

FEATURE

MARC LE BIHAN AND THE MAN RAY SUIT

BY LYDIA KAMITSIS

The work of the fashion designer Marc le Bihan eludes easy classification. Like those who inspire him – Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela, Joseph Beuys – he is a rigorous conceptualist, a believer in timeless fashion rather than transitory trends.

I have had the opportunity to study le Bihan's growth and development through his studies at l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where I was teaching the history of fashion when he launched his own, eponymous brand. Already an admirer, I was, naturally, one of his first clients. Since the age of 15, he has possessed a constancy that is rare in the fashion world, whose appetite for novelty can so easily direct the energy of young talents to a dead end. le Bihan, though, is a man of unflinching artistic scruples – he refuses to separate his men's and women's collections, which translates into mixed catwalk shows. The pieces are fundamentally the same for both sexes, he says, but "with a different cut modified to their different figures."

His men's and women's skirts, trousers and waistcoats do not imply de-sexualisation, but rather reaffirm the distinct identity of each sex against the same frame. His trademark palette of black and white – or, more precisely, a nuanced spectrum of near-blacks and almost-whites – is created using traditional dye methods. "Black and white, alpha and omega, *'lange et le lincoln'* [swaddling cloth and shroud] are the twin notions that are the name of my society," he explains.

le Bihan's education in textiles began in his teens, when he began working at the prestigious tapestry factory Manufacture des Gobelins, in Paris. Gobelins supplied tapestry to the court of Louis XIV; le Bihan worked there for several years as a weaver. He developed a taste for the handmade. "Everything is manufactured in Paris, a large part in artists' studios," he says of his collections. "We work with small studios all over and around Paris. The entire collection is very artisanal. It is a way to control. A way to know who you work with, what conditions these people work in, how much money they are paid. I know quality; I know how it's made. These are truly beautiful materials. On the commercial side, it's something that must be defended and something we must always be talking about."

He refuses to develop his collections according to a digestible, commercially friendly theme. "This bores me," he says. "For me, each collection is no different from the last in the idea and manner

by which it is created. And so we will often find that certain pieces are repeated and updated according to the taste of every passing season. What interests me more than a cycle of fashion is the gradual composition of a wardrobe. In any one of my collections you can find pieces seen a decade ago alongside new ones. It's more of a process, more about an ongoing reflection on clothing than the creation of a collection."

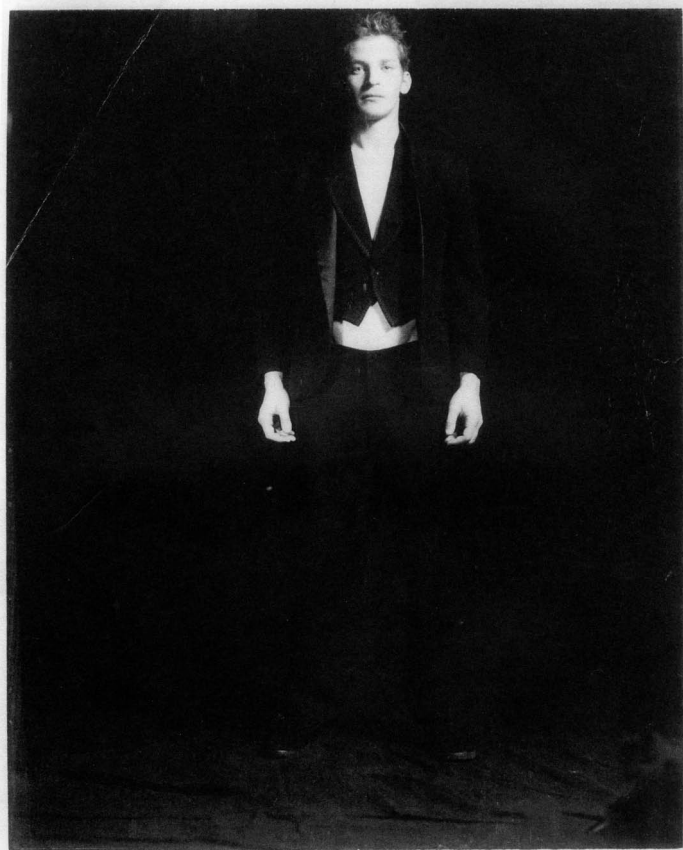
Even in a world of famously idiosyncratic figures, le Bihan may be unique in his obstinacy and his inexhaustible interrogation of specific forms, textures and styles. "I find interest in creating from clothes already heavy with the past," he explains. "This becomes an item of clothing with a history without end. This past, my past, this future: from the boutique, which will sell them, to the person who will wear them at some consequential point in their lives."

