



Accessories designer and stylist

JUDY BLAME

came to prominence in the 1980s with a punk aesthetic using everyday objects such as buttons and bottle tops. Over the decades he has collaborated with a host of international designers, from Christopher Nemeth to Kim Jones at Louis Vuitton, as well as styling the likes of Neneh Cherry and Björk.

Portrait **Mark Mattock**
Words **Andy Thomas**

“The one thing I didn’t want it to be was a nostalgia-fest,” announced Judy Blame last November, speaking about his forthcoming exhibition at London’s ICA. “It’s called the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and I want to do something contemporary, using all my different tools. So it’s going to be a bit of jewellery, a bit of customising, photos – we’re finding out a way of mixing all the things together. But it will be me with a 2016 hat on, not a 1980s kind of thing.”

It was in the 1980s, though, that Blame’s DIY creativity burst out of London’s post-punk scene. After running away from home in rural Devon when he was 17, he’d spent the early punk years in Manchester meeting influential friends such as Malcolm Garrett, designer of the Buzzcocks’ sleeves. At the end of 1978, he moved to London with Garrett at the birth of the new romantic scene. He was soon hanging out with the likes of Princess Julia at Covent Garden’s PX boutique, and wearing his homemade accessories to the Blitz club.

In a previous ICA exhibition, *A Journey Through London Subculture: 1980s to Now*, one image really captured the spirit of the post-punk period. British artist Nicola Tyson had accompanied Blame and shoemaker John Moore to the muddy banks of the Thames. There under Blackfriars Bridge she photographed them scavenging for old bones, buttons and bottle tops. “I don’t know what it is about England, but we’re really good at accessories,” Blame told Iain R. Webb in *The Independent* in 2005. “When we haven’t got the money, we have to use our imagination. I’ve never been formally trained at anything so I didn’t have any fear about using something that wasn’t a classical jewellery material.”

Blame’s recycled pieces shared much in common with the creative salvage movement, emerging during the bleakest days of Thatcher’s Britain. In the book *Cut and Shut: The History of Creative Salvage*, Gareth Williams describes the environment in which Blame and his contemporaries worked: “In the early 1980s, Britain seemed to be on the brink of civil war. Riots had kicked off in Brixton, Birmingham and Liverpool... Unemployment had reached 12 per cent. City centre shops were boards up,

industrial buildings sprouted shrubbery from the guttering and ‘To Let’ signs from the walls.”

London club culture responded with a display of creative ingenuity. It was at Cha Cha, the club Blame co-hosted at Heaven with Michael Hardy and fellow punk renegade Scarlett Cannon, that his reclaimed jewellery (made out of everything from driftwood to coat hangers and metal chains) really started to turn heads.

One of those excited by the pieces he saw was the designer Antony Price, who commissioned Blame for a catwalk show at Camden Palace. Blame’s designs were also reaching across the Atlantic thanks to Susanne Bartsch’s boutique in New York’s Soho. Fast-forward to the men’s collections in Paris in 2015 and his beautiful bricolage jewellery, made out of skeleton keys, brass buttons and leather shoelaces, is adorning Kim Jones’s autumn/winter 2015 collection for Louis Vuitton. Jones’s collection that season was a tribute to the genius of designer Christopher Nemeth. And it was alongside this pioneering deconstructionist that Blame, along with designers John Moore and Richard Torry and photographer Mark Lebon, created the House of Beauty and Culture collective in 1980s east London.

The environment around the Hackney store and workshop resulted in beautifully crafted pieces that worked perfectly together – Blame’s salvaged jewellery finishing off a Nemeth post office sack jacket above a pair of John Moore square-toed shoes.

It was a similarly organic process that launched Blame as one of England’s pioneering stylists of the 1980s, working with the likes of Ray Petri’s Buffalo collective for *The Face* and *i-D*. Alongside many powerful fashion editorials, he created the ‘Buffalo Stance’ look of his friend Neneh Cherry and the cover of Björk’s *Debut* in 1993, both shot by Jean-Baptiste Mondino. In a world where styling is often overthought, Blame strips it back to basics.

Collaboration has always been key to Blame’s design ethic. It’s seen him work with everyone from Rei Kawakubo at Comme des Garçons to Katie Hillier and Luella Bartley on their recent Marc by Marc Jacobs line. His work for Kim Jones’s Louis Vuitton collection is the latest in a series of partnerships with a big design houses, including a Paco Rabanne handbag adorned with metal keys, bottle openers, coins and buttons. It’s been quite a journey for the punk renegade, one that is to be explored through a book published by Kim Jones’s Slow Loris imprint, currently in early planning stages. Along with the ICA exhibition it serves as a fitting tribute to one of England’s true design mavericks.

Why did you decide to do the ICA exhibition now?

