast or an unexpected juxtaposition of elements."

For two decades, both as a photographer and fashion designer for Dior Homme, Saint Laurent and now Celine, Slimane has collaborated with emerging musicians. He has commissioned bands such as These New Puritans and SWMRS to create the soundtrack to fashion shows, and documented their lives in books such as London Birth of a Cult. A diehard music fan, Slimane has been deeply inspired by the greatest rock performers of the past 20 years. However, his recent work at Celine has thrown the spotlight on to another group of collaborators: artists.

Slimane was announced as Celine's new creative director in January 2018, with a mandate to introduce menswear and eventually couture. From 2012-16 he had overhauled Saint Laurent, a project which more than doubled the brand's turnover, and redefined the role of the modern fashion designer. For Slimane, the clothes are only part of the story – he's responsible for everything, from photographing the advertising campaigns and designing the sets for his elaborate fashion shows, right down to look and paper quality of the shopping bags. Of course, this 360-degree approach includes designing Celine's stores. So far, remodelled branches in New York, LA, Tokyo, Milan and Paris have been unveiled, ranging from an imposing glass box in Madison Avenue to the flagship on Rue de Grenelle in Paris, a tactile temple of marble and reclaimed oak, with plinths and shelves that – thanks to LED lighting – seem to float just above the concrete floor.

Slimane's stores for Saint Laurent had been modernist and monumental. For Celine, he wanted something more intimate. Yes, the stores would embody a kind of brutalism involving stainless steel, black granite threaded with ginger and cream and wood, but there would also be plenty of chairs to sit on, books to read, people to talk to, materials to stroke (not just the clothes, but the building's surfaces), music to listen to – and artworks to look at.

Which is where the new Celine Art Project comes in. It encompasses almost 20 painters and sculptors, ranging from emerging talents such as Shawn Kurunuru to huge names such as Theaster Gates, who have had work either commissioned or acquired for Celine's stores around the world as they are redesigned by Slimane. The stores have been envisaged as not simply places to buy clothes, but as salons in which to hang out and explore culture, proposals for a 21st-century maison. "There's a real understanding that [the store] is a public space," says Tuazon, who has made a piece for the Grenelle store. "It has restrictions, but it is a place where anybody can walk in the door and the levels of engagement vary – not everybody's there to buy."

Tuazon's work *Mobile Floor* is mounted on the wall but looks a bit like the floorplan of a small structure, detailed in contrasting wood, some of which was sourced from parquet panels from a house in the same Left Bank neighbourhood as the store, "so it has a connection to that place and history". Like many of the other works in the Celine Art Project, it begs to be touched. "The store is welcoming in a different way than an art gallery," Tuazon says. "There, you're asked to look at something and leave. Here, you're asked to look at something and stay. It comes down to touch – people can go into the store and touch things." Certainly, in the Avenue Montaigne store in Paris I am encouraged to rattle the painted chains of a sculpture by Davina Semo. Called *We Don't Win Any More*, the black chains have been hung to form two giant X's.



Davina Semo's WE DON'T WIN ANYMORE, 2016: powder-coated steel chain. Photograph: courtesy of Celine

Many of the works Slimane commissioned are rough-edged and almost architectural, a contrast to the soft luxuriousness of the clothes. The sculptor Virginia Overton has a work on each American coast. The piece in Celine's Soho, New York store, she says, is "made with cedar, walnut, steel and string. It's a low columnar piece, with the angled walnut chunk stacked on top of the larger cedar component." In the Rodeo Drive store in Los Angeles is an Overton piece "from a small series of sram-like wall works that are made from old plywood tabletops in the studio. The 'star' that hangs at Celine was the first one that I made as a test. The plywood was worn out in terms of its use as a tabletop but functioned well as a sculpture. I cut the full sheet of plywood into 20 triangular sections and then reassembled it into the current shape: usefulness restored."

Canadian sculptor and installation artist Rochelle Goldberg, meanwhile, has created a sequence of ceramic masks called *Composite Release*, which have been placed in the changing rooms of the Milan Montenapoleone and Paris Duphot stores, "confronting the private sphere of the patron and everything he or she brings to the mirror", the artist says. Other works in the Celine Art Project include David Adamo's totemic whittled cedar columns in two Paris stores; Gates's *Small Stumble With Mountain*, a black concrete pillar with two grey stones on top; and James Balmforth's *Surface Response (Stack)*, large chunks of steel and slag placed on top of one another with three smooth, grey surfaces and a black, jagged one, commissioned for Madison Avenue.

While the stores are united by Slimane's aesthetic, there's nothing identikit about them. The designer carefully considers each store's location, the history of the building, and how it knits into the local community. He has decided where all the artworks will stand or hang, and also personally placed the furniture in its own specific locations – not just vintage pieces, but pared-down, modernist chairs he designed himself (they were briefly commercially available in the 00s, and may be again). "I've been to the store in New York and Tokyo, and seeing how the space is organised and the furniture he's done, I like his selection, I feel there's a common interest there," says Kuruneru, whose swirling, black ink paintings hang in two of the Paris stores.

Common interest is key in Slimane's collaborations, both with artists and musicians – likeminded, creative people whose work exhibits some kind of sympathy of spirit. ("He found my work to be very strange," says Goldberg. "And strange can of course be attractive.") Slimane's ultimate aim is to uncover new talent and create a community with shared attitudes and aesthetic values, in which music, design, art and fashion all express a way of seeing the world.

Other artists' work has been incorporated into Slimane's clothes design; most recently Kramer, but also artists like Seth Bogart, frontman of Hunx and his Punx, whose cartoon scribbles covered shirts and shoes in a Saint Laurent capsule collection released in 2014. Slimane's first collection for Celine, meanwhile, saw Christian Marclay – famous for his 24-hour film masterpiece *The Clock* – create pop art-style cartoon panels which were embroidered on coats and jackets (Pet Shop Boys singer Neil Tennant wore a Slimane/Marclay parka when performing with the Killers during their headline set at Glastonbury this summer).

None of the artists believe that their work is weakened by being put in a fashion context. "It's the moment to recognise that fashion has historically been a female-dominated domain while the art world has been a male-dominated endeavour," Goldberg says. "There is an embedded misogyny in the exclusion of fashion as an outlet for thought and action."

Overton, meanwhile, simply says that it's refreshing to have a work displayed somewhere unusual: "Unexpected places like the Celine stores are nice because we can experience the work in new ways."

Tuazon likes that the store itself acts as a performance arena for shoppers trying on new clothes – and that while the clothes may be for sale, there are also objects in the store, like his works, that can't be bought: "There can be an interesting tension between objects in two different states."

As further revamped stores open around the world – London's Mount Street has just relaunched and 45 more will have opened by the end of the year – the Celine Art Project will continue to evolve. "Hedi's a creative person so he understands the process and the support artists need," Tuazon says. "He's really committed to making the space work." With their collision of opposites – public and private, rough and soft, commercial and intellectual, high and low – these spaces are Slimane's design philosophy made concrete.