His meticulous deconstruction of the historical garments he collects – an 18th-century suit, an 1880 boy's jacket, a 1910 frock coat, old uniforms, embroidery, lace – plays on the intimacy and mutability of memory. He injects vintage details, and sometimes even scraps of the old garments, into every new design. "What pleases me in the act of using old pieces," he muses, "is that the clothes will be attached to memories or emotions, and at the same time to references suitable for each and every one of us. By looking at an item of clothing, it is quite easy to imagine the figure and stature of the person who'd worn it. You can quickly make up the story. I love taking that story and adding my own, to permit the person who will make it theirs to make it a story of their own."

Vintage style has become, in recent years, a major fashion trend, yet the way in which le Bihan approaches the past is radically different from most vintage-inspired designers. His work is neither the evocation of any particular period nor a rediscovery of a historical attitude. His designs hover in space and time, impossible to pin down to a single point.

Conceptual underpinnings aside, the clothes are exquisite, delicate and sensual. Rugged leather is paired with ethereal chiffon and nubby, light cotton. Fabrics are ruched, gathered and draped in complex, elegant silhouettes. His vision is extreme, but never Spartan.

The lightness of his touch is evident in his dancer's outfit, a stiffened bra and attached tutu that references the many studies of ballet dancers by Edgar Degas. Since he first revealed it, in 1997, it has resurfaced in his collections many times; it has been reworked for both men and women; it has been closed at the back or entirely open in the front; it has been paired with a vest, which may be long or short. Like all his designs, it has always been asymmetrical.





PHOTOGRAPHY BY D.R.

Another recurring theme is the Man Ray suit that has inspired him since 1999. The story of its discovery is extraordinary. "Searching through junk shops for a tuxedo, I never found one my size," he explains. "What I did find, in one of the shops where I usually buy my books, was a suit whose size seemed fine. It was evidently of impeccable quality. A tag inside the pocket credited a great Viennese tailor, the date 1928 and the name Man Ray. Usually, when you find something in junk shops there is no way of knowing to whom it belonged. It was devastating to discover. It was almost the remains."

The three-piece woolen suit consists of a jacket with a shawl collar, a waistcoat and trousers. The waist is slightly higher than normal, and the waistcoat bears the label of Knize, the great Austrian house founded in 1858. Knize is still based at the premises designed for it by the fiercely modernist architect Adolf Loos in Vienna in 1913. Admired equally for the perfection of its cuts and the sportiness of its suits, Knize had boutiques in Paris, Prague and Berlin, all designed by Loos and frequented by a glamorous clientele. Marlene Dietrich had several suits, coats and waistcoats made for her that were identical to those of her husband, Rudolf Sieber. Another client was the society figure Paul Wittgenstein, the wealthy, unstable second cousin of Ludwig, who died in an insane asylum. (His eccentric behavior is chronicled by Thomas Bernhard in a semi-autobiographical novel, *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, in which Paul spends a great deal of time bargaining with his tailor.)

The Man Ray suit is not just an inspiration for le Bihan. In its many iterations, it is more like an editioned piece of art. "I love his photographic work," says le Bihan of Man Ray, "but I am quite distant to all the rest. Perhaps it is more the idea of the intellectually important individual that has led me to take this step: he was a lasting personality who belonged to an effervescent time."

The spring/summer 2001 collection was the first to feature the suit, as an edition of 20 numbered copies in white cotton canvas, constructed to its original proportions. It is, naturally, for men and women alike. It has reappeared in subsequent collections, hand-painted on one side, tinted in a graduated effect, or made of black or red latex. Le Bihan's taste for hybridisation reinforces his eternal refusal of symmetry-induced perfection.

From the margins of the fashion world, le Bihan continues his epistemological exploration. His techniques and proportions transcend time, mapping out a profound cartography of the influence of fashion on fashion.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDRE FIETTE