They asked me. I was a bit surprised to tell you the truth. I'd never thought of somewhere like that asking me. I knew [executive director] Gregor [Muir] a bit, but when he asked me I was a bit like, are you sure? I'm really pleased though. It's nice because it's on for a few months and isn't one of these pop-up things. Also Kim Jones had asked me to do the book a couple of years ago, so I was going through a lot of things from the past. And then we did the Christopher Nemeth collection for Louis Vuitton together. And Kim is a bit of a fan so he remembers all the work and is a lot more documentary about it than me. My attitude about it is that I just did it.

Do you think all this 1980s nostalgia can hold people back from creating their own thing today?

I do have a problem looking backwards; I'm really not a big nostalgia person. I'm one of the last of the paper, glue and scissors era, where you actually made something and wore it yourself – that's how you used to experiment. Whereas kids experiment in a different way now. They've got access to more information. It's too much information for me, but then I know where my taste is. I never stop and look back and rest on my laurels. I'm always seeing something that inspires me and kicks me off in a new direction.

You said you wanted to make the exhibition 2016 rather than 1980s. How have you done this?

Looking back over my work, it's made me realise that there are certain themes that run through what I've done. So I can pick up pictures of things I did 25 years ago and one of something I did last week and you can't really tell the date on them. I'm not saying I'm repetitive, because a lot of what I do is about my environment and the time we are in. But if you look back there are certain threads that run through my work, so that was very

interesting for me. And that's how I've put together this exhibition for the ICA. I've gone into my archive, I've found things that particularly stimulate me still, and then I've brought some of those themes up to date.

How does your work as an accessories designer connect to your work as a stylist?

It always starts from a jewellery idea. All of my roots start from a necklace that I might have made. And then I will think, why don't I do a shoot that uses that as a starting point. That is one of the things you will see with the ICA show. I wasn't initially going to put a lot of the jewellery in and then I realised how important it is to my whole thought process. To physically sit there and make something.

When did you first starting making things?

As a very young kid, I was always the one who was quite happy to be in his room drawing away or making something. I've got two brothers and two sisters and they would be outside with the rough and tumble and I'd be in my room drawing and dreaming. I didn't feel like I had to go out and throw myself around and graze my knees. From a very young age, I always had an attitude that if I didn't have something, I would make it.

Do you think that childlike thing has stuck with you over the years?

Yes, sometimes I think my work is naïve but then that is the charm in it. And that's because I've never physically been taught or trained to do anything. So I'm not coming at it from a formal point of view. I'm coming at it from an instinctive, visual way.

Have you always seen the beauty in everyday objects?

Always. I've realised that it's never about the value of it as a material thing. I've always believed you make it into something of value by changing it. But I've never had money as my motivation. The inspiration can come from anywhere and I've never had blinkers on. I like to use lots of different things from all over the place and mix it up in my own way.

Could you tell me more about working on Kim Jones's Christopher Nemeth collection for Louis Vuitton?

To work with Kim really wasn't difficult because he's very sympathetic to my ideas. Christopher is a designer who inspired him and he also knew all about my work with him. He was really coming at it from a point of knowledge. But he didn't want to repeat the nostalgia of it either. So it was really easy. I also love working with Louis Vuitton.

You also worked in Paris for Paco Rabanne. Can you tell me about that?

What was so good about Paco Rabanne was that they let me go into his archive and really absorb it and to nick some of his old materials. I knew that I had to do a chain bag but anything else that came away from that was fine. So I went into the archive, spent a couple of days in the boxes, then built one of the chain bags with my vibe all over it. And then I made a necklace and a bangle and a couple more bags. It was a really good job because I didn't know much about him, but being able to go through someone like that's archive was great. I found I had quite a lot in common with him.

Can you talk about the mid-1980s and your work with the House of Beauty and Culture?

It's been turned into legend, which is all a bit odd to those of us still left. The most important thing about that time was that there was a lot of really good camaraderie around. We met when we were all at the same level, just starting out and working out what our own vibe was. John [Moore] had just come out of college and I was doing my jewellery, then we met Nemeth, and we already knew Richard Torry and we were all at a similar level.

Did you create pieces with each other's work in mind?

I was doing a lot of recycled stuff and the minute I saw Nemeth's stuff I was like, this man makes the clothes of my dreams. So it was like, let's throw some old coins on it or whatever. It was a very fertile time.



Unpublished portrait of Judy Blame, circa 1980
Photograph Robyn Beeche

“I’m one of the last of the paper, glue and scissors era, where you actually made something and wore it yourself. Kids experiment in a different way now.”

You mentioned recycling. Did you feel a connection to the creative salvage movement and people like Ron Arad and Tom Dixon?

