

THOM BROWNE SAT DIRECTLY ACROSS FROM ME IN A CONFERENCE ROOM IN THE CHELSEA GALLERY DISTRICT WITH ONE OF THE MOST CONTAGIOUS GRINS I'D SEEN IN AWHILE. IT WAS LIKE BEING IN A ROOM WITH ONE OF THOSE ENIGMATIC KIDS THAT LIKES SECRETS TOO MUCH, AND CONTROLS SPACE BECAUSE OF IT. THE INTERVIEW WAS SCHEDULED DURING MODEL CASTINGS FOR HIS FALL 2013 SHOW, AND I WAS GIVEN A RARE GLANCE AT THE DEFINITIVE AMERICAN CONCEPTUAL DESIGNER RIGHT BEFORE HIS SEASONAL DEBUT. THE COMPLETE CHAOS THAT I'D PREPARED FOR WAS MET WITH NEAR SILENCE, A POLAROID-COLLAGED BOARD OF FRESH FACES, AND THE CHOICE OF SPARKLING WATER OR FLAT. A SNOWSTORM HAD JUST TORN THROUGH NEW YORK CITY, AND THOUGH THE REST OF THE INDUSTRY WAS IN A STATE OF PANIC, THOM BROWNE WAS WALKING ON SUNSHINE. IT WAS THE FIRST INTERVIEW I'D DONE ALL WEEK WHERE I DIDN'T HAVE TO CONTEND WITH A FRENZY OF PEOPLE – MOSTLY OVER-ZEALOUS INTERNS – RUNNING, DIVING AND TRIPPING OVER THINGS IN THE BACKGROUND.

By Thom Browne's demeanor you couldn't tell that he was just days away from showing one of the most anticipated collections of the season – not at Lincoln Center, but at Center548 – just around the corner from where we were meeting. Browne chose the space for its malleability, and with a vision as unwavering and meticulous as his, the large empty gallery seemed like the only choice. He sat there as if he was completely unaware of the industry's expectations of his work. He was floating above it all in some distilled Neverland, smiling, like the incarnation of Bobby Driscoll's Peter Pan in a shrunken charcoal-gray suit. Though he's nearly 50 years old, Thom Browne is in many ways fashion's eternal child. With a childhood consumed with academics and athletic competition it's no surprise that his imaginative side came into full bloom later in life. In fact, there aren't many designers that honor the value of childhood and childlike thinking the way that Thom Browne and his team do. Innocence for them is a privilege, which is refreshing when the trend among many of his peers favors precociousness and a "live fast, die young" aesthetic. That angsty mantra gets boring after awhile, especially for those that actually appreciate the art of controversial yet timeless design. He's become the reigning master at keeping the industry on pins and needles come collections season – all with good reason. Thom Browne loves storytelling, and few others carry that special creative gene needed to present something more than just clothes. He knows how to maximize the potential of a moment and a space to create an almost spiritual experience for the audience. Instead of simply observing a stampede of models, he invites your eyes and body to be enveloped by his imagination. His spring 2013 men's show, for example, staged

in the garden of the Maison de la Chimie, featured four silver satyrs, forty bouncing human slinkys, and a technicolor rainbow of mismatched madras and plaids all to convey an acid-tripped reinterpretation of themes surrounding 1950s collegiate prep culture. His women's show, inspired by Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, was no less tame. From concept to construction he designs on an entirely different level than most. For one, he's completely obsessed with the craft of making couture-quality clothes. And it's the handmade touch that keeps everything new and extraordinary. You can tell by his signature tailoring that he's constantly probing the child within all of us by offsetting our notions of reality on such a grand scale. His shrunken and exaggerated proportions work as the perfect metaphor for men and women inviting themselves into the consciousness of children, through clothes, to see life with new eyes, in brighter colors and in simpler shapes. The talent lies in his ability to transport the mind to a world without rules and restrictions, making everyone involved feel limitless and naïve again. For Thom Browne, there's power in this kind of vulnerability. As imaginative a person as he is, he's firmly in control of his creative process. It's key to preserving some notion of sanity and happiness in his life. With a prolific namesake brand, best-selling collaborations with Brooks Brothers – a diffusion line called Black Fleece – and Harry Winston, on top of a creative director seat at Moncler Gamme Bleu, there's more than enough on his plate. How does he manage? He has his vices that keep things balanced. Mostly it's the love of the game, and the love of those around him. Above all else he is truly an optimist with unmatched vitality. Settling into his chair before our interview he let out a laugh,



which was more like a bubbling giggle, and he suddenly reappeared ready to engage in conversation about the thing that he's most in love with, his work. The laughing was as contagious as his smile and lightened the mood even more. I could tell he was relieved to take a break from the madness of fashion week. Bouncing back from showing two large-scale shows in Paris, you could see that he was thankful that the finish line was quickly approaching, if only until next season.

Let's start at the beginning, where did you grow up?

In Allentown, Pennsylvania.

That's funny, my brother doesn't live too far from there. What was Allentown like in the 1980s?

Hmmm, '70s and '80s.

Fair play. Well, what was Allentown like in the '70s and '80s?

It was a typical suburban, American town. I grew up in a family of seven kids. My parents were both professionals, both attorneys. So a very traditional, conservative, classic American life.

What was high school like?

I mean, I went to the public high school outside my district because I swam. So I actually paid tuition for a public high school just to swim. Which sounds kind of silly now. High school was good. Well, you know, I was the quiet kid for sure, but the one thing for us was my parents were very strict in doing well in school and doing well in sports. Aside from that we could do whatever we wanted really. We could goof off as long as we concentrated on school and sports.

What did you all do for fun?

Honestly, we were kept pretty busy with school and sports so most of our down time was spent resting. We were usually pretty tired and didn't do very much.

Did you make it to Philadelphia often?

Well Allentown is about an hour north of Philadelphia and an hour and a half southeast of here, so we came to New York a little more. My parents grew up in the area and actually went to school here in New York, so they were more familiar with the city. I wouldn't say we "hungout" in New York. We mostly did normal out of town things that people do: museums, dinners, etc.

How has growing up in Allentown influenced your design?

A lot of people don't realize it, but it has had a huge effect on my creative process. I feel like I am a true American designer. I do approach my design really from this classic, American point of view, American clothing point of view, American tailoring point of view. Of course I go off on whatever tangent I want for that collection – every collection is different and new – but really it's rooted in an American sportswear and tailoring point of view. I think American sportswear is so iconically American, and was so important around the world at one point for the symbols that it represented. Even the tailoring I've been doing from the beginning has always had a very American sensibility to it.

