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Material man

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Artist Benjamin Shine's innovative tulle portraits have caught the eye of Givenchy, **Natasha Rudra** writes.



"I just grabbed the bit of black tulle I had and just went for it" ... Benjamin Shine. Photo: Jeffrey Chan

It's always interesting to see what Benjamin Shine will do next. Previous projects have included a portrait of Barack Obama woven from an American flag, and Elizabeth Taylor wrought in black tulle. He's done Sir Edmund Hillary in fabric woven through eyelets in a steel sheet. Last year he gained international attention when one of his artworks - a bright red egg-shaped post box - was stolen in London during a charity event.

So what he's doing next is a collaboration with French haute couture house Givenchy. It's based on his fabric portraits - beautifully nuanced, arresting images of people crafted out of gauzy tulle. The Givenchy project involves a series of tops and T-shirts featuring Shine's tulle portraits of the Madonna.

The collaboration came, he says, totally out of the blue. Shine, who divides his time between Britain and Canberra, got an email from the fashion house through his website, asking if he would be interested in working with Givenchy. Shine said yes (of course) and asked what would be involved, thinking the fashion house wanted him to create an artwork or installation for display. Instead, they said they wanted him to turn his portraits into clothes. So there he was, walking into the Givenchy atelier in Paris, to meet designer Riccardo Tisci.

It was "amazing". Shine describes Tisci as a down-to-earth artist and says working with the fashion designer almost brought things full circle for him. As a young artist straight out of London's Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design, Shine started out in clothing, creating a scarf that turned into a jacket and into a reversible raincoat.

The idea for making portraits out of a single piece of tulle came to him while he was using the fabric for his woven images, ripping it to pieces and weaving it into artwork. One day, his eye fell on a stray piece of tulle that had folds in it, creating light and dark tones. "I saw those tones and I'm very conscious of any medium that can provide tonal variation. If you can find a material that does that, it's an open door to a new technique," he says. "I thought, 'Oh my god, there's three, four, five, six, there's 10 tones. I just grabbed the bit of black tulle I had and just went for it.'"

He spent four weeks putting together a portrait of Rembrandt, pushing the tulle into shape, folding and ironing in creases to create lines,

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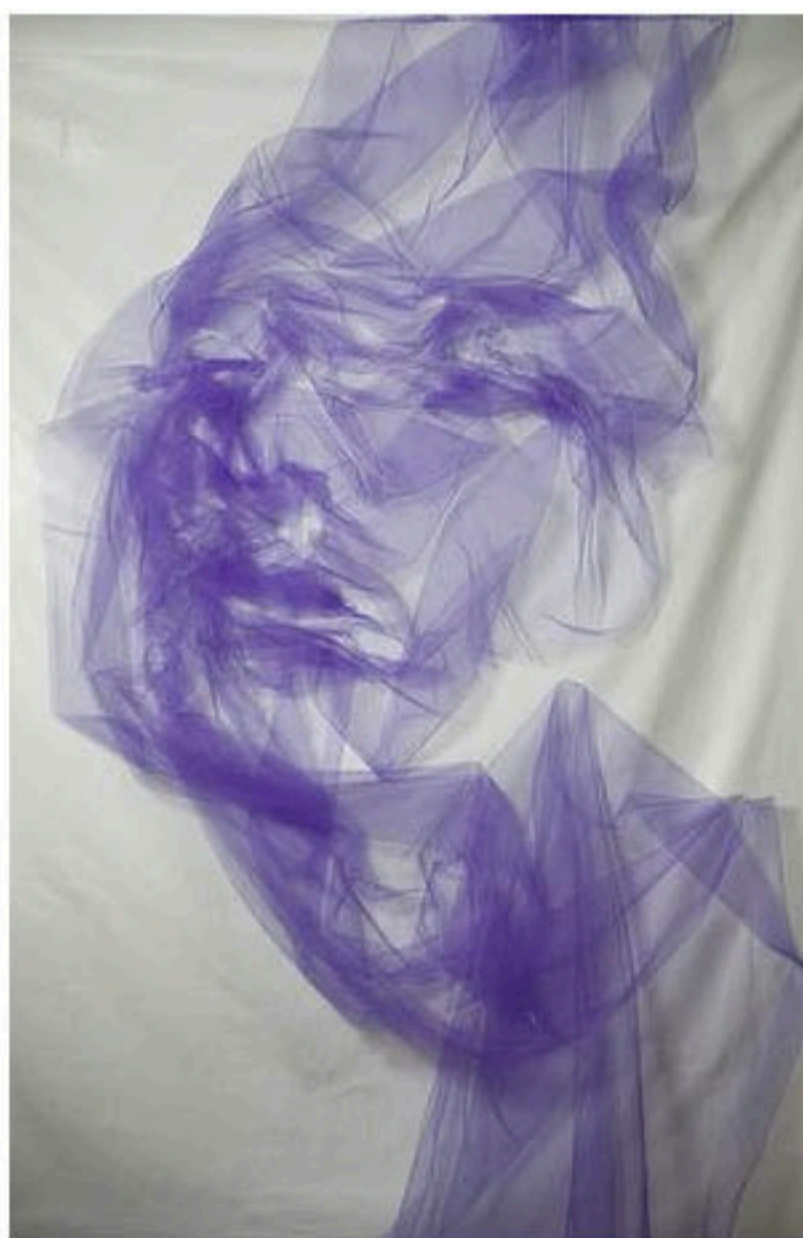