I didn't know Ron so much, although I did do a couple of things with him back in the day. I knew Tom well. He made the first clothes rail for Chris [Nemeth] out of old rusted things that he used to hang at Mark Lebon's studio. Tom made a mad crown out of old cogs and we used to hang all the Nemeth on it. This was before the House of Beauty and Culture and people used to go to Mark's studio to pick up a wicked jacket or whatever. That is one of the things I miss, the way people mix. They don't really do that any more. They email, whereas back in the day we didn't have mobile phones so you had to go to nightclubs to meet people and find out what was going on.

That whole DIY environment you were working in was a continuation from punk. Can you talk about your time in Manchester?

I arrived there in 1977. I'd gone to London where I thought I'd meet loads of people but I didn't. And the only place I knew anyone was Manchester. It had a great scene of its own so I stayed. I knew I couldn't go back to the countryside. People were friendlier than in London and then it had its own solid scene. There was a lot of stuff going on and we all went to the same things. And in Manchester, I also had some space to learn to make mistakes.

What was the main thing punk did for you?

I always say I never went to college but punk was like my college. It was like the musicians, many of them couldn't really play but we still went to see them. It was so daring in a funny way. It was very much, rip it up and start again. And that is what I did. For a young lad from the countryside it was perfect. It really was the start of my life. So I had that spirit in me. And Manchester was a fucking great place to do it.

Had you started making your own things by then?

Only with our own appearance, that was always important. So, what colour should I have my hair this week? I didn't know anything about fashion really though. I didn't know anything about music or anything else, so it was a great way to find out. And luckily I had people like Malcolm [Garrett] saying, “Have you heard this record?” or “Do you know this artist?” or “I'm taking you to the cinema to see this film.”

What do most people get wrong about punk today?

They think it is a look and it isn't. Punk is not a look – it is an attitude. They turned the look into a formula so it doesn't shock anyone now. That's the worst part of it.

Can you tell me about your move to London with Malcolm?

When we arrived it was really at the very start of the new romantic time. The guts had been kicked out of punk and it was just formula. I got the feeling with this new romantic thing that it was a bit more like the original punk when everyone wanted to be different. So I loved it, meeting [Princess] Julia and Steve Strange and all that lot. There were definitely a lot of characters, so it was great fun.

And this was when you really began making the jewellery?

I started making it with my friend Scarlett [Cannon] just to go out. So it was literally just to wear when we went out to the clubs. And then one night at Heaven I met Antony Price. And Antony asked me to do a show with him just from me wearing the pieces out. I didn't think what I was wearing was very Antony Price at all. But I showed him this funny little book of Polaroids of my other pieces and he laughed while he turned every page. I got really pissed off with it, but he said, “We will do a show together.” So he pushed me to take it to the next stage with this massive show at Camden Palace. It was three nights at £7 a ticket, and it was packed. It was a really great show, very theatrical and it was a brilliant experience for me. I'd been a huge fan of Antony's work through Roxy Music and it was great for me to do that.

How did Susanne Bartsch get hold of your stuff?

Again it was through the nightclubs. She came up to me and said, “Oh darling, where did you get that from?” And I was like, “Oh, I made it.” And she was a big friend of Michael [Costiff] and Gerlinde [who owned the boutique World, celebrated in a previous book by Kim Jones's publishing house Slow Loris] so I went down



Judy Blame's customised version of Paco Rabanne's Le 69 bag, 2011
Photograph courtesy of Paco Rabanne



Elisabet Davidsdottir for *i-D* magazine, styling and head piece by Judy Blame, make-up by Sharon Dowsett and hair by Barnabé, photographed by Mark Mattock, late 1990s

Ray Petri and he was really encouraging and said, “You’re good at putting clothes together Judy.” And then Terry Jones was getting *i-D* together. He’d seen what I was doing at the House of Beauty and Culture and liked it so he’d say, “I’ll print that.” So now with *The Face* and *i-D* there was somewhere to show these things I was putting together. There was a reason for doing it.

What was your first fashion editorial?

It was for *i-D* with Mark Lebon. We were supposed to have Jenny Howarth model for us and I was so nervous. Jenny was like a supermodel back then and I was mad about her. She’d just cropped her hair off and she looked so great in Chris’s clothes. We’d borrowed a lot of stuff from Galliano and when Jenny turned up Mark gave her the camera and said, “You take the fuckin’ pictures.” So I ended up modelling it with my friend Dave Baby and Scarlett, who I called up. And then after the weekend we took the pictures into Terry, who was expecting Jenny done by Mark. But he still printed it.

One of your most iconic shoots was Neneh Cherry for ‘Buffalo Stance’ and the *Raw Like Sushi* LP. What made that work so well?

