

BRAND CHEMISTRY

LIFE PART 2

TEXT LISA GOUDSMIT

Shubhankar Ray is in his fifth year as the brand director of G-Star. The Englishman, born in India, is partly responsible for the global success the jeans label has had the last couple of years. He was involved in several shows during New York Fashion Week, an exhibit at the RAW Gallery in Tokyo, and launched the international campaign shot by rock star photographer Anton Corbijn. After accidentally meeting with the owner and founder of G-Star, Jos Van Tilburg, Ray says 'the easy chemistry' between the two led to him getting involved in the unstoppable success of the jeans brand in 2006.

Speaking of chemistry, you have a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Manchester University,

yet you ended up in fashion. How do you apply your education to your current work: do you fix the chemistry of brands?

'I guess like any science degree, studying chemistry trained my brains to think logically. It is about understanding molecular reactions, and this process is not far away from creativity, which to me is a borderline between science and art. Chemistry keeps me open to creativity, since everything is based on reactions and reactions can come unexpectedly, just like creativity is spontaneous.'

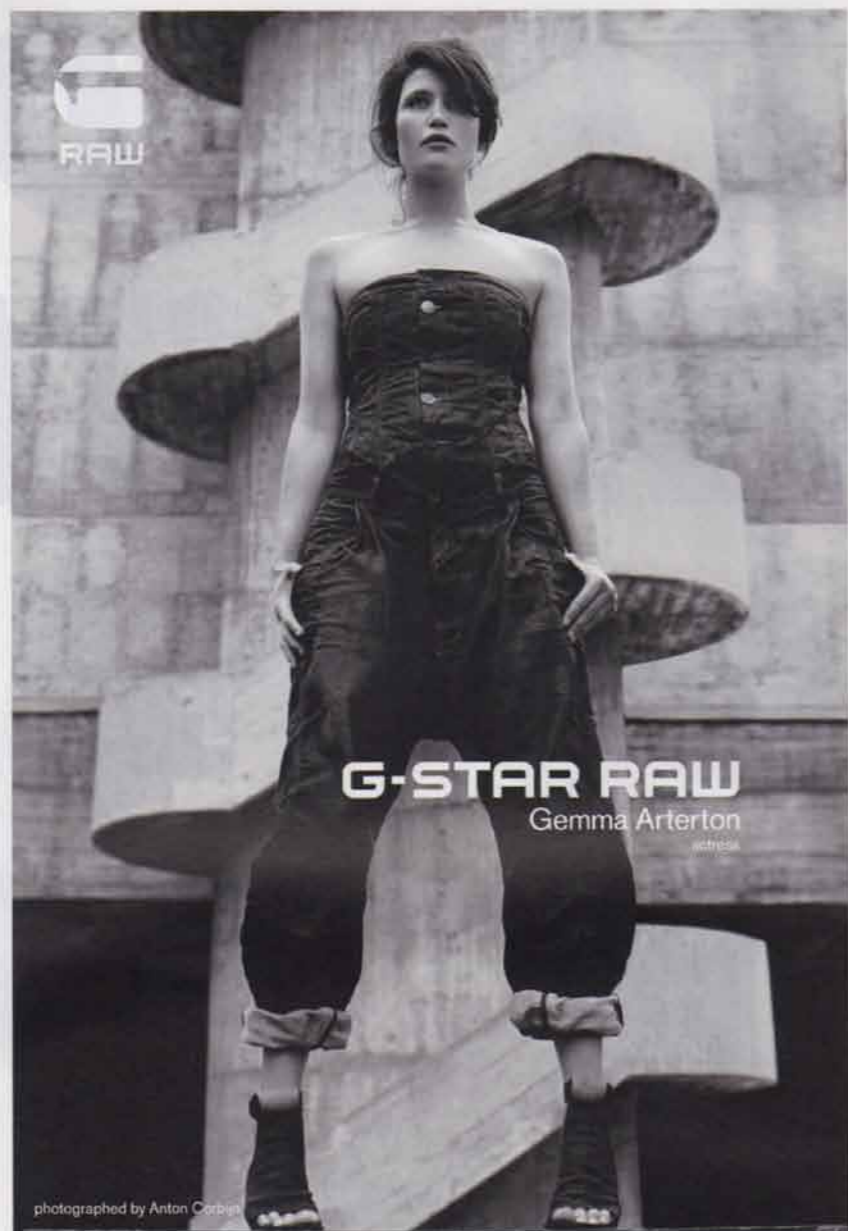
What were your goals when you started working at G-Star?

'It was an interesting moment, where G-Star went from street to luxury; I thought that I could help

them to make a more cultural image. In a jeans business driven by heritage and nostalgia, we could be the authentic modern brand and at the same time make the brand more intelligent. This was the challenge: could G-Star compete with other jeans labels and at the same time compete with high-end fashion brands by updating the product and reaching a high level of craftsmanship? It creates an interesting contradiction, because we can be the super specialists in a mass-market business. The next step was about how to remain a cool brand whilst growing bigger and cross countries. I had some experience and skills in this area, so it was a good match.'

