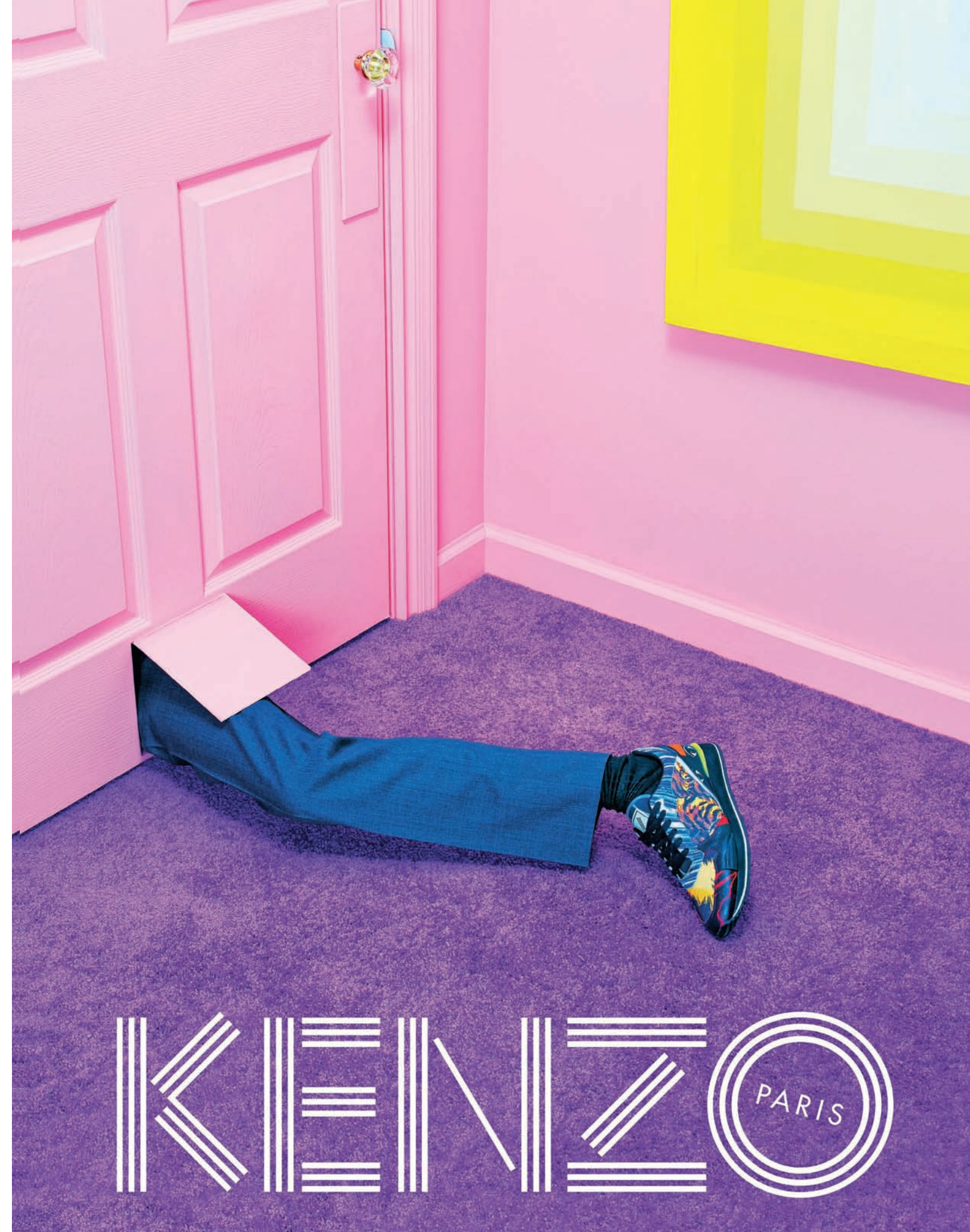


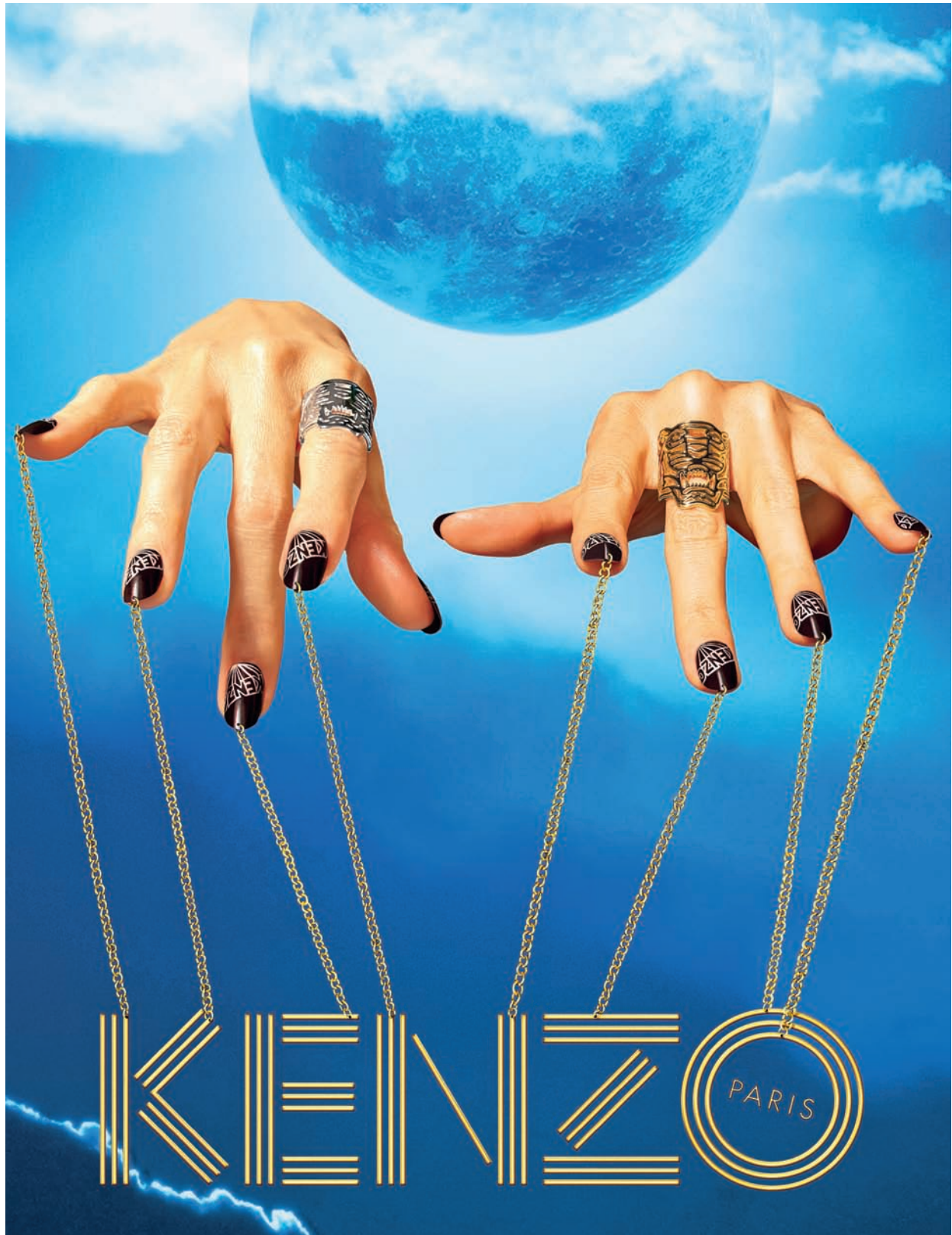
REBIRTH OF A BRAND

Carol Lim and
Humberto Leon,
the creative team
behind KENZO,
explain how they
used photography
to reinvigorate
the iconic brand.
Jessica Gordon
reports



KENZO PARIS





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It's a rare bird that can revitalise a brand by reshaping its visual identity – and an even rarer one that can do so while pasting sticky eyeballs on a model. But for KENZO, the fashion house created by French-Japanese designer Kenzō Takada in the early 1980s, Carol Lim and Humberto Leon were just those birds. The duo were invited to take over KENZO's creative direction in 2011 by its parent company LVMH, the French luxury goods conglomerate, after turning their concept store, Opening Ceremony – set up in 2002 with a \$20,000 loan – into a multi-million dollar success.