Sheikha Moza, the trend-setting, stylish second wife of the Emir of Qatar, who is depicted in bright red tulle with her traditional headscarf and jewelled earrings. There's the amusing tulle portrait of Andy Warhol titled *15 Metres of Fame*. He's also produced one of a European princess ahead of her wedding anniversary - and no, it's not Kate Middleton.

Last year Shine was involved in a charity project in which more than 200 artists and celebrities designed giant eggs for the Faberge Egg Hunt. They were hidden across London and people could take part by downloading maps and clues to their location. When Shine's red post-box egg was stolen, it caused a furore and his phone rang hot with calls from the international media. It was returned days later outside a department store. Now he's making another egg for the charity egg hunt in New York, fashioning it out of green-and-white New York street signs.

In his light, airy studio, Shine says the tension between craft and art is an interesting problem. "When you see craftsmanship it's about labour intensiveness, you're looking at something and going, 'God, someone spent hours making that.' Sometimes the result is absolutely brilliant and sometimes ... you kind of see the workmanship too much," he says.

He's trying to move away from craftsmanship, producing tulle artwork that's much less structured. And it shows in a recent piece for London's SCIN Gallery, which houses a huge range of building materials for the architecture industry. The artwork he created was a huge pair of elderly hands, made from 50 metres of soft blue tulle and draped on the wall on the ground floor of the gallery. It's a big piece - four metres wide and three metres tall. "It was cool because it wasn't framed, it was just like an installation, it really billowed out from the wall. Now I like the rawness," he says. That's coming across in the tulle portraits as well. Where previous portraits, like the Rembrandt, were cleverly detailed and deliberate or calculated, now Shine tries to get the fabric to blow in the wind. "They're just much more splattery and raw, it's much more ambiguous. It's about a fleeting moment," he says. "You could imagine the tulle just floating on the wind, flickering past and a face emerged and you were able to catch it for a split second." It's not something you can imagine saying about the artist himself. Benjamin Shine is definitely here to stay.



Singularity ... Benjamin Shine uses a single piece of tulle to produce portraits of people. Photo: Jeffrey Chan

texture and, yes, tone. The result is an extremely detailed portrait of the artist, so finely worked that you might not guess it was made out of tulle until you got close up. "I guess I got a bit precious about it and then it became almost craft-like, which now I can recognise," Shine says.

The tulle portraits are among his most popular work. The first one he did was so popular that it netted him a commission for a second, which begat a third, and it's grown from there. Shine's done portraits of Sir Philip Green, the billionaire owner of fashion chain Topshop, and his daughter Chloe. Another is of



Going with the flow... Givenchy latches on to Benjamin Shine's work. Photo: Jeffrey Chan