





Stand outside any big-name fashion venue a few hours before show time and you'll see them: a conga line of coltish models sliding out of chauffeured, grey BMWs, wearing skinny jeans, iPods dangling, Diet Coke in one hand, a BlackBerry in the other. Their hair is fresh, faces scrubbed clean. Suddenly, a door flings open and they're swallowed by the backstage, only to be spat out three hours later as runway belles – all coiffed, glossed and dressed for the catwalk. A sonic boom fills the air and megawatts of white light shower down on their beauty – or maybe a vivid wash of velvety colour illuminates their faces, or the golden shimmer of a Balearic sunset. Maybe the whole show is bathed in a rich, inky, Yves Klein blue.

Whatever the effect, the cause is clear: beyond the clothes, lighting is a fashion show's highest art form. It's the hybrid child of architecture, design, illusion, magic, technology – you want to say astronomy. It exploits fashion's finest exhibits, elevating the creators to the status of artists and confirming their places in the US\$175million global fashion industry. The men who light the catwalks work on the simplest principle: light is only visible because it is reflected.

"It's about the nuances," says Keith Baptista, vice-president of prestigious New York production and PR company KCD. "You aren't seeing light, you're seeing the effect of light." And the man who knows most about the effects of light, be they emotional, psychological or aesthetic, is Thierry Dreyfus, president of Eyesight. "Light can touch the eye of even those who refuse to see," says Dreyfus. "It opens up the space, the range of possibilities and expands time – contrary to consumer society, which mutilates it. While everything in modern life tends to drown, distance, displace, forcibly direct the eyes, a luminous creation reinvests the moment, confirms its weightlessness."

Dreyfus devotes enormous intellectual effort to each 15-minute fashion show, infusing it with such power that it's a fashion mousetrap. Then he moves on, from New York to Milan and Paris, unconcerned by the fleeting nature of his work. "When you fall in love with someone, it's better to have 15 minutes of strong emotion than to have too long a thing. That is not interesting," he says, sitting at a small, white desk in his atelier by the Place des Victoires. For

a man who masterminds those wild, delicious roller-coaster rides known as fashion shows, his manner is disarmingly relaxed. But his chaotic desk tells another story: a couple of iPod Nanos, two mobile phones, a BlackBerry, a MacBook, a Leica camera, a few candles (used), some bottles of fragrance (his own) and an ashtray (full) in the shape of a light bulb. This man's five senses – maybe a sixth – are witheringly alive.

When Dreyfus tiptoed onto the scene (from the Strasbourg Opera) in 1985 he identified how to strengthen a brand using the fashion show as a powerful new medium. "I began in theatre, where you are always looking for the aesthetic, for a better way." He first worked with the late designer, Patrick Kelly, but his shows for Helmut Lang sealed his early reputation. As Keith Baptista remembers it: "Long before I entered the business, Dreyfus was the designer who founded white light." Baptista, whose dozens of clients include Gucci, Marc Jacobs and Versace, said: "When he layered that white light on Helmut Lang's shows he started a strong, new creative direction. He made shows that belonged to the designer, the handwriting was so distinctive." Dreyfus said of that early collaboration: "Helmut wanted to play with natural light and infuse more. He chose locations with a lot of natural light, but the midday light in autumn and the midday light in spring are very different. And the girl's skin looks different. So we worked with the existing natural light to make it more powerful."

Later, in 1989, he began working with Ann Demeulemeester, who described his work as "poetic" compared to the rest of fashion lighting, which she saw as "oppressive". He then caught the eye of Pierre Bergé, who asked him to produce the 2001 Yves Saint Laurent retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris – an event that was beamed around the world. Alex de Betak, who heads

