Erdem Moralioglu, with MBE in hand, mulls coming to Paris

By Godfrey Deeny - 29 November 2021

This month Erdem Moralioglu, a Turkish-Canadian designer, was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire. This week he has been in Paris, mulling a show in the French capital.
Though born in Quebec, few designers have ever expressed so much love for British culture and architecture as Erdem. He has staged shows everywhere from the National Portrait Gallery or Inns of Court Garden to inside the colonnade of the British Museum last September. No one had ever held a catwalk show under the colonnade before, though Erdem is used to being a pathbreaker ever since he left Montreal.

This past decade, no journey to London Fashion Week is complete without catching one of Erdem’s shows. Whose hyper particular oeuvre manages to blend haute romanticism, cerebral style and post-modern historicism.

So, we sat down with Erdem inside Paris’ hotel of the moment, Chateau Voltaire on Rue St Roch, on Thanksgiving to hear about his latest projects – launching a fully-fledged menswear collection, living in Bloomsbury and having the MBE pinned on him by Anne, the Princess Royal.

Fashion Network: Good to see you since speaking post show after your last show at the British Museum!
Erdem Moralioglu: Yes, we were in the Egyptian Hall, and you came backstage to congratulate me very kindly. That show was very important to me for numerous reasons. Firstly to celebrate the past 15 years of the label. And also as a kind of coming out of this Covid bubble. It’s a place that I love so much and strangely, Godfrey, no one had ever shown under those columns, since it was built in 1763.

FNW: What brings you to Paris?
EM: Well, that’s a good question. I think it’s long overdue that I reestablish my relationship with France and with Paris. My introduction to Paris was with Sarah (Andelman), when Colette opened, they had my collection and from there it evolved.

FNW: Tell us about your new men’s collection and where you shot the campaign?
EM: We shot it in East Wittering Beach which is near Dungeness where Derek Jarman’s house is. I was very much inspired by Derek Jarman and Patrick Procktor, an amazing painter that studied with David Hockney, and is forgotten now. What I love about Derek Jarman is this world he created as a filmmaker and as an image maker and romantic. But he himself was a total uniform dresser who was very much utilitarian. And I was inspired by this kind idea of romantic utilitarianism. It felt very interesting to me, this idea of an artist remaining constant even as his world is constantly changing, odd and amazing.
FNW: The men’s capsule four years ago with H&M focused on British tailoring and tweeds; some floral fantasy but darker. Why such an evolution?
EM: The evolution from H&M was interesting; it was like men and women existed symbiotically together whereas this collection evolved in a very different way. Really truly almost like Adam’s rib, like it came out of my women’s wear. It evolved during Covid, with knitwear and denim, and kind of thinking about her from the moment she wakes up to when she goes to bed. It’s so boring, this Covid conversation about how everyone started dressing casually, it wasn’t that. It was like a headspece to think about her in different contexts, when I started noticing guys that I work with in the studio and myself kind of wearing these clothes. It suddenly became that she was him and he was her. Really looking at this, I started researching Derek Jarman during lockdown and his diaries, and he’s the most amazing writer.

FNW: Better than his movies? I find his movie on Caravaggio pretty great.
EM: When you look at my men’s collection there’s a series of these Grecian-shaped tops with very English cords. Jarman would wear these kind of thick cords with boiler suits. Plus, there was this moment in the middle of lockdown where I went to the Garden Museum, as you do, right down by the river across from the Houses of Parliament. They had an exposition lo and behold on Derek Jarman. They had his diaries of course which I had just read - Modern Nature, The Dancing Ledge, Smiling In Slow Motion - his books on color, chroma, it’s such a wonderful world. And he had all of these extraordinary Dutch etchings of black flowers, the kind of things he was going to put in his garden with such a scientific rigor. Anyways, this would form how I would approach the collection.

FNW: Now you live near the site of your last show in the British Museum?
EM: Yes, we live in in Bloomsbury, in Regent Square. It’s quite a big square, it was bombed heavily in WW2. There’s one side that is Georgian and three sides that are new buildings. One of the new sides has access to Saint Jordan’s garden -- it is wonderful and it’s one of the oldest cemeteries in London.
FNW: The show of yours one I'll never forget is the one about Duke Ellington and the Queen. I've even dreamt about it. Was it called The Queen's Suite?
EM: Do you know what's very strange? When I got my MBE from Windsor Castle from Princess Anne she asked if I'd ever been to Windsor Castle and of course, there's nothing I love more than research. As I researched that collection in Windsor. Even if this piece of music actually goes back to Washington. Not many people know that Duke Ellington was the favorite musician of the Queen's father, King George VI. Well, the Duke was so inspired by Elizabeth and her strength as a woman that he wrote this piece of music called the Queen's Suite. Of course, Duke Ellington comes from Harlem, and worked with an amazing history of female artists. But that's a very different world than the Queen's!

FNW: When and where will you show in February?
EM: I'll be showing in London. But you know maybe I'll jump for a season or two into the Paris schedule. It would be wonderful (to do that) at one point. And I think it could be very interesting.

FNW: I think you absolutely should.
EM: Really? Would you come?

FNW: Are you kidding? Everyone will want that ticket. You can compete. That's why you must do it. I've seen a lot of quite talented foreign designers come in and sink here, you will not.
EM: That's a huge compliment, thank you.

FNW: You have a flagship in London, on South Audley Street. Planning to open more?
EM: Yes, very much but I think that's down the road. I would love to open up a store in New York. But the question is, does Erdem live uptown or downtown? Or does she live in neither? That's the big question. You know our plans were kind of slightly derailed by Covid, but I would love to open (more), definitely. I think there's something really interesting when you can create a space and an environment that's kind of like the art that she buys, the carpet she stands on, the furniture she lives with, everything. I find it's almost forensic, figuring her out.
FNW: How many stores do you sell in worldwide?
EM: That's a good question, about 170 stores worldwide. Eighty-five percent of our turnover is from wholesale.

FNW: So, have you breached the magical ten-million-pound-mark in annuals sales?
EM: Am I allowed to say that? And then some!

FNW: Do you have perfume, or a license?
EM: I don’t even have a driver's license.

FNW: You don’t know how to drive?
EM: Well, my husband (Philip Joseph) does. Anyways he just bought a car, a Lada, Russian four-door. The car hasn’t changed since 1978 and of course the wheel is on the left side. But to answer your earlier question, I think a scent would be an amazing thing. I did a collaboration with Nars a few years ago creating a small makeup collection. I so enjoyed working with the product developers. What’s amazing about beauty and makeup is the evolution it takes to develop new products. To work with Nars was amazing. The collection was called Strange Garden, with amazing, odd and weird colors, and it was wonderful.

FNW: Who are the designers you admire?
EM: I’ve always admired Alaïa as an independent, I've always admired Yves Saint Laurent in his language of the feminine. But I also love Mainbocher. I love Lacroix always, I think he’s an amazing, extraordinary man. I feel people like Alaïa were on a journey of independence.

FNW: Describe the DNA of brand Erdem?
EM: I hate that word, 'brand'. What compels me is the creation of a body of work that tells a story using the human hand. That’s how I describe the DNA. It’s about being able to tell a story but through the creation of clothes. When
something is designed well and beautifully it has a permanence to it. I’m interested in creating a body of work that someone has and lives with and owns forever. I have always been kind of deterred by things that feel transient.

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