

A person is walking on a wooden runway. They are wearing a black, shiny, form-fitting latex bodysuit and black high-heeled shoes. They have a long, light-colored beaded wig that covers their head and face, leaving only their eyes visible through a narrow slit. The wig has many long, thin strands that hang down to their knees. They are holding a black, fringed handbag with a gold chain strap in their right hand. In the background, there are blurred figures of people sitting on the runway.

LET'S GET WIGGY

Charlie Le Mindu is a creative visionary whose fantastical – sometimes shocking wigs have the ability to boggle even the most imaginative minds. INSTYLE's Cecily Bennett talks to the man who made the infamous rat balaclava, and whose pastimes include dying his cat.

Charlie Le Mindu is no ordinary hairdresser. An Avant Gardist of the most eccentric extremes, he is the very personification of creativity; a modern day Dali – there is no limit to his imagination, or how far he is willing to push it. Shock value, it seems, is something of a signature.

I was first made aware of the 'wigger' (as he calls himself) at London Fashion Week Autumn/Winter 2009, where he presented his debut catwalk show – entirely focused on wigs – in collaboration with Fudge. The first thing that struck me was that this was no ordinary Fashion Week audience. They queued all the way up Portland Place, in typical London drizzle before filing through the door and clamouring for a seat.

There was a smattering of media, but where the toothpick-limbed fashion editors might have sat, there were kooks and eccentrics, outlandish drag-queens in extraordinary get-ups; a man dressed in a gold, quilted coat, gold crown perched jauntily on the side of his head, and ears, intriguingly, dyed a startling hue of magenta. Evidently, it was no ordinary audience – and it was to be no ordinary show. (Whispers later found their way around the room that a tardy Courtney Love had begged door security for a seat but had been turned away due to the venue being stuffed to capacity with cool kids including singer Peaches and celebrity DJ Jodie Harsh.)

Experimenting with scale, texture and style, the collection of 15 pieces combined antique and baroque chic with futuristic influences, created from more than 50 textures. Sumptuous fabrics, Swarovski crystals and sleek shiny hair adorned models who stalked down the catwalk with a dominant colour palette of burgundy, gold, pearl white, flesh and glossy black; the collection was resplendent in its ubiquitous attention to detail and wholehearted quirkiness. "I think people underestimate how amazing wigs and pieces can be, so this collection made a statement to both the hair and fashion world," Le Mindu had said. And what a statement it was. The piece that drew the most gasps was a balaclava-style headpiece made from rat and mice carcasses sewn together, their little furry faces perfectly aligned. Macabre? Sure. Unique? Definitely. It made me shudder, but I was entranced.

When I asked Le Mindu the thinking behind the bizarre headwear, he said, simply, "I bought them dead at the pet store; they are sold for snakes to eat. I decided to do a balaclava with them as I just wanted to show that rats are so pretty. Not only fox fur or a rare expensive animal should be considered as fur to use in fashion. I think all animals are lovely, dead or alive."

Perhaps always destined to become a luminary, Le Mindu started young. Born in Bergerac, France, he quickly rose to the limelight as a child prodigy in the French Hair Academy – cutting and styling the hair of the glamorous Bordeaux grandmas from the age of thirteen. He's gone from boarding school disciple, to young hairdresser, to fashion icon in Berlin and to London's pool of distinct imaginaries – in a relatively short space of time.

Le Mindu first realised he wanted to be involved in the hairdressing industry (he says) when he fell in love with the woman on the L'Oréal Elnett bottle. He has a tattoo of her on his back to prove it. "I also loved looking at the hairstyles of the old ladies where I grew up. All those blue rinses! I worked in a very traditional salon when I was young where I learnt all the old fashioned techniques of hairstyling."

Listing Cher among his inspirations ("I love people who spend lots of money to look so cheap! But Cher is an exception, she is just amazing. She is like [Lady] Gaga in 50 years time!"), Le Mindu believes that wigs are as important as any accessory. "Use wigs to transform your look. Use them as an accessory, like you would a shoe or bag. Allow yourself to get away from your normal colour and cut even if it is for one night!"

The pieces – some of them on a massive scale – require a labour intensive process of snipping and sewing and dying. 'Some of my interns die before finishing the wigs,' he jokes. All the hair he uses is 100 per cent human – much of it supplied by sponsors including Fudge and Wonderful Hair. There is seemingly no end to his talent or idiosyncratic quirks. When asked to confess to the craziest thing he's done with hair, he offered, 'dying my cat'. Apparently his cat doesn't mind – and neither do his clients who (when he's not jetsetting around the world) visit the salon he runs from his home in Shoreditch, East London. "The concept is for cool people to come down like they are hanging out in a friend's apartment. It is not a typical salon environment," he says. The purposefully placed dildos allegedly on display in his bathroom would confirm that.

In the same way that Lady Gaga is wholeheartedly dedicated to her theatrical persona, so Le Mindu keeps coming up with the goods. It's no surprise that Gaga is a fan – most recently donning his Lips headpiece in her Bad Romance video – and is often papped out and about in Le Mindu's cranial creations.

Unsurprising too, is that Le Mindu's latest collection, shown at London Fashion Week Autumn/Winter 2010 did not disappoint. Glamorous, sophisticated and polished as ever, models were sent down the runway sporting



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extravagant sculptural headpieces inspired by black magic, the occult and religious mysteries; a diamond encrusted crucifix, a Faberge egg containing a tiny ballerina, an Eiffel tower replica, an oversized tiered wig. Each one as stunning and visually decadent as the next. “Sex, religion, bullshit, Lucifer,” says Le Mindu of the collection’s themes. “It is not provocation. You can read into it what you like, the religion element for example with the Swarovski cross.”

Add to three Fashion Week triumphs a celebrity following and an accessory line for London label Tatty Devine (where he also has a residency, cutting hair at its Brick Lane store on Fridays) and it appears Le Mindu’s star keeps rising – as glittering as an oversized Swarovski cross. So where does he see himself in five years time? “Really fat with lots of gold jewellery in a bed with 50 cats in my hotel in Monaco,” he suggests. The kooky times keep coming, for the king of haute coiffure. www.charlielemindu.com **IN**

