

Kent Baker

inferno Alexander McQueen

An intimate portrait of his seminal show *Dante*Autumn/Winter 1996–97

Through me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me among the people lost for aye.
Justice the founder of my fabric mov'd:
To rear me was the task of Power divine,
Supremest Wisdom, and primeval Love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I shall endure.
All hope abandon ye who enter here.

Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy

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Book conceived by Kent Baker and Olly Walker

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MQUEEN

BACKSTAGE PASS

NAME:

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MQUEEN

BACKSTAGE PASS

NAME:

