

Painting with fabric

Theone Wilson discovers how Benjamin Shine creates his impressive installations



Benjamin Shine

Designer

Benjamin Shine studied fashion design at The Surrey Institute of Art and Design and Central St Martins in London. In 2003 he set up his creative studio, where materials, techniques and constructional ideas continue to inform his diverse portfolio and multidisciplinary approach. Shine's work has attracted a range of clients encompassing fashion labels, product and interior manufacturers and international arts and design institutions such as The Crafts Council, UK and The New York Museum of Arts and Design.

Name

Job title

Career

If you visited the SCIN Gallery at this year's London Design Festival, you may have stood in front of a large installation - a giant pair of blue fabric hands - and marvelled at the detail involved. This was Benjamin Shine's 'Hands of Time', constructed from over 50m of tulle.

His unusual fabric works are one of his hallmarks; Shine has completed many of these lifelike creations, including portraits of Princess Diana and Elizabeth Taylor. This harks back to his early design education when he studied fashion, which allowed him to think of fabric as a new medium.

"I was quite obsessed with one-piece garment construction but I also began creating works away from the body as sculptural ideas, which were better suited to a gallery or wall," Shine explains. "The idea of 'painting with fabric' led to creating portraits through material combinations or materials that related to the subject. Most recently, my tulle portraits have followed this train of thought where a single

piece of tulle is sculpted, pressed and pleated to form the image. These portraits can take anywhere from 50 to over 100 hours depending on the complexity and size."

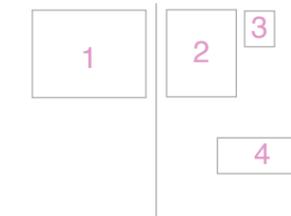
The reaction to Hands of Time, he reports, was "exceptional"; the SCIN Gallery showcases the latest surface textures and materials, so it was the ideal opportunity to show the scope of the technique. It brought a lot of interest from architects and interior designers, who were able to see how the medium could work in larger spaces, and proved so successful that the SCIN Gallery is extending the exhibition until the end of this year.

Shine's skills extend far beyond fabric portraits, though. His work is incredibly varied and current projects include designing a teapot for a London Heritage Hotel as well as a series of large-scale fabric portraits and installations for the New Zealand America's Cup using their sailboat fabric. He recently collaborated with LVMH, who wanted to adapt his tulle portraits into clothing, and is also working on two char-



ity projects: the Playsam Project, with designs based on the classic toy car for auction, and a collaboration with BT. The BT project will involve releasing his red phone box-sofa, the 'Box Lounger', as a limited edition series following the demand after the one-off piece he made for BT's charity exhibition earlier this year.

Shine's product design has also won awards, including the Red Dot Design Award for 'Cordz', a children's drawing toy. "The idea was developed and simplified from my material and woven works where torn fabric is woven through eyelets to build the image.



Material processes | 1. Hands of Time 2. Elizabeth Taylor 3. Egg Letter Box 4. Box Lounger

Continuing the idea of 'painting with fabric', I wanted to develop this process as a tactile construction activity for children," he explains. "Pre-cut lengths of cord can be applied by hand or via a stylus onto a low-profile hook surface. The artworks can be altered or completely removed to create a new picture. The product was patented and developed in 2006, then licensed and launched in 2007, and I won the award in 2009."

Another charity project, the Faberge Big Egg Hunt charity exhibition, put Shine in the spotlight briefly when his design, Egg Letter Box, disappeared. "After its fourth day exhibited on Carnaby Street, it was stolen - ripped from its plinth," Shine elaborates. "Within

Shine's product design has also won awards

those four days it had become rather popular with Londoners and subsequently, people took to Twitter and the internet to appeal for its safe return. I too was interviewed for BBC News

from Australia! Amazingly, it was returned to the scene of the crime the following week and reinstalled behind a clear security box." The piece went on to raise a huge amount at Sotheby's for the Elephant Family and Action for Children charities.

Shine's creations mix the fields of art and design, but he does not differentiate between the two, explaining that these are "very vague terms". "I really try not to concern myself with either as I think they relate much more to the marketing end of the creative process," he says. "I think of myself as more of an ideas person, where invention lies at the root of my work." This means that on his website he categorises his projects simply by what they are for - To View, To Wear and To Use - rather than marketing them as examples of either art or design. "I do not set out to create a 'piece of art' or a 'piece of design' - each piece simply develops with the aim of fulfilling a creative idea," he states. However, what is important is that the work brings about some kind of reaction. "If my work can provoke the reaction 'How?' or 'Wow!' then I'm satisfied," he concludes. ■