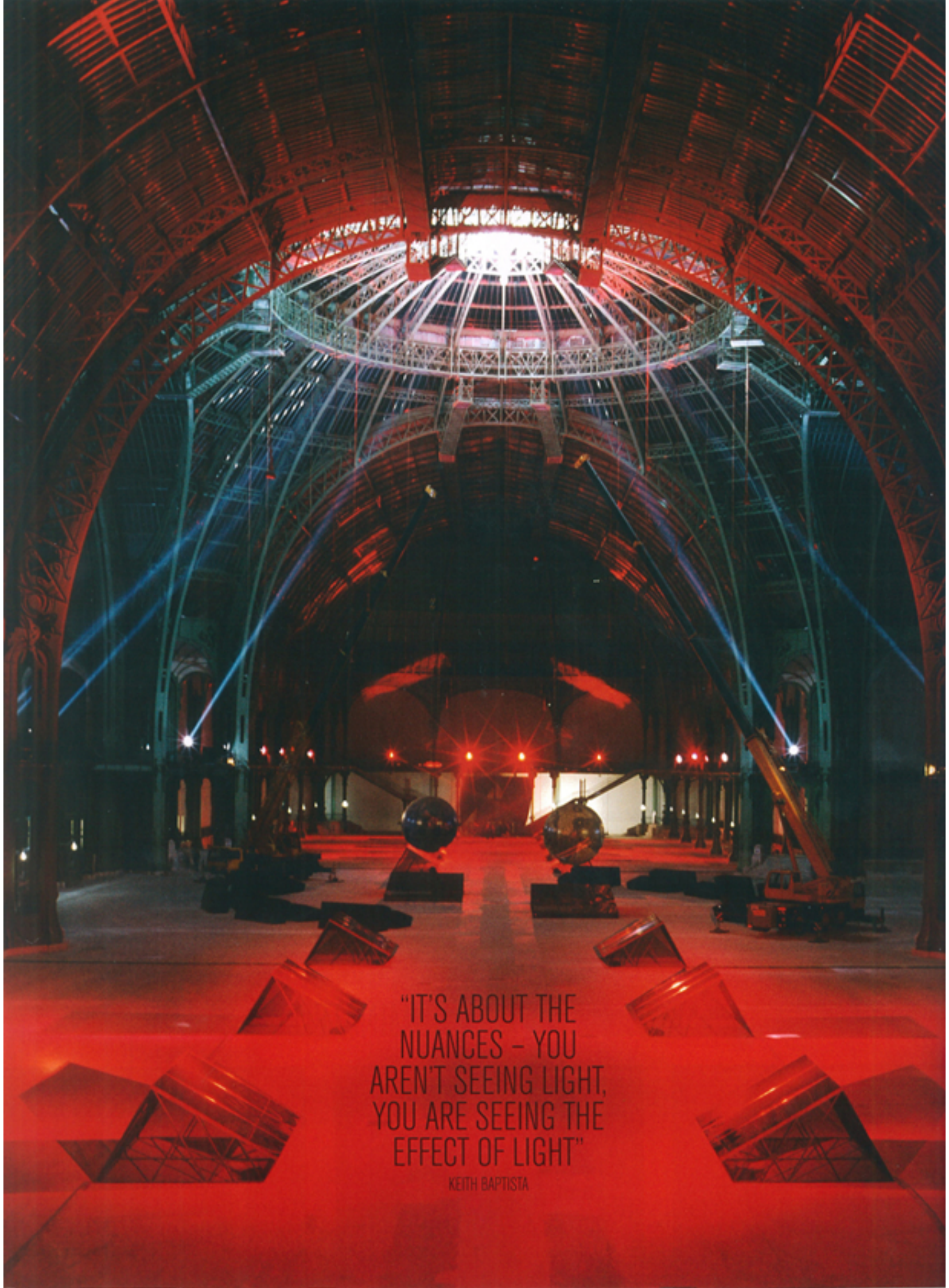
Clockwise from top left: Alex de Betak for Dior, Spring Summer 2004; Thierry Dreyfus (set and lighting production, Eyesight) for Dior Homme, June 2003; Keith Baptista (KCD) for Marc Jacobs, Spring Summer 2009; Thierry Dreyfus (Eyesight) for Gianbattista Valli Autumn Winter 2008/09
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EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

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THE SEEN // LIGHTING DESIGN

Eye-popping colours, high-drama details, sheer technical perfection... is fashion show lighting the new black? Susan Owens investigates



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the New York and Paris production company Bureau Betak, describes why fashion shows went up a notch: "The arrival of the internet, the increased press coverage, the immediacy with which images were sent around the world," he says. "With that surge in exposure, designers started to try for memorable and recognisable shows." Most of these producers are at odds discussing a mysterious, intangible art form like light. But Dreyfus is clear: "You take something invisible and go straight to the heart."

It's of little interest to Dreyfus that the rest of the world is preoccupied with economic turmoil. Public art is not in retreat: in recent times he has installed a vivid illuminated ladder for Paris' La Nuit Blanche, completed installations for Le Méridien hotels in Shanghai and San Francisco, and placed a beam of light shooting to the pole star on the Villa Noailles. And his limited-edition, coloured light boxes are swiftly snared by collectors. But when it comes to the fashion show, Dreyfus is dealing with a paradox: for the industry to continue growing, customers must like this year's designs but they must also become dissatisfied with them, so they'll buy next year's.