Did your international background help?

'Probably. And I've been a denim boy since I was



Campaign 2011, Gemma Arterton

17, I have the roots of this culture in me, and a heart for the product. I was a consumer anyway. I wear denim all the time, even if I wouldn't have worked for G-Star. The guys who have been here at G-Star from the beginning also have real heart for their product, that's what I liked about them. Jeans are the only universal clothing items: they cut through age, race, taste and culture. Within the team of G-Star there is this energy that wants to push through boundaries of denim by mixing street with high fashion. We love the material: the rough sophistication of denim, hard and smooth at the same time.'

How does showing in New York help position the brand?

'In 2006 G-Star was strong in Northern-Europe

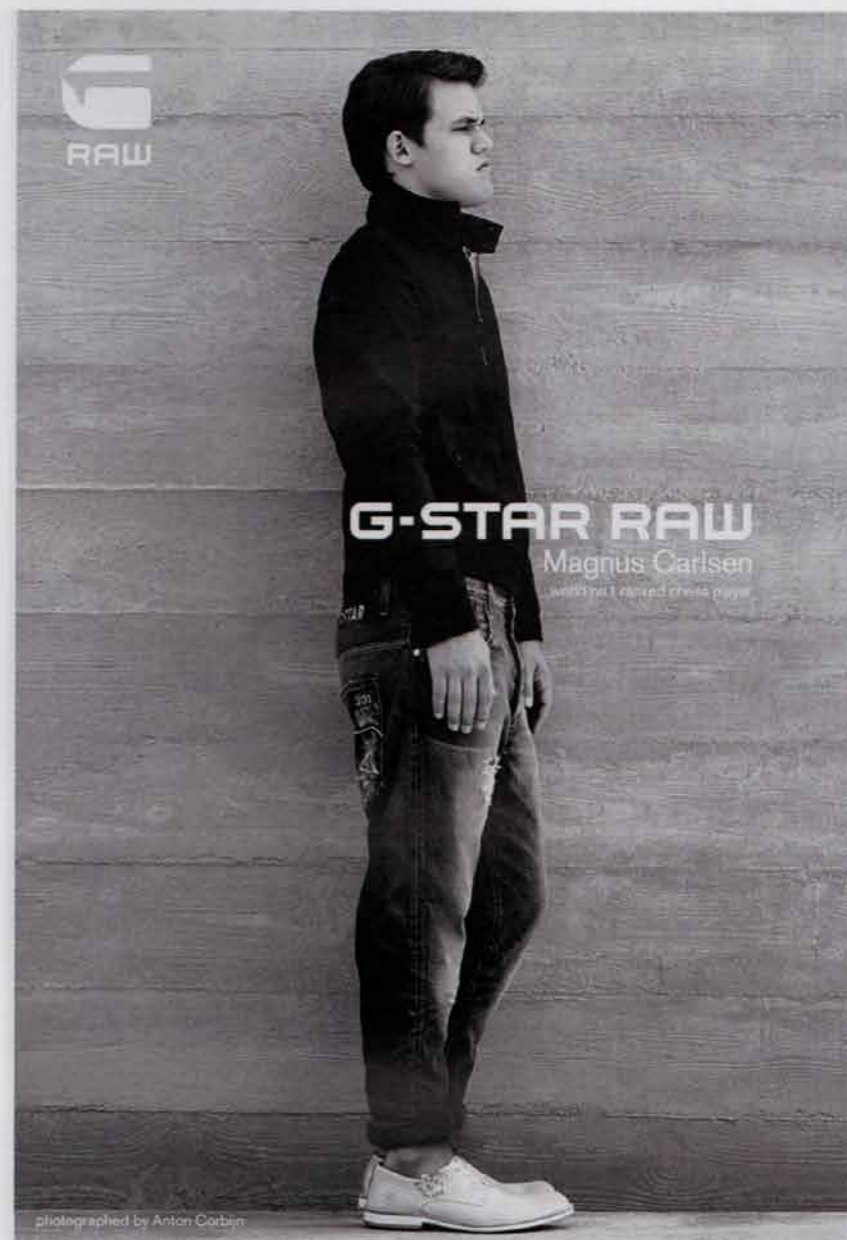
and we were trying to get the same position in the two biggest markets in the world: America and Japan, two complete opposites. You can't be a serious global brand without being popular in those parts of the world. We decided to show at New York Fashion Week to demonstrate our approach of specialism and craftsmanship in denim. We also wanted to do something that was unexpected so we worked with people like Dennis Hopper, who put in poetry in the middle of the show, with Benicio Del Toro and the UN.'

How do you position yourself on the other continents?

'What we try to do for different parts of the world is to find specific solutions. In Japan we did not want to use a fashion platform but instead showed

at Tokyo Design Week, where clothing brands normally don't show, only cars and furniture. In China we used a public platform: we built an installation inside the biggest shopping mall in Shanghai during World Expo. In Europe we show at Bread and Butter in Berlin, the biggest streetwear trade fare in the world. This season we had a 'slow show', presented by Agnès B. Even the music was slow: we reworked classic tracks, stripped them down to make them very mellow. We wanted to radically change our normally energetic shows: everybody sat front row. It was a very intimate and close presentation.'

It seems that with this collection G-Star wants to go back to the core of the business: RAW denim. Whereas the prior and very colorful collection was



Campaign 2011, Magnus Carlsen

presented with a dramatic show, the new collection and show were very minimalist. How come?

'Last year I think we felt the world needed a change. Now we've gone back to our foundation of denim and are pushing the boundaries of the material. The level of experimentation we do is in the shapes and volume: we created a denim 3D-silhouette this season and are also influenced by the functionality of European workwear. Another element is bringing in workwear functionality, mixed with tailoring.'

The look of the campaign is also relatively minimal for a jeans brand. What is the philosophy behind that?

'It is all about the product. If you look at the dictionary description of 'raw', it says pure

or naked. This is what we try to reflect in the character in the advertisement. First of all we strip the background to become neutral, not sporting any lifestyle, just mindstyle: it's about how you think, not how you live. Then, even though there are celebrities in the picture we see them as characters, not as models. Liv Tyler's character reflects raw elegance, just like Magnus Carlsen's unexpected look for a 19-year old world champion chess player fits us. We liked the idea of using chess as a back-story for fashion, since it is not something that is normally perceived as being cool. Gemma Arterton, the British actress and new face for G-Star S/S 2011 also matches our DNA of operating on the contradicting levels of street and luxury simultaneously. She is in huge

Hollywood blockbusters like Prince of Persia and James Bond, and at the same time she performs in front of small audiences in theatres in London.'

The S/S 2011 ad campaign was shot by Anton Corbijn in Marseille, at the famous Unite D'Habitation apartment building designed by architect Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier was known for his simple and natural choice of material, just like G-Star. Coincidence?

'We are big fans of Le Corbusier. Likewise, we are fans of interior designer Jean Prouvé. We have gone into his archives and are currently in the process of making a crossover furniture line with Vitra in which we redesign Prouvé furniture. This 'Jean Prouvé by G-Star Raw for Vitra' line



New York fashion show, F/W 2011

including chairs and tables is launched summer 2011. All of our creative collaborations are based on mutual respect, and many of us grew up with Anton Corbijn being the iconic music photographer of our generation. He never does commercial photography but we really liked him as an artist, creator and person, making it a perfect match.'

In 2006 you wrote a book: 'The Dis-ease Of Consumption - Capitalism Is A Thief', yet you are the brand director of a big commercial brand: how do you explain that?

'I was quite radicalized as a student; I come from a family of communists and was a teenager at the time of punk. I fell into this work I do now by accident. As an 18-year-old activist, it is very easy to be outside of the system and complain.

What I chose to do is be inside the system and try to make a change. I think that what we are doing at the company is a good example of utilizing capitalism and doing things that are a bit more responsible, like the partnership with the UN and pushing sustainable clothing.'

Social responsibility is a big factor in your company, which shows in the organic line but also in the connection to the UN Millennium Program that fights issues like poverty and hunger. How do you keep developing this sustainable character?

'We have an independent foundation, involved in educational and environmental projects in the countries where we produce, primarily in India and China: the GSRD (G-Star Raw Denim) Foundation. At the moment we are building

schools in these countries. The UN partnership also worked as a catalyst for us to think about sustainable clothing: besides our organic line, we are doing a lot of investigation on cotton alternatives. We are very serious about our commitment to society; in the end we have a responsibility as a big company. Brands are a very powerful medium. I would say that modern branding is like religion: the world's oldest religions are amongst the first global brands. Take Catholicism: first of all it has a very recognizable logo, the crucifix. Then it has a celebrity icon as their face: Jesus Christ, who looks pretty good, and the church is a fantastic shop. Branding of today works like religion in the old days, also using a mythology for emotional bonding and the correct image and product to create a level of social bonding.'



New York fashion show, F/W 2011

Speaking of social bonding: in January another RAW Night took place in London. What are these nights about?

'RAW Nights are developed as an entertainment concept. The idea is to have a virtual nightclub that would operate in different forms in different parts of the world. Every RAW Night has a curator: an artist that makes a night in collaboration with G-Star. For our first event in 2007 we took the coolest nightclub in Japan, stripped it down and made it into a museum. Japanese photographer Hiromix was the curator and DJ, presenting upcoming local bands. The RAW Nights in Tokyo were in a nightclub, because the city is so kinetic and fast. In L.A., the place of sunshine and outside life, we took a car park, stripped it down and made it a

street gallery curated by and with artwork from Dennis Hopper. Samantha Ronson deejayed and films by Quentin Tarantino were projected from a Cadillac. In New York we did a RAW Night making a mobilization platform for the UN in an armory. In London Gemma Arterton recently curated a RAW Night in a church, becoming part disco, part gallery and part installation and performance stage. Each time the RAW Night is a situation highjack, repurposing a space.'

g-star.com