“We had worked on Opening Ceremony for almost 10 years, so when we had the opportunity to work on KENZO – at the time our first foray into advertising, runway shows and visibility on a branding level – we wanted to challenge the norm,” Leon says. “We said, ‘What can we do that would inject something completely different and off-kilter as you're flipping through a magazine but still have the attributes of the brand we were building?’”

Leon got his start in visual merchandising and Lim graduated with a degree in economics and worked in investment banking. Their 8th floor office in Manhattan's Chinatown is unassuming, with many of their 35 employees poring over spreadsheets, and an open storage cupboard full of boxes labelled things like ‘FW15 Women’ and ‘Russia’. It's clear the office is the place for organisation, storage and planning, and that, above all, the team driving it is incredibly business-savvy. But Lim and Leon are also rightly known for their creativity, and their ability to translate their taste in art and music into customer experience.

“Culture is one of the foundations for what we build at both brands, so photography is one of the cultural aspects we like to explore. For KENZO, there's a history to the brand, and in many ways we're trying to dedicate the history to the founder in a way that is through our lens and hands. It's sifted through our soul, but with him in mind,” Leon says. “We're the common thread,” says Lim “so the process is the same, but storywise it's very distinct.”

They made a bold start with KENZO's direction, choosing New York-based fine art

1	A shot from KENZO's autumn/winter 2013/14 campaign, shot by <i>Toiletpaper</i> , aka Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari.	3	A shot from KENZO's spring/summer 2015 campaign, shot by <i>Toiletpaper</i> .	6	A shot from KENZO's spring/summer 2013 campaign, shot by Jean-Paul Goude.
2	A shot by Laetitia Hotte showing 10-year-old Dizzie dressed in clothes from the KENZO Kids' spring/summer 2015 collection. The story was published on KENZO's website in May 2015.	4	Images from the lookbook for KENZO's resort 2014 collection, shot by Jamie Hawkesworth.	7	Shots from KENZO's spring/summer 2012 campaign – the first that Carol Lim and Humberto Leon directed for the brand – shot by Roe Ethridge.
		5	A shot from Synchronodogs' story for the KENZO's website, which used the autumn/winter 2013/14 collection and was published in November 2013.		All images © KENZO

photographer Roe Ethridge to shoot their first campaign for the brand, spring/summer 2012 [page 49]. “We're really attracted to fine artists, and various younger artists,” Leon says. “For our first campaign with Roe, we came up with a strong concept that we still love to this day. It was a presentation, so we shot the ad campaign in a way that reflected that.”

Graphically charged, the images feature models propped and kneeling on metal scaffolding, all anchored by the KENZO logo. “That first collection was executed and photographed within six weeks, factoring in the August holiday, when everyone in France is on vacation,” Lim says. “It marked the beginning of our chapter... like us saying, ‘We're going to approach this our own way.’”

For Ethridge, who worked on the shoot with stylist Marie Chaix, the idea was a fresh take on the classic, commercial image – a white backdrop and punchy graphics. “We were playing with ideas where the logo could interact with the silhouettes,” Ethridge says. “The girls were incredible and they each brought something to the image I couldn't have directed. They were essentially in character and killing it.”

Lim and Leon also brought graphic designer Juan Gatti onto the set to lend a hand on the creative direction, and Ethridge says the result was a group effort. “It's so satisfying when those collaborations are better than the ideas you start off with,” he says.

This first campaign was a success, giving the designer duo the momentum to realise a dream – shooting with photography legend Jean-Paul Goude. The autumn/winter 2012/13 campaign was Goude's first collaboration with a clothing brand, but the result went down so well he was invited back to shoot the next [page 48]: fun, vibrant and quirky, these campaigns solidified KENZO's new voice, and LVHM approved.