Lighting proved the perfect change agent for clients like Hedi Slimane's Dior Homme, Martine Sitbon, Jil Sander, Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfger and Comme des Garçons. All designers are acutely aware that every show means business and each member of the audience is engaged on a personal journey, ready to exploit a talent as they witness the effortless flow between one model and the next. Journalists do it with words, television producers with images and, most significantly, buyers do it with their fat chequebooks, writing orders that fuel the business.

"The show is very serious," says Dreyfus. "It's not a gala, it's a marketing exercise that projects the image of the designer and uses light to elicit emotion. And you protect the clients, who see up to 12 shows a day, in the way you light the audience sympathetically. There's a reason why a lot of people in the front row are wearing sunglasses."

De Betak also talks of lighting as a way of expressing emotion. "I like things that are direct, that make a point, but that doesn't mean they can't be subtle." When de Betak started out, he wanted to "infuse poetry and personality into the fashion stage" and it won him a raft of clients including Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, John Galliano, Viktor & Rolf, Donna Karan – a list as long as your arm. He can claim directing the world's costliest fashion show, in Cannes in 2000 for Victoria's Secret ("a budget of US\$10million") and he's a past master of

spectaculars – Kylie Minogue in Shanghai for the launch of H&M China, an upside-down set for Viktor & Rolf and Swarovski's music and fashion event, Fashion Rocks. He even burst onto the scene at Art Basel Miami Beach, having created a rotating, life-sized chandelier of supermodel Gisele Bündchen. *Through Gisele*, a 1.8-metre silhouette with 120 crystal fibre-optic lights, was unveiled as part of the Swarovski Crystal Palace collection.

All lighting designers speak a distinctively individual language on behalf of their clients. The idea of applying formula lighting is deemed heresy. Dreyfus talks first of the "collection", secondly of the "spirit of the designer" and thirdly of the "emotion" that reflects what's going on in the designer's head. "A designer looks at light to enhance the character of a girl on the runway just as a film maker looks at an actor," says Baptista.

Last January, at the 18th-century Hôtel de la Monnaie in Paris, Baptista illuminated a challenging series of sets for designers as diverse as Vivienne Westwood, John Galliano and Giorgio Armani. Their wedding gowns, designed for *Unbridled*, CRYSTALLIZED™'s homage to marriage, each took on a life of their own. "Lighting is a language in itself, not one point of view," he said. "I am dealing with convention, creativity, the esoteric. I'm responding to a great designer who is like a painter, able to bring out colours, textures, contrasts." De Betak searches to elicit different emotional responses for each client. "Hussein Chalayan is subtle, smooth and romantic. John Galliano is about a powerful, constant energy from beginning to end. But both have a crescendo in their own way. You set out to enrich the handwriting of each one."

Their art – new as it may seem – has myriad historic influences. Such as Nicolas Schöffer, the Hungarian-born French artist who died in Paris in 1992, and was considered the father of cybernetic and video art. And James Turrell, for his neon museum installations. Dreyfus references Dan Flavin, the American artist, famous for fluorescent-light sculptures. But early childhood memories also influence Dreyfus, who talks of the golden glow of Notre Dame, its fat, white, flickering candles. And of playing cards, aged 14, by candlelight. "Candles, for me, are still the most beautiful, like fire, the moment of life."

De Betak has never lost his fascination for the glittering lights of Times Square, the Eiffel Tower, the Vegas Strip. He says the person who has been most influential in his life was Jean-Paul Goude, whose masterful 1989 celebrations for the bicentennial of the French Revolution inspired him to start his business, and with whom Dreyfus collaborates. And Baptista makes sentimental references to 1950s Hollywood. "Those spots, that focused entirely on the model, lent such a sense of glamour. Tom Ford liked that for Gucci, when the girl in the light seemed as if she was the only thing in the room and everything else faded to nothing." That emotional tug is fleeting, but the designer's identity is sealed with a lasting imprint. The show is branded.

Previous pages: Thierry Dreyfus' *Onale Visibles* installation for the re-opening of the Grand Palais, Paris, September-October 2005. Right, clockwise from top left: Alex de Betak for Christian Dior Haute Couture, Autumn Winner 2003/04; Thierry Dreyfus (set and lighting production, *Eyesight*) for Sophia Kokosalaki, February 2006; Thierry Dreyfus (*Eyesight*) for Giambattista Valli, October 2008; Dreyfus' *Sly is the Limit* rooftop installation at Le Royal Méridien Shanghai, December 2006

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