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Designers as Artists, Meta-fashion Exhibition Rule the Conversation at 2024 ITS Awards

The International Talent Support contest bestowed its 2024 awards, naming Momoka Sato the winner and unveiling an exhibition by Olivier Saillard titled "The Many Lives of a Garment."

By MARTINO CARRERA MARCH 23, 2024, 1:19PM

The finalists of the 2024 edition of ITS in Trieste. COURTESY OF ITS

TRIESTE, Italy — "You have been another strong, conscious and revolutionary generation of ITS [contestants]. Everybody gained a human and professional experience."

So said Barbara Franchin, the founder and mastermind of the International Talent Support fashion contest, known as ITS, showing appreciation for the 16 finalists of the 2023-2024 edition.

Franchin was visibly emotional. ITS has gone through highs and lows over its 20-plus-year history and as much as finding a new home in the CRTrieste Foundation's spaces in 2020 seemed an accomplished mission when it opened two years ago, Franchin's ambition to do better and bigger leaves her with more needs to be fulfilled.

"We need Italian fashion companies to stand by our side, to share the experience with us…knowing that we can give back the outputs we receive [from talents] yearly. We need financial support in this operation, which is not only for us, but also really for anyone living on this planet. We need investments in culture, even when they do not offer immediate return on investment," she said, noting her aim is to find a new home for ITS of about 75,000 to 105,000 square feet.

She pointed to the French support system for fashion contests, without naming names but clearly looking at such competitions as the Hyères Festival, among others, which have received support from both institutional and corporate players.

She was nonetheless excited to unveil not only this year's ITS winners, but also the second exhibition at the ITS Arcademy, the contest's headquarters, archives and multifunctional space covering 7,000 square feet.

A meta-fashion exhibition reflecting on the role garments have in everybody's lives, their emotional connections and memory-triggering power, the show is titled "The Many Lives of a Garment."

Franchin again conscripted Olivier Saillard as the show curator, this time aided by philosopher Emanuele Coccia. Filled with mannequins clad in outfits by previous ITS contestants, some scattered in the space as if they were visitors looking at artworks, the show tackled clothing's life stages, from being displayed in a store window to being tried on in a changing room, taken out by its wearer, then lost, deteriorated, exhibited in a museum or even only described through words.

Conceptually the show is about the idea that clothes being worn every day are themselves a walking exhibition, suggesting their wearer's curatorial decisions, the curators noted.

"This exhibition started three decades ago, [because] inside it there are a lot of small experimentations I used to do in the past, and this is the first time that we are showing them all, together in the same place," Saillard said.

The library space at ITS Arcademy. MASSIMO GARDONE AZIMUT/COURTESY OF ITS

The reason for eschewing a traditional fashion exhibit was suggested by Issey Miyake, Saillard said. "He used to say that a dress is only half-finished when it comes out of the atelier, and it's completely finished, like 100 percent, when a man or woman is wearing that dress," Saillard quoted the Japanese designer as saying. "So, it's always that in [fashion] exhibitions lie a paradox," in that they lack the wearer's input.

Case in point: an entire section in the show was devoted to small frames displaying details of shirts owned and worn by Saillard, flanked by written text on the memories and life stories each was linked to. Two cabinets displayed actual outfits from Charlotte Rampling and Tilda Swinton, arranged on chairs as if ready to be picked up from their wearer, while another glass case contained a wedding gown designed by Valentino Garavani for model Alda Balestra von Stauffenberg.

That latter display case is expected to change its content over time, as ITS Arcademy hopes Trieste citizens will loan their personal clothes with some emotional meaning to be showcased for one month each.

The radical approach to the exhibition was seen in the section that gathered fashion descriptions from literature — no clothing on display. "Garments have an ostensive and self-narrative power that transcends the physical presence of fabrics and the object itself," said Coccia.

The manifesto for "The Many Lives of a Garment" exhibition by Olivier Saillard at ITS Arcademy in Trieste, Italy. COURTESY OF ITS

A second exhibition in the Wunderkammer space was dedicated to the 2023-2024 finalists' creations under the tagline "Born to Create," ITS' overarching manifesto.

Both exhibits will be open to the public until Jan. 6, 2025.

The ITS Arcademy's curatorial approach toward preserving and archiving young talents' work as if they were already museum-worthy space for designers' and artists' residencies in town, another project Franchin hopes will find a backer soon.

On Friday night, the jury of the contest's 2023-2024 edition gave out 13 awards to the 16 finalists, who were shortlisted from 782 applicants from 65 countries.

The ITS Arcademy Award, which comes with a 15,000-euro cash prize, was given to Japanese talent Momoka Sato, who presented a whimsical collection with a strong and elaborate narrative attached to it, inspired by a fictional nun living on a mountaintop with an adoring monk by her side.

The collection — which is rich in layering and nods to traditional Japanese gear, including the kimono trouser silhouette — embedded recycling practices, by repurposing the cotton stuffing of old mattresses, for example.

Sato dedicated her collection to her grandmother, with whom she spent time while working on the lineup. The young designer, a Bunka Fashion College graduate with a master's degree from Nottingham Trent University in the U.K., said she applied to ITS to introduce her brand, formally launched during the pandemic years, to an international audience.

"I didn't expect I could win; that's why I'm really honored to get this award," she said.