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STYLE WISE

By Martin Webb

It's been a busy month for the Tokyo style scene, with a flurry of high-profile store openings culminating in an unveiling of the monumental Omotesando Hills that coincided with extravagant 100th anniversary bashes for luxury pen brand Mont Blanc and jeweler Van Cleef & Arpels. All this meant a punishing agenda for the beautiful people, who were obliged to down gallons of champagne and schmooze for all they were worth night after night.

But these parties do get rather repetitive. The consensus among those in the business of selling luxury is that plying tastemakers with alcohol and ritzy finger food is the best way to inculcate reverence for a brand — and not many seem willing to break the formula of a glorified buffet accompanied by a DJ spinning unobtrusive dance music. And why not? Regular partygoers need a pleasant arena in which to air-kiss and make their own fun, and they wouldn't want it any other way.

It's notable that while the guests at these sorts of events tend to be cosmopolitan types, the typical Tokyo launch differs from its Western equivalent by featuring good manners among attendees, less endemic snobbery and a welcome absence of drunken dancing. They may be taller over there, but at least Tokyo has decorum.

Chloé

Headed up by Stella McCartney up until 2001, French fashion brand Chloé is currently without a chief designer after The Beatles heiress' replacement, Brit "it" girl Phoebe Philo, quit earlier this month. That news put a bit of a damper on the Jan. 10 launch of Chloé's first store in Japan, next to the new Cartier flagship in Omotesando.

Held in the Chloé Cafe, a temporary building on the former site of the Aoyama branch of the supermarket Kinokuniya, the event distinguished itself by featuring a DJ set by Tomoyuki Tanaka of Fantastic Plastic Machine, which was only audible through wireless headphones distributed to guests.

Also of note was an enormous orgy of seafood piled, at points, over head height, and a pair of sushi chefs preparing *maguro* to order. The fact that many of the fashion elite were in Europe for the menswear collections meant that the star quotient was lower than the organizers might have hoped. Thank goodness, then, for the dazzling presence of the impeccably dressed Sae Isshiki, dolled out head to toe in Chloé, including one of the label's famously expensive handbags.

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Maison Martin Margiela

Master of fashion deconstruction Martin Margiela spent six years designing womenswear for Hermes before being replaced by Jean-Paul Gaultier. After



OPENING WITH A BANG — (clockwise from above) Actress Sae Isshiki perks up the Chloé opening; showroom dummies mingle at the launch of Maison Martin Margiela; and Bernard Willhelm (right) and item idem™ pose at Wilhelm's new store in Parco

MARTIN WEBB PHOTOS

years toughing it out on his own, in 2002 the reclusive Belgian signed a deal with Diesel tycoon Renzo Russo who is masterminding a rapid expansion of his conceptual clothing empire.

Margiela, who has always found his most receptive audience in Japan, opened a store in Tokyo in 2000, before he had any retail presence in his native Europe. The new shop in Ebisu is the biggest yet for his brand. To mark the opening, staff donned white lab coats — the uniform for all Margiela folks — and served sake in *masu* boxlike wooden cups. True to the intellectual image of the brand, almost every attendee was dressed in black, and the chin-stroking set pondered the significance of whitewashed television sets, disassembled mannequins and rack after rack of baffling clothes.

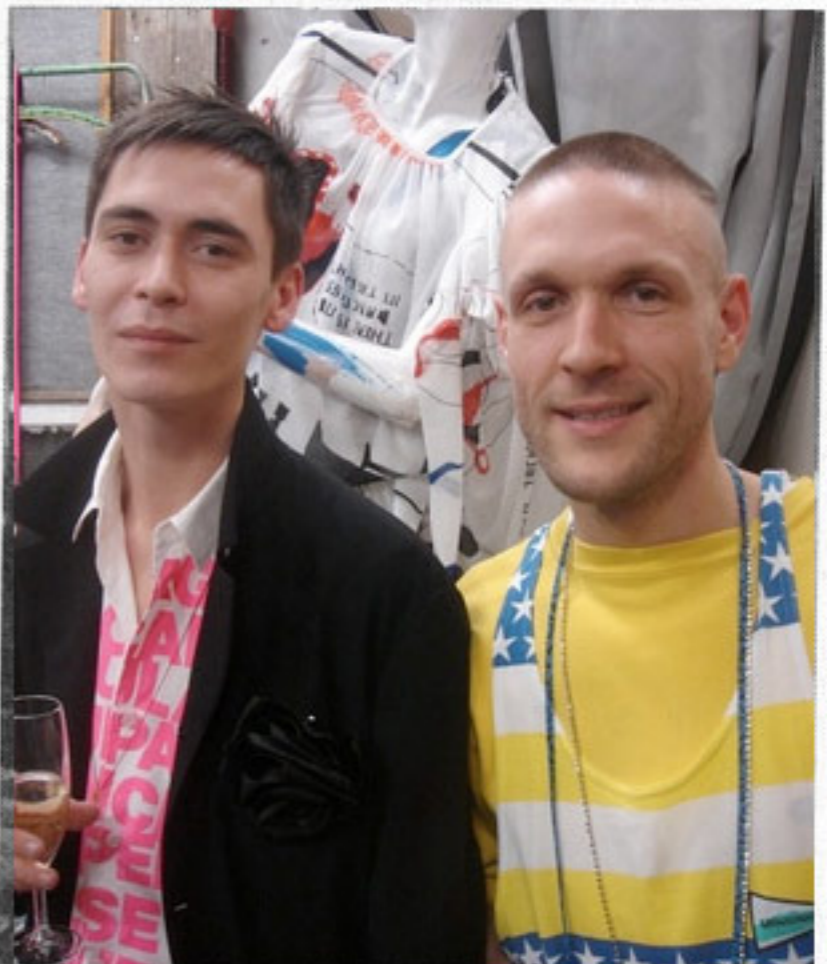
Margiela does not give interviews and refuses to be photographed, so the buzz at the party was all about whether the man himself had made it over to Tokyo. Was he somewhere in back philosophizing with his Japanese partners? Or have they even met him?

3-3-3 Ebisu Minami, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 5725-2414.

Bernhard Willhelm

Yet another cult figure from the world of fashion was also in town recently: Bernhard Willhelm, arguably the oddest fashion designer in the business. The Paris-based German's wacky *oeuvre* includes a collection based on McDonald's Happy Meal figures, and another inspired by dung-gathering beetles. Willhelm is regarded with a degree of puzzlement by the European fashion fraternity, while he is respected for daring to go where others will not, very few people have the guts to splash out on his bright, childlike creations, at least not at the prices at which they retail.

The flamboyant designer, who famously posed nude for the launch issue of gay quarterly *Butt Magazine*,



is lucky to have a huge following in Japan. Here, his head-turning sartorial experiments find a ready market among a cash-flush generation of young Japanese looking to distinguish themselves from their peers with outlandish outfits. It makes sense, then, for Willhelm to launch his first retail outlet in Tokyo's Shibuya, inside fashion emporium Parco.

Tucked away in a corner of the trendy third floor, the interior was handled by conceptual artist item idem™ and his sometime partner-in-creation Asa. The pair scavenged garbage dumps and assembled their treasures into what Asa describes as a "junk puzzle" inside the store. The texture of rusty corrugated iron and old planks of wood sat well in juxtaposition with the fluorescent colors of Willhelm's creations — an effect he declared to be "really nice."

3F Shibuya Parco Part 1, 1-15 Udagawa-cho, Shibuya-ku. Tel: (03) 5459-9671.