MIUCCIA PRADA

"CRISES ARE ALWAYS POSITIVE BECAUSE they force you to think," says Miuccia Prada, reflecting on Italy's political and economic woes. "You redesign reality. When everything is going well, people get lazy!"

Dressed like an irreverent tomboy in a long, cream skirt, with a turquoise feather boa poking out beneath a multicolored leather biker jacket, Mrs. Prada recalls her own professional beginnings during a time of radicalism and political ferment. In Milan in the 1970s, being a woman in fashion, as well as a Marxist and a feminist, was something to own and fight for. Italy wasn't exactly forward in terms of female entrepreneurs, and the leftist culture Prada espoused as a political-science graduate frowned on the idea that clothes and accessories were anything but frivolous —let alone culturally relevant.

"It was very tough," she recalls, speaking in her office at the Prada HQ. "I understand now that I really must have had a big passion because, although I felt unease declaring it to the world, it was never an internal struggle for me. I always felt I was on the right path."

That path not only led to a massively popular, $8.6 billion business but it was built from her own worldview. She used democratic and sometimes bizarre materials—army-tent nylon, bottle tops, broken mirrors, shards of cutlery—and introduced "ugly" elements alongside vintage influences as a way to bid farewell to a limited vision of fashion. "Through the 1970s, fashion represented only white people, Northern Americans, rich and bourgeois Europeans. Such an elitist idea was absurd to me."

Today Mrs. Prada feeds her vision from everything around her. "It could be a color or something I see on the street or a silly thing I hear that ends up sticking with me," she says. "Part of the vitality of my work comes from the access to other fields. You have to be quick-thinking, with a curious, 360-degree eye on the worlds of film, music, dance, and art. There is a story behind every fashion show—perhaps one that is politically incorrect, kooky, wild."

A social being, not a socialite; ironic but never detached; compassionate but not sentimental, Mrs. Prada likes to engage. "It's important for me to make clothes for broad groups of people," she says. "The idea of creating things for the same type is dull: beautiful, chic, well read—too boring! Opening your gaze to the rest of the world, to their unforgiving taste, is the challenge I am up for."

As for politics, she says of Donald Trump's election in the U.S., "it really shook things up. The same thing happened in Italy. Renzi lost the referendum, so the left has to wake up: It's now or never." No longer a member of the Communist Party, she finds new ways to keep her fervor alive, citing an upcoming show at her extraordinary Fondazione Prada museum about the history of Fascism in the arts in Italy. "We never use logos or slogans," she says. "I refuse to be political with my brand, but that's because I don't take politics lightly. There are other ways to suggest ideas."—CHIARA BARZINI



Miuccia Prada (in her own designs) on the roof of the Fondazione Prada. Fashion Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

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