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FASHION

A perfect fit

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- It looked like a 1990s fashion time capsule had exploded in Todd Oldham's New York studio last June.

Opening many of his storage bins for the first time in 20 years, the retired designer laid everything out on the floor. There were glittered tops, intricately embroidered skirts and multicolored mini dresses worn on the runway by supermodels such as Cindy Crawford and Tyra Banks.

From that sea of garments, Oldham and curator Kate Irvin selected the 67 ensembles that will be on display at the RISD Museum April 8 through Sept. 11 as part of the exhibition "All of Everything: Todd Oldham Fashion."

"No, this is not a giant résumé to get me to try to come back to fashion again — which kind of makes it even more fun," Oldham said. "It's truly without agenda. It can just be what it is."

His first museum retrospective highlights Oldham's playful aesthetic, love of color and dedication to old-world handiwork, such as embroidery and beading. His knack for mixing high and low and finding inspiration in unlikely places, such as a taxi driver's turban and '50s cookbooks, is also apparent.

Such a large number of Oldham's garments were available for the exhibit because, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not hold sample sales.

"We just packed everything up at the end of the season," he said. "I had thrown myself on the tracks for these things along with all of the artisans involved with making them ... and I wasn't interested in seeing people pulling on the sleeves."

Oldham's fashion career spanned from 1989 to 1999. The former MTV "House of Style"

host shut down his label while in his 30s because he had already “explored everything that was interesting to me.”

“If you are in a position like this ... you’d better take it seriously,” said Texas-raised Oldham, “and if you no longer have anything to say, shut up.”

While he jokes that he’s currently “unemployed, thankfully,” after leaving fashion, Oldham went on to work on several other design-related projects. He published art books, created furniture for La-Z-Boy and mentored contestants on Bravo’s “Top Design.” Now 54, he also has a line of high-quality art supplies for children and said he's excited to soon begin working on a movie project.

In 2014, Rhode Island School of Design, where he had been guest lecturing and mentoring students for decades, awarded him an honorary degree. “It’s my school now -- I go here,” he joked, adding that he was “flabbergasted” to receive it.

Curator Irvin met Oldham when he was in town to receive his degree. He had already started donating some of his garments to the institution’s permanent collection, favoring RISD because of its status as a learning institution, and struck up a conversation with her about giving more.

Creating an exhibit around his work was the next logical step, Irvin said.

“It’s such a perfect fit for RISD,” she said. “It’s all about making and inventing things, and showing that if you make things that make you happy, people will appreciate it.”

The exhibition includes some of Oldham’s paper collages, accessories and about 20 hours of runway footage of his models skipping, smiling and striking playful poses on the runway. There’s also a new gown he created in collaboration with more than 60 RISD textiles students he taught last spring.

As the show’s designer, Oldham took a lead role in creating its look and feel. The display is meant to evoke a formal French garden.

Most of the pieces are styled differently than when they were originally shown, with garments from different seasons often presented together. “It felt like a more modern take,” he said.

The models Oldham was working with in the ‘90s were smaller than the museum’s mannequins, so many of the outfits had to be padded out before going on display.

“I prefer them on humans, but it would certainly be annoying for 65 girls to stand around here all day, so I’m grateful for these mannequins,” he said.

Oldham said he didn’t know whether Crawford, who has posted on social media about the exhibit, and other models he frequently worked with, including Naomi Campbell and Helena Christensen, would come to the museum to see the iconic looks they once wore on the runway.

“It’s up for a very long time, so hopefully some people will get to come through,” he said.

Oldham is often asked how he defines ‘90s fashion. “I have no idea,” he said. “What is it? I guess it’s when things became an amalgam, which gave me the freedom to just kind of do anything.”

That came with its own pressure. Oldham described the painstaking detail that went into each piece, and his desire to always create something no one had seen before.

“Every single thing was like a unique child, and you had to figure out how to get it together,” he said. “It was a crazy kind of adventure.”

Putting together the retrospective has allowed him to view his work from a new perspective.

“I was always trying to fix something because that’s the bar, it’s got to be perfect,” he said. “Without that drama, yeah they’re beautifully made and it was a pleasure to see. I probably shouldn’t have worried as much as I did.”

That, he added, is a new lesson he can teach his students.

For more information, go to risdmuseum.org. RISD Museum will hold an "All of Everything" Grand Opening Celebration Thurs. April 7 from 5:30-7:30 p.m. Free, all welcome. Use the museum's Chace Center entrance, 20 North Main St., Providence.

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