Neneh was not hard to do. I adore her and, as I said before, I like mixing things up. So she was like a dream person for me to work with. She had it all. She had the Swedish upbringing, the New York upbringing, the jazz, hip-hop, punk, reggae and funk. She had a similar kind of mix to me in a way. We got on like a house on fire. And when it came to the shoots it really was about mixing things up, so the hip-hop with the European look and everything. You had Ray Petri over there doing the Buffalo thing and we were all feeding off each other. And then of course we had [Jean-Baptiste] Mondino taking the shots. It just clicked. Neneh put the black bra on with gold chains and that was it.

The cover of Bjork’s *Debut* LP is a beautiful image. Can you tell me the story behind it?

My happy accidents have been some of my most enduring things. I’d only met her two days beforehand at [music producer] Nellee Hooper’s. I didn’t know anything about her, I just thought she was this sweet girl we’d gone back to Nellee’s with after the club. She knew who I was through me working with Neneh and she told me she was shooting with Mondino in Paris in a few days time. I told her I was also in Paris and she said, “I’ve never met him, so would you mind coming to help me out?” I told her, “Just pack your favourite things and I’ll help you get the pictures together with Mondino,” and Topolino, who was doing the



Polaroid from Neneh Cherry’s *Raw Like Sushi* album shoot, styling by Judy Blame, photographed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, 1988

make-up. Anyway she arrived at the hotel on Sunday night and the airport had lost all her luggage. So first thing on Monday morning I called Margiela and said, “Can I come over like now?” Bjork wanted to look like a little animal. So I went through and pulled out this little mohair jumper. I took it back to Mondino’s and Topolino put these two little dots under her eyes. It just clicked. The whole simplicity of it made it really fresh.

You have said that it worries you that everyone takes their reference from the surface these days and they don’t go below it.

There is too much surface and people don’t mind putting another layer on top of it. People aren’t very good about facing up to things any more. It’s all about distraction. You can be so easily distracted now and people don’t think beyond that. The



Clara Benjamin, styling and head piece by Judy Blame, photographed by Mark Mattock, late 1990s

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world is in a mess, but they still talk about the most mundane things. And you think, yeah, but 200 babies died in Africa while you are talking about someone’s visible panty line.

Why do you think there hasn’t been a major cultural response to global events?

I don’t worry about it so much as being disappointed by it. But I always live in hope that there will be an underground of some sort, especially now. Some people blame the machines and maybe that’s true to some extent, but you can still use the machines. You just need an idea behind it.

I guess you did it with Instagram.

If you look at what I do with Instagram, it’s taking one image and putting one slogan with it, and immediately there are two points of reference. And it’s just like my editorials. When I did that shoot about pollution, everyone went, “You’re mad, you can’t do a fashion shoot about pollution.”

What was that shoot?

It’s one I did for *i-D* with Mondino. It was around the time of the Exxon Valdez oil disaster [Alaska, 1989], and all you saw on the news were these images of birds covered in oil. So I wanted to do a shoot where it looked like the models were the birds being pulled out of the sea. The thing was, they were these super sexy glamorous images, but then when you looked at them again I’d printed the facts of what was happening to the sea. And it worked. So it’s the way you project things that’s important. If you can get people to look at what you’ve done twice then you’re laughing, because you’ve got them thinking about it, instead of just flicking past it.

How does a shoot differ now?

You have to look at everything on a machine now, then you have to find a number for it, and then you have to work out a shoot date, and then create a storyboard. Not so much in what I do though. Also, they don’t let the people borrowing the clothes experiment enough with them. If one more PR says to me, “You’ve got to do the total look,” I just look at them like they are a mad person. Nobody I know wears a total look of anything. Before it was like, “What have we got? Throw that Galliano together with that T-shirt from Camden Market, rip that up and tie it on her head.” There’s none of that going on any more.

Where do you take most of your inspiration these days?

I can’t follow one path, because it could come from anything or anywhere. The news might come on or there might be a programme that sparks something. But it really can come from anywhere.

What have been your most rewarding projects?

Going back to Japan was really nice because I hadn’t been there for 10 years. All my memories of Japan had been of my time there with Christopher [Nemeth] so I was a little bit nervous about going back. But I really found Japan exciting again. I met a lot of nice new people and I was referenced quite a lot and homaged a bit. So that was a bonus. But travel always is the bonus of the job.

How do you compare your creativity today to back in the early days?

Creatively I feel more bubbling today than I ever did. And maybe that’s part of the knowledge thing, with all the looking back for the book and exhibition. It’s really been interesting going through my past. I forget things, but then Kim can reference a picture I did years ago. I get a lot of that these days with young kids coming up to me and pointing to something I did as really inspiring them. I’ve had that all over the world – it could be ‘Buffalo Stance’ with Neneh or a shoot for *The Face*. They remember which bus they were on when they saw it and how it made them feel, but to you it was just an editorial. It’s funny.

The exhibition Judy Blame: Never Again is at the ICA, the Mall, London SW1 from 29 June
ica.org.uk