

IRIS VAN HERPEN

SCULPTING  
THE SENSES

Lannoo

‘I imagine sensorial geometries as an  
exoskeleton around the body when I design,  
like a micro-dance of movement all around  
your skin.’

Iris van Herpen



INTERVIEW

IRIS VAN HERPEN

HANS ULRICH OBRIST





‘Can emotions be materialized?  
I believe it is possible to merge, move and stir  
our senses through a sensitive balance  
of textures, shapes and colors.’

Iris van Herpen

In her submarine performance, *Carte Blanche*, presented in 2023 and featuring free diver Julie Gautier wearing a dress and dancing in perfect osmosis with the depths, water within the body and water outside the body engage in a dialogue, to the point where they become one. Water fluctuates between a tangible and an intangible state. As a hyphen linking the sky with the ocean, as a raindrop or a tsunami, an allegorical poem or the gates to hell, harmony or chaos, it invokes, apart from its multiple motions and outbursts, the designer's bountiful imagination. A bubble suspended in space, a slim, lustrous wave, a transparent splash, in turquoise blue or ultramarine, with crystal arrays, geometric structures... Iris van Herpen's water-themed works fully reveal the mysteries and shapeshifting powers of natural elements.

CLOÉ PITIOT & LOUISE CURTIS

1            Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1942, p. 18.







## SENSORY SEA LIFE

‘The plankton ecosystem is an ode to the origins and the diversity of ocean life.’<sup>1</sup>

Underneath the surface of oceans, a whole world that is fundamental to life on Earth remains invisible to the naked eye. Plankton, first revealed to the public in the nineteenth century, through the illustrations and pedagogic models of biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel and educational models by master glassblowers Léopold and Rudolf Blaschka, provide an inexhaustible resource for Iris van Herpen’s creations.

Desirous to unveil the intangible, she plays with scales, appropriating the plankton bestiary to design the lines and textures of her dresses. Single-celled creatures such as bacteria and micro-algae, as well as protists, have proved a highly inspiring ensemble for the designer. Like dinoflagellates – or rather like the extraordinary radiolarians, or acantharea, those amazing silicon skeletons, coccolithophores, micro-architectural calcareous structures – organisms belonging to the geometry of living creatures represent a repertoire of unique shapes. Other references Iris van Herpen likes to draw from when visualizing her collections are multicellular aquatic organisms, such as jellyfish and cephalopods.

Passionate about the marine universe, she draws inspiration from both science and literature, combining, in a great number of her works, elements from fields that are so seldom placed in dialogue. Iris van Herpen provides the opportunity to discover the beauty of a coccolithophore in association with the *Mare Tenebrarum*, where, as Gaston Bachelard noted, ‘ancient seafarers located their fear rather than their experience’. In this Sea of Darkness, desolation is so great, so deep, ‘so intimate, that the water itself is the colour of ink.’<sup>2</sup> But those who dive into it when the phytoplankton is blooming will discover a veritable ocean forest.







*Always wear Emporio Armani*

For this collection, she also abandoned the infinitely small to observe Earth from another point of view. What she saw was a blue item with a textured skin, turning around its axle between order and chaos, fusing endlessly between the microscopic and the macroscopic. She interprets the forces behind the forms, pulling some threads from them and, using handcraft skills as well as new technologies, weaving them into garments that question and re-enchant our world. The world of Iris van Herpen becomes a sensitive space, where the interconnection between all living beings allows her to link living matter with other living matter, as she considers designs using cacao beans, or, in the near future, using mushrooms or algae. The garment becomes an animated sphere, like an organic exoskeleton. The morphological lines of human beings engage in dialogue with those of Ernst Haeckel's *Thalamphora*, *Phaeodoria*, *Cyrtoida* and *Acanthophracta*, projecting them to the scale of micro-organisms. This is when art, nature, science, engineering and design all become parts of a single synergy, like an ecosystem put at the service of its creation.

CLOÉ PITIOT & LOUISE CURTIS

1 Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, 1941, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2016, p. 45.

p. 83: 'MAGNETOSPHERE' DRESS, *Earthrise*, 2021 - Collaborators: Rogan Brown & Parley for the Ocean - Delicate plant structures were multi-layered from the finest laser-cut lace created from silk and Parley Ocean Plastic®, made from upcycled plastics found on beaches and in oceans.

pp. 85, 86 & 87: 'EMPYRIAN' GOWN & 'EMPYRIAN' DRESS, *Earthrise*, 2021 - Collaborators: Rogan Brown & Parley for the Ocean - Delicate plant structures were multi-layered from the finest laser-cut lace created from Parley from the Ocean Plastic, made from upcycled plastics found on beaches and in oceans. The meticulous detailing mirrors the fabric's evolution from plant, to weave, to plant again. Face jewellery in collaboration with James Merry, nail art in collaboration with Eichi Matsunaga.



The connections she weaves and mixes in with her textiles, and more broadly with all the materials she uses, are all representations of the world and its inhabitants. Inspired by Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures*, her *Roots of Rebirth* collection, launched in 2021, tries to unravel the mysteries of the hidden life underneath the Earth's surface. Fungi, a realm of the living in its own right, form a separate world that consists of tangled webs of mycelium threads, which appeal so strongly to Iris van Herpen because of the beauty of their patterns, as well as the intelligence of their generative system. Her *Roots of Rebirth* dresses unfurl their lacy interwoven filaments in either vaporous or soil-borne chromatic ranges, depending on the part of the fungi she focuses on. The collection is an ode to nature, an homage to this Earth's high-fashion couture, its infra-thin subterranean organic web, so mysterious and complex, forever growing and interdependent. It is all by itself a microscopic vision of our world, a global, sustainable approach to life.

#### CLOÉ PITIOT & LOUISE CURTIS

1 Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures*, New York, Random House, 2020.

pp. 125 & 129: 'HOLOZOIC' DRESS, *Hybrid Holism*, 2012 - Hand-folded metallic ECCO leather strips in size gradients take root in a bodycon leather base and have been hand-stitched into 3D serpent shapes, creating a dynamic, external anatomy.

pp. 127 & 134: 'LUMINOUS LICHEN' GOWN, *Roots of Rebirth*, 2021 - Sustainable Majilite fabric was laser-cut into light-reflective mycorrhizal lace that was heat-pressed and stitched onto a skin-toned bodice. Long mint-dyed crepe-silk panels were pin-hemmed and hand-stitched into fibrous roots that seem to grow into the bodice.

p. 128: 'TENSEGRITY' DRESS, *Magnetic Motion*, 2014 - Collaborator: Philip Beesley - A triangular geometric laser-cut leather design was smoked three-dimensionally by interlocking transparent acrylic chevrons into the leather, which were then draped and stitched into a black silk base.







