

art show

Ralph Rucci

The acclaimed American fashion designer infuses his powerful abstract paintings with philosophical musings and historical references

By Vicky Lowry

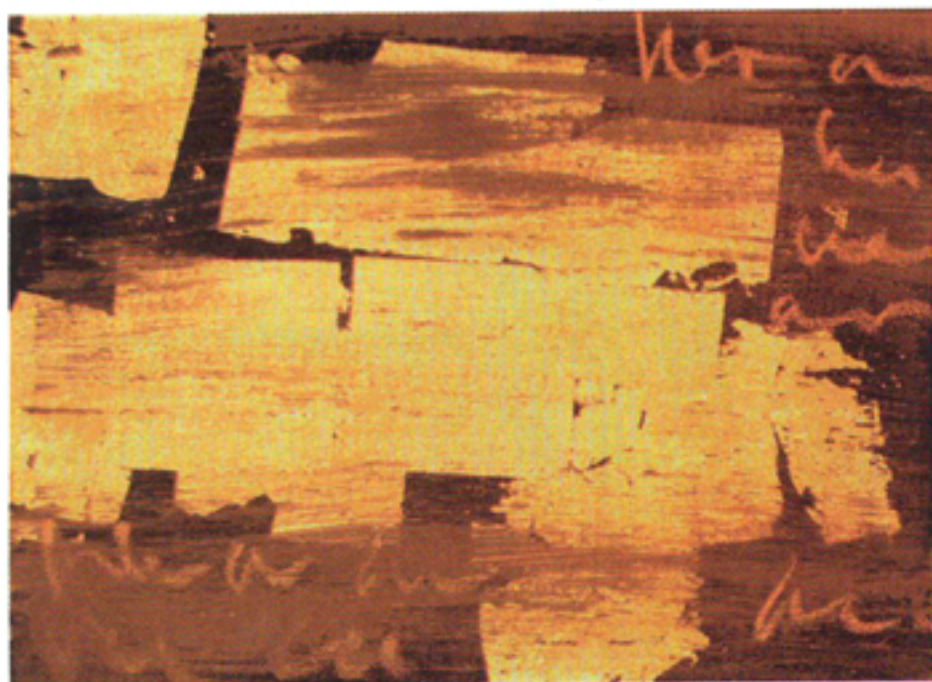


From left:
Believe, 2007.
The artist.

If you're the kind of designer who decides to name your fashion house after a painstakingly complex traditional Japanese tea ceremony, you're clearly not telegraphing a desire for the easy life. In fact, your existence is likely one of disciplined attention to detail, creativity, and ambition.

That seems to be the case for Philadelphia-born couturier Ralph Rucci, founder of Chado Ralph Rucci, renowned for his sculptural silhouettes and polished restraint. He's the first American in 60 years to be invited by France's *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* to show his collections in Paris. And in July, it was announced at the White House that he is one of the recipients of the prestigious Cooper-Hewitt 2008 National Design Award.

Rucci's unrelenting zeal is why he found himself staying up late and working weekends this past summer to complete his latest project: painting 25 new canvases for his current one-man exhibition in downtown Manhattan at the same time his day job involved creating approximately 70 spring looks for the runways of New York's September Fashion Week. If anyone exemplifies the saying, "If you want to get something done, give it to a busy person," it's Rucci. "When I get locked into the sphere of work, it is an avalanche," he says. "I feel as if I don't have enough mental capacity to breathe." That drive produces elegant large-scale collages and paintings in the subdued palette for which he's famous: black, brown, and taupe, with occasional strokes of cinnabar or chartreuse. Not surprisingly, fabrics often make an appearance on his canvases—such as swatches of double-face cashmere—along with other touches both high and low: gold leaf, for example, applied to gravel, transforms the rocks into golden nuggets. ▶



