



# west

LOS ANGELES TIMES : SEPTEMBER 10, 2006

## FALL FASHION ISSUE

Joy Bryant sets her sights on  
L.A. in dresses that flounce  
and blouses that flare.  
It's the season of plenty.

Hard bodies, hard sell at  
Abercrombie & Fitch  
John Eshaya: The Busiest  
Man in L.A. Apparel





# Jet Set

It's never a dull moment for  
Ron Herman's John Eshaya

By ELIZABETH KHURI

JOHN ESHAYA NAVIGATES THE brick walkway leading to the Ron Herman boutique at Fred Segal on Melrose Boulevard, dodging the hornet's nest of black boxes and reflective lenses created by photographers straining their necks and cameras because, supposedly, someone famous is shopping inside. Someone famous often is. "That's the disco part of working here," Eshaya says, heading to his office. "I've seen all my favorites: Bette Davis, Madonna, Liz Taylor—after you see Liz Taylor, you kind of become immune to anybody else."

For Eshaya, Ron Herman's women's buyer and creative director, a designer himself and the cofounder of a perfume line, the glamour of fashion isn't in the celebrities but in the clothes and the way they fit on customers, particularly the nameless. "Seeing someone put on a shirt or a dress is like looking at a piece of art," the 40-year-old Los Angeles native says. "Fashion can be art. It should be."

His latest venture, then, isn't a stretch at all. This month he's collaborating with conceptual artist Ruben Ochoa, producing limited-edition T-shirts for "Extracted," Ochoa's exhibition at LAXART, a nonprofit center in Culver City. In fact, Eshaya will make T-shirts for the next eight exhibitions at the center, including those by Chris Oliveria, Matt Lucero and Julio Cesar Morales. The shirts are handed out to new LAXART members, and Eshaya will cover the production costs. "Everyone they're featuring is a young artist. It's exciting," Eshaya says.

The fashion and art worlds often mingle. Designers draw inspiration from artists—Proenza Schouler looked to Cy Twombly for its fall line, for [CONTINUED ON PAGE 53]



# John Eshaya

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38] instance, decorating its sleeveless shifts with Twombly-like squiggles—and practically every museum sells T-shirts screened with images from the latest exhibition.

But what Eshaya and Ochoa are doing is new. For one thing, Eshaya didn't simply borrow a piece of art and transfer it to an article of clothing; Ochoa created a drawing of shards of concrete for what Eshaya calls "the canvas of a blank T-shirt." For another, Eshaya's name may be a bigger draw than Ochoa's, something not lost on 7-month-old LAXART.

"To have a fashion icon like Eshaya involved makes contemporary art more relevant," says Lauri Firstenberg, the gallery's director and curator. "It's a very generous gesture, to get behind a young artist."

Ochoa and Eshaya met for the first time at the Sept. 9 opening of "Extracted." Until recently, Ochoa hadn't even heard of JET, Eshaya's family-run clothing line for women. Now, Ochoa says, "I'm noticing my friends and colleagues wearing his shirts."

The walls of Eshaya's California bungalow near Larchmont Village are crowded with works by Bruce Weber, Herb Ritts and Andy Warhol (and one Warhol, of course, is of Elizabeth Taylor). Eshaya wouldn't mind adding an Ochoa—perhaps something from "Extracted." Ochoa's exhibition includes a sculpture of a freeway fragment, a photographic image of a Los Angeles landscape stretched across a freeway wall on Interstate 10 near North Soto Street, and a billboard on La Cienega between Venice and Washington boulevards. Firstenberg calls the multimedia exhibit a way to question the subdivision of our society through L.A. freeways and other landmarks. Eshaya calls the show "simple and beautiful. It is what it is; it's straightforward. That's how I look at fashion, that's how I look at everything. Things shouldn't be too complicated."

He claims that this applies to his multiple careers. His jobs at Ron Herman—where one of his titles is vice president—include dressing all the windows in its five boutiques in Southern California and switching the furniture in each store every month to match the clothing theme. The perfume line he co-owns with Kristen Becker, formerly of Earl Jean, goes by the simple name be, and its

products are available in 200 stores nationwide. His clothing line, JET, got its start in 1987, when one of his bosses at Ron Herman, where Eshaya was then a salesman, liked his shorts.

They were, he recalls, 501 Levi's cut off at the knees, tie-dyed, bleached and scuffed, a look that wouldn't capture much notice today but was remarkable 19 years ago. Eshaya was commissioned to make a few pairs for the store, and he started sewing in his garage.

Ten pieces turned into 20, with matching tops and T-shirts. His brother Jeff saw the potential and rented a manufacturing space. JET now sells its printed T-shirts and sweatshirts, tops, dresses and jeans in 300 stores around the country, including Angel in Santa Barbara, Tobi Blatt in San Diego and Scoop in New York. The brothers even employ their father, Edward. "It's perfect," John Eshaya says.

"The girls," as he calls his famous customers who wear his JET "Celebrity Sweatshirt," include Jessica Simpson, Scarlett Johansson, Christina Aguilera and Mary-Kate Olsen. "I don't send anyone anything, only Madonna, 'cause she's my girl. The other girls shop," meaning they actually pay for his clothes. "They are buying it on their own, which is cool because it's being sold on its own merit."

With the success of JET, booming sales at Ron Herman and a new perfume business, Eshaya is reaping the rewards: trips to Paris to see Viktor & Rolf shows, a weekend pad in Palm Springs and free rein to express himself through his designs and store windows.

"I can't draw, I can't paint, I can't do any of that, but when I put together windows, I'm creating a visual," he says. And like his recent motocross-themed front window in the Melrose store—complete with an McQ top, Citizens of Humanity jeans, heaps of tires and the husk of a car—the scenes Eshaya creates are filled with whimsy and joy. That's what it's all about. "It becomes fun, Eshaya says,

Ochoa, by contrast, focuses on the nitty-gritty and the mundane of L.A., from freeways to shopping carts. Firstenberg says, though, the alliance between the two men is all about breaking those barriers—and expanding the audience for contemporary art in the city. "The T-shirt in a way becomes an emblem that people are wearing to support the endeavor," she says. That's Eshaya in his element, art and fashion as one. **w**