

Photographer: Rainer Hosch @ Walter Schupfer
Stylist: Peter Weisz
Directed by Carol Christian Poell

OPINION POELL

Carol Christian Poell has been hailed as a label with great promise for the future. forward thinking and modern in his attitudes towards menswear design, Simon O'Connell talks to the unsung and very opinionated hero of intellectual and purpose-built design, while friend and photographer Rainer Hosch showcases the spring and summer collection

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© 2007. Photography: Rainer Hosch, www.rainerhosch.com. Hair: Collin Smith, www.collinsmith.com. Make-up: Carol Christian Poell, www.carolchristianpoell.com. London SW2. Tel: 0171 289 2991.

"WE ARE IN THE YEAR 1998 AND it's not necessary for gay men to dress in women's stuff to make people look twice - we are already ahead. It might be a scandal for a housewife to see a man walking round like that, but for nobody else."

Carol Christian Poell is discussing the recent menswear collections of an English designer who shall remain nameless for fear of starting a war of words which the shy, 31 year old designer from Linz in Northern Austria would be ill-equipped to conduct.

Despite selling to 50 top stores around the world, Poell has a remarkably low profile for someone whose clothes could easily fill many a column inch. In his one and only show in Milan last July, for this summer's collection, the model's arses hung out the back of trousers, the waistband of which was disconnected from the seat; and the coated linen frock coats looked, well, frankly, as if they'd seen better days.

"That collection was about people who are living on the limit, a feeling of being refused from society... a little bit pissed off," says Poell, sounding as if it had just occurred to him that second.

Poell describes his working methods as being closer to an industrial designer than a fashion designer, by which he means his focus is on one product, one garment, at a time. "I am too much in love with the product - I prefer to see just one piece hanging there."

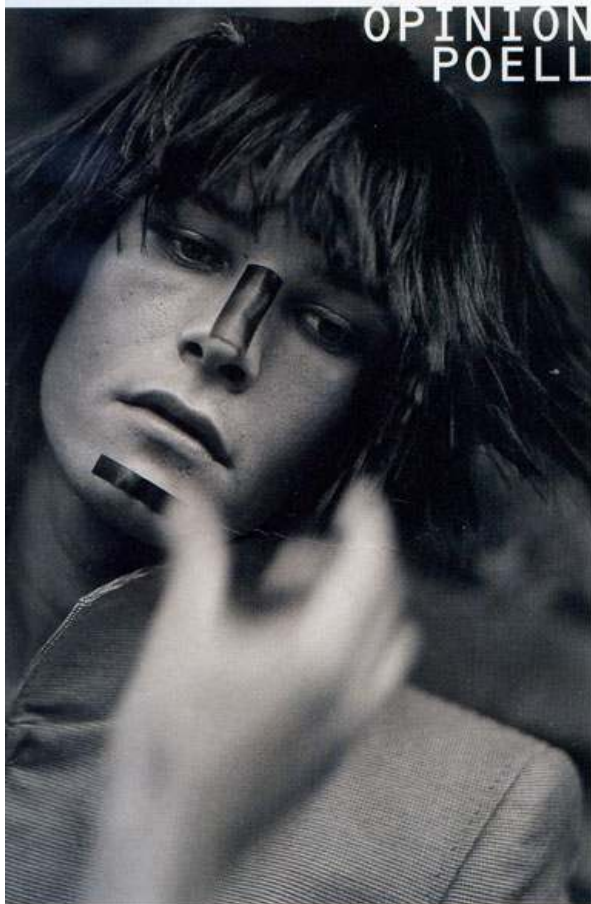
Hence his difficulty in describing a collection, and the extreme reluctance to do catwalk shows. There is no theme - no "I was thinking of the films of Godard/my week in Antibes/my old mum and her big boobs" - just construction, and often bizarre construction at that.

Poell, like so many of the new generation of designers, has a background in tailoring. His stepfather had a tailoring business for which Poell worked part-time from the age of 15. He studied fashion, with an emphasis on tailoring, in Graz, Austria before moving on to the costume Micheleleurn school in Vienna, and finally the Domus



Yuma (left) wears: Lounge jacket in thermosensible silk, pistachio-coloured wool trousers, black waistcoat in cotton/polyurethan and polyamid mix, transparent polyamid t-shirt, and red leather boots all by Carol Christian Poell
 Marc (right) wears: Perforated black leather frock coat, white leather trousers, t-shirt in viscose/nylon and elasthan mix, and black leather sneakers all by Carol Christian Poell
 (To order from: The Library, 268 Brompton Road, London SW3. Tel: 0171 589 6569)

"This collection is about people who are living on the limit, a feeling of being refused from society... a little bit pissed off," says Poell, sounding as if it had just occurred to him that second



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Red zipper polyamid/polypropylene jacket by Carol Christian Poell
(To order from: The Library, 268 Brompton Road, London SW3
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Academy in Milan, where he was awarded the coveted Master in Fashion Design award.

So he knows what he's doing. You have to know the rules before you can break them, and break them he does. What's with the distressed trousers and knackered jackets then, Carol? "Say someone is out for five days non-stop. He is lost. Maybe he loses something in the casino, maybe he loses his trousers, after a few days... he may lose something in a love affair, he's only got one sleeve left, even the waistband of his trousers is gone."

When I suggest that people might be reluctant to part with the not-insubstantial sums that Poell's hand-tailored clothes cost for a jacket that Rab C Nesbitt might favour, his defence is instructive. "We did a lot of research with fabrics that were natural but with a finish that is really oily, as if you found it on a street. But the jacket is always beautiful. It's not just an oily jacket. It would be easy to make an oily jacket. It would be easy to take a normal jacket and get a stylist to put oil on it, but we are not just working on styling."

Poell doesn't like stylists very much. It's nothing personal; it's just that he believes they help to disguise the inadequacies of some designers. In fact, he thinks most other designers are stylists. "With my clothes, the message is in a single piece. Most designers have lost that; I just cannot see it in the end. It's difficult to find a jacket which has personality. If you take away the styling of the show and all that stuff, you're left with nothing - just an ordinary jacket."

Coming from Austria, comparisons with Helmut Lang are inevitable. Poell remembers Lang from long before the rest of the world tuned in. Right now Lang seems to be the designer who has best perfected the art of designing what people want before they know they want it. "I don't think it's that he picks up on trends before other people or anything like that. The trend has come and gone and he's stayed the same."

There are two types of fashion designers: those who try to distil the spirit of the times, to translate the headlines into cloth; and those

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Wool frock coat, mustard-coloured diagonal cut trousers in wool, black polyester t-shirt



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who have a style, a vision, and stick to it whatever is happening. Which camp is Poell in? "I don't care so much about trends; I do what I'm feeling. It's natural. Automatic. I'm not able to check it before. Of course it's a kind of zeitgeist, but I am never inspired. Actually I am always inspired, but never inspired."

Clear as mud, Carol. Poell's clothes are not cheap – you'd get more change in Prada. At the moment every garment is hand-made. "Of course the price is high, but you are getting more value for money. You are not paying for a huge advertising budget, hundreds of employees and other stuff like you are with Prada or with Gucci."

CCP Milano, as the company is called, consists of just Poell, his partner Sergio Simone and four others who work in the busy parts of the year. The rest of the work is contracted out to tailors Poell trusts. "If I talk about tailoring you will think of classic stuff, but I am trying to bring tailoring up to date."

Obviously this situation has to change if the company is to grow. Poell says he does not know what the future holds and whether he will have to find a manufacturer to work with.

His reluctance to do any promotional work or catwalk shows ("I like to do tailoring – I am not so hungry to be famous") has not stopped canny buyers spotting the raw talent visible in his clothes.

There is a move away from design houses whose creativity is confined to the marketing department towards clothes with a voice of their own. And, whether he likes it or not, Carol Christian Poell looks set to be one of the designers to benefit from this new school of thought. So look out – Poell might yet do for Austria what the Antwerp Six (Dries, Dirk etc) did for Belgium a few years ago. Cool Austria anybody?

*All clothes featured are taken from Carol Christian Poell's spring/summer 98 collection
Make Up & Hair by Nicole Jaritz
@ Premier using Aveda
Production: Nicole Jaritz & Peter Weisz*

*Models: Yuma @ Beatrice (Milan)
& Marc Levitz @ Major Model (Milan)*