“In some ways, LVHM doesn't understand what we're doing, but they've grown to love it. They feel like it has such a strong handwriting. In our rebranding efforts, we've retold the language of what's us, and the brand is doing phenomenally. [Going into a concept, we ask ourselves] is it invigorating, exciting, energetic?

At this point, I think they would challenge us if we did something normal.”

Creative directions

Since then, the KENZO team has tapped into a series of photographers whose work has the right kind of vibe, including left-field emerging photographers such as Synchronodogs and Philippe Jarrigeon, and imagemakers better known for their fine art, such as Lorenzo Vitturi, and inviting them to shoot editorial-style stories for KENZO's website, as well as more traditional ad campaigns. “It really is from our curiosity,” Lim says. “We go to [music] shows and say, ‘Oh, who did the cover for that album?’ Or we'll see something super random and be like, ‘Whoa, I wonder if they'd be interested in trying a shoot for us.’”

“We like to explore and try new things,” agrees Leon. “For a lot of other brands, there's a singular vision. We feel like our brand is so much more diverse; we like seeing different artists and people move in and out. There are times when we use one artist repeatedly to re-enhance the story, and there are times when we bring in somebody totally new and young, or legendary and experienced. We like to play around with what the product is and what would feel freshest to us.”

Lim and Leon teamed up with Ukrainian photo-duo Tania Shcheglova and Roman Noven of Synchronodogs to create a story with the autumn/winter 2013/14 collection for the KENZO website published in November 2013, for example, which they shot in a rented Paris apartment. Using patterned fabrics and wallpaper, the duo built all the sets themselves and used them to create a richly textured set of images [opposite]. “The collection we shot was full of patterns and elements, so our goal was to organically blend it all with even more patterns and elements,” Shcheglova explains. “The only difficulty was finding the right combinations, which meant checking thousands of fabrics to find the ones suited to KENZO's clothes. Our style is based so much on colours and textures; I guess there is something similar in the KENZO concept.”

For Lim and Leon, the common factor among all the photographers they commission

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is the strength of their vision – they look for collaborators with a strong point of view, says Lim. “If we didn’t let their style come through, then we would take the pictures ourselves,” Lim says. “If you look at the recent editorials and photographers we’ve used, a lot are focused on real people in certain scenes that feel different yet still feel very KENZO.”

Their collaboration with Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari, the brains behind *Toiletpaper* magazine, and its art director Micol Talso, is a case in point: working with the KENZO team, Cattelan and Ferrari also produced *Kenzine*, a limited-edition magazine marrying *Toiletpaper*’s kitschy concept art with KENZO’s autumn/winter 2013/14 products. One noteworthy image shows a rogue leg popping through the bottom of a pink door wearing one of KENZO’s \$245 Crazy Tiger trainers [page 41], and was used as a campaign ad. “It was completely different from Jean-Paul Goude, but equally strong and exciting,” Leon says.

The images won the Fashion Media Award for Advertising Campaign of the Year in 2014, but while Lim and Leon were pleased to have the validation, they say it was never the end goal. “The most amazing thing about it is that [the images are] super authentic,” says Leon. “We’re not trying to please the crowd; we’re trying to do something that’s meaningful to us.”

And although there are easier ways to disseminate lookbooks to fashion editors, Lim and Leon say *Kenzine* was worth the investment, and *Toiletpaper* went on to produce four in total, one every season ending with spring/summer 2015. Each edition featured images also used in the accompanying ad campaign. “We’re still huge fans of print, almost as a way to stumble upon things in 10 or 20 years,” Leon says. “If we just did it digitally, you wouldn’t find it in 10 years.”

Next up they’re starting a new approach based on producing mini movies, though shooting the surrounding campaign as movie posters – Lim and Leon have previously collaborated with directors including Spike Jonze as well as actress Chloë Sevigny, so it feels like a natural fit and they’ve already made a successful first attempt with Sean Baker. They have the freedom to spin off in new directions because their efforts have made KENZO commercially viable again without descending into pure product push. “There are different components of how we communicate; the campaigns are one part of that,” says Lim. “The product is also a huge part because people need to like it in order to buy it... the campaign is our way of invoking a feeling of where we think the brand is going.” **BJP**

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