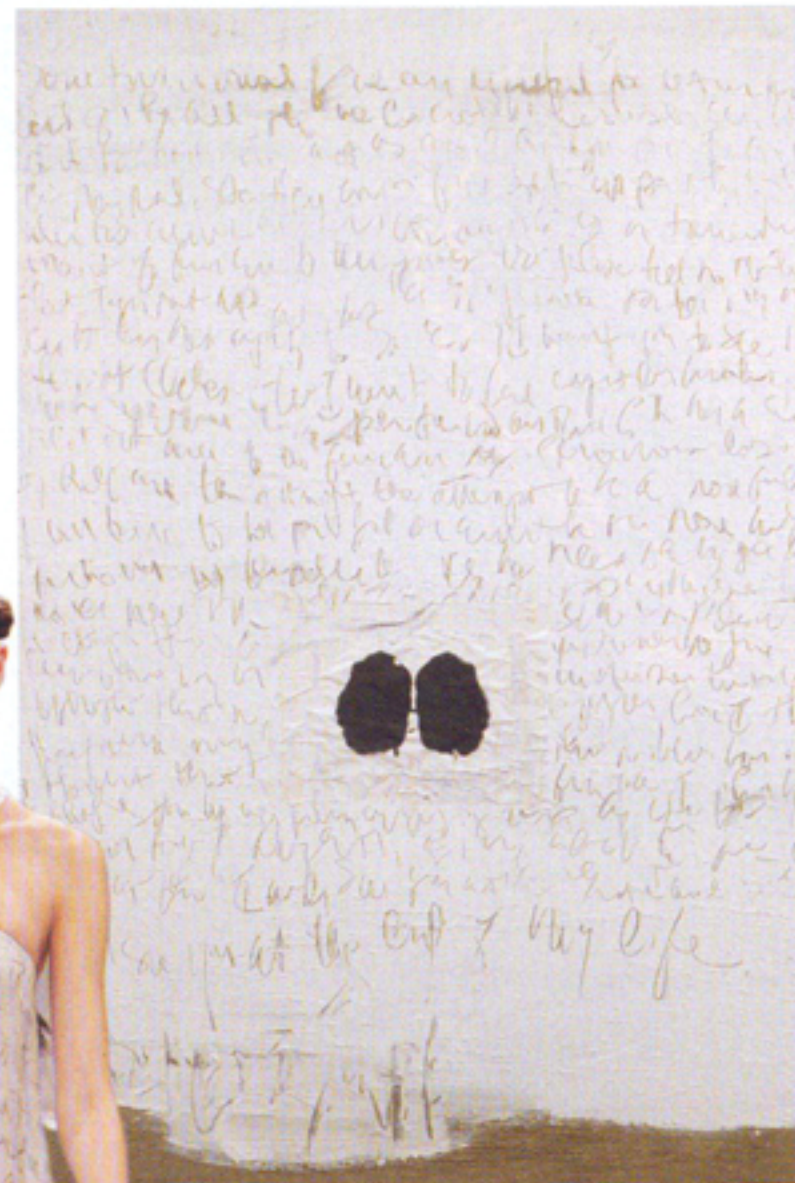
Neverland, 2006.
See Resources.

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While his works are abstract (he's a lifelong student of philosophy, after all), they're laden with concrete, often haunting, handwritten messages—a bow to Cy Twombly, a profound influence. The last line of *Intention*, a 2007 painting that hangs in Rucci's New York showroom, reads, I WILL SEE YOU AT THE END OF MY LIFE. As he explains, "It addresses personal experience, as in a failed love affair, perhaps." But the script, which serves as a decorative pattern, also is a nod to history: "The writing has a lot to do with archeology, hieroglyphics, calligraphy, and the language of a culture."

Rucci never received formal studio art training, but has always dabbled in paints privately, as a "psychiatric activity," he says. That is until three years ago, when San Francisco art dealer Serge Sorokko saw his potential. The dealer's wife, Tatiana, a former model, collects Rucci's fashions like a patron collects art, and, Sorokko says, "The aesthetics of his clothing were so striking I thought I could take them and put them in a frame." When he learned that Rucci actually painted, Sorokko set an exhibition date. The designer has since had shows at the Phoenix Art Museum and New York's Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology and is in the private collections of such tastemakers as clothing designer Monique Lhuillier. "I love his color combinations and textures," she says. "His work is soothing and luxurious at the same time."

The crossover between Rucci's fashion and his art showed up in his spring 2008 runway collection, for which he screened four new collages onto cloth. And the color black—true religion for a fashionista—dominates his canvases. "Being around a lot of color disturbs me," he admits. But there are differences in his approach to the two disciplines. "With art, I don't have to think of anyone wearing it or buying it, and I'm entirely motivated by the unconscious," Rucci says. "I love the process. I just wish I had more time." ■



Clockwise from top: *Intention*, 2007. *Visitation II*, 2006. *Coromandel*, 2008. *Tina Chow*, 2007. *Moveó*, 2007. A look from the spring 2008 Chado Ralph Rucci collection. See Resources.



ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/RALPH RUCCI

