Francesco Ragazzi, founder of Palm Angels, on launching eyewear and brand building worldwide

By Godfrey Deeny - 26 May 2021

No one could accuse New Guards and its Milanese-meets-Malibu brand Palm Angels from lacking ambition.

This week, following in the footsteps of mighty conglomerates like LVMH and Kering, New Guards launched its own eyewear division, spearheaded by Francesco Ragazzi, the creative director and founder of Palm Angels.

The Palm Angels eyewear collection is a very careful launch, debuting with just two frames on May 27. In effect, it is the opening of a new business unit at New Guards, which will develop and produce internally all its eyewear, without any license.

Elaborated in New Guards design workshops and creative hubs, the new Palm Angels shades seem very in synch with the Palm Angels aesthetic. Created in geometric shapes with acetate frame shapes featuring a metallic Palm Angels logo, the two unisex styles are punchy yet polished. To kick off this new division, Palm Angels commissioned a video and photo campaign by David Sims, timed for the launch of the new eyewear on its website and in selected boutiques and opticians globally.
Back in 2014, Ragazzi launched Palm Angels in a novel manner - with a photo essay book on California skaters, boasting a forward by Pharrell Williams. Indeed, he hopes many future collections can debut with book ideas. Since then, Ragazzi has partnered his Palm powerhouse with sports equipment giant Under Armour and hipster hotel group Setai.

So, we Zoomed into Milano for a free-ranging discussion with the prince of Palm Angels Francesco Ragazzi about the new shades brand building; and how he plans to position Palm Angels internationally.

**FashionNetwork.com:** How did you become a designer?

**Francesco Ragazzi:** Let’s say I’m not a designer in an obvious way, though I always considered myself an artistic director. In the beginning I was passionate about fashion photography. That’s what I wanted to become. By
artist director. In the beginning I was passionate about fashion photography. That’s what I wanted to become. By chance I started working with Moncler, 15 years ago, luckily for me. And my journey with the company was great as I was able to work with lots of ideas, brand images, products, and bringing hype into Moncler with Remo (Ruffini, Moncler CEO).

Yet, at a certain point I wanted to do my own thing. I was a very big fan of photography and I was looking at people like Bruce Weber or Larry Clarke and at surf culture. And how surf culture had been uplifted by these talented people. Whereas skating was not so considered by photography, or photographers. So, my idea was to try to do for skate what these great artists did for surf. Hence, when I took photos I was more into the moods and aesthetic or the style and the people skating, and not the tricks.

**FNW: Where did you get the name for Palm Angels?**
**FR:** I called it Palm Angels, mainly because of these skaters in LA. They were skating under palm trees and they looked like angels – a handsome blond guy floating in air.

**FNW: What did you learn and take with you from your experience in Moncler?**
**FR:** Basically, everything! I had the luck to start helping to build a brand from the '50s into something truly global. It was a local brand in Italy and a little in Japan in the '80s, now it is worldwide luxury brand. Eventually, I left Moncler in 2019, to fully concentrate on Palm Angels. It was impossible to do both. I am a perfectionist and I try to the best I can.

**FNW: What attracted Palm Angels to participating in Moncler Genius?**
**FR:** I wanted to tell my story in terms of a fresh perspective and context. Like my story in skateboarding. Try to give a different twist to something known.

**FNW: How did the link up to New Guards happen?**
**FR:** Well, in 2014 we launched the book; and in 2015 we launched collection. I started with the same guys who founded New Guards. We had Off-White and a couple of brands and now we have a conglomerate. Initially, we began with a showroom in Milan, but since then have done a few shows in Paris, and then to New York, taking the best from each city.

**FNW: What is your legal relationship with New Guards, since Farfetch bought control?**
**FR:** We are partners – I own part of the brand and they have a license and I have part of that.
FNW: What did you like most about working with Under Armour?
FR: That it was pretty different as they were a huge company and not fashion; and I liked the language and technology. It was an immense pleasure to learn something new; from a small brand to a multi-million brand. All that I learn in any collab’ I hope to get into my brand.

FNW: What made you say yes to a collab with Setai in Miami?
FR: That’s more like a continuous collab as I like the idea of Palm Angels examining a lifestyle and everything that connects as a brand. So, hotel-keeping and entertainment is what I have in mind for the brand for the future. I work with many talents and custom fit with them. Like how Palm Angels was born with Pharrell, with him writing the book intro, after we became friends while I was working at Moncler.

FNW: Why did you want to create an eyewear collection?
FR: It’s part of the DNA of Palm Angels and how it started with California and sun and sunglasses. It connects to the idea of the brand. It has to be a core element for us, and a huge opportunity. We are proud we did it ourselves and on the inside. It’s part of our brand and has no license. To me, 2020 was moment to sit down and work, so 2021 is a very big year. We are opening many stores this year – Miami very soon, in July in the Design District. And other places in the States and Europe. We will open from five to 10 stores in the next 18 months. Our plan for the eyewear is to launch in top eyewear specialists –around 100 the world – at a price point of between 200 to 300 euros.

FNW: Define the DNA of Palm Angels?
FR: A re-interpretation of American culture though my Italian side – which is the aesthetic process that I know.

FNW: Which designers do you admire?
FR: Ralph Lauren – as we are talking about lifestyle! And I respect Prada for their integrity. Business-wise, I like the way that certain brands do merchandising. Like how you translate being Gucci and Valentino into boutiques. Like at the beginning when Jacopo Venturini was at Valentino for the first time. I think he was exceptional at merchandising and translating product into business. Like Dior right now!

FNW: Where were your last three vacations?
FR: Saint Moritz to ski, Lake Como for the weekend, and Geneva as I love watches.

During our Zoom Ragazzi was wearing a Patek Philippe 175th anniversary year model, which he bought in 2014, when he started Palm Angels and his daughter Georgina, now seven, was born. He also has a two-year-old son
Romeo – both of whose names are celebrated in tattoos on this bearded Milanese designer.

FNW: Your favorite three restaurants?
In Milano, Bacaro on Montenapoleone. In London, Scott's; and in America, the Palm Beach Grill. I have old fashioned tastes when it comes to food.

FNW: How big is your brand?
FR: We never reveal numbers, but I may tell you more one day over lunch in Bacaro! But we retail in more than 300 doors worldwide, so business is not bad.

FNW: Where will your next show be staged?
FR: To be honest I don’t know. We started with a strategy of a new collection with a new book. Which I like, especially during all this digital madness in pandemic. I don’t want collections made from home and just created from a mood board. I like the idea of a book every season. And hopefully, I think maybe in February or March in Milano we can. But right now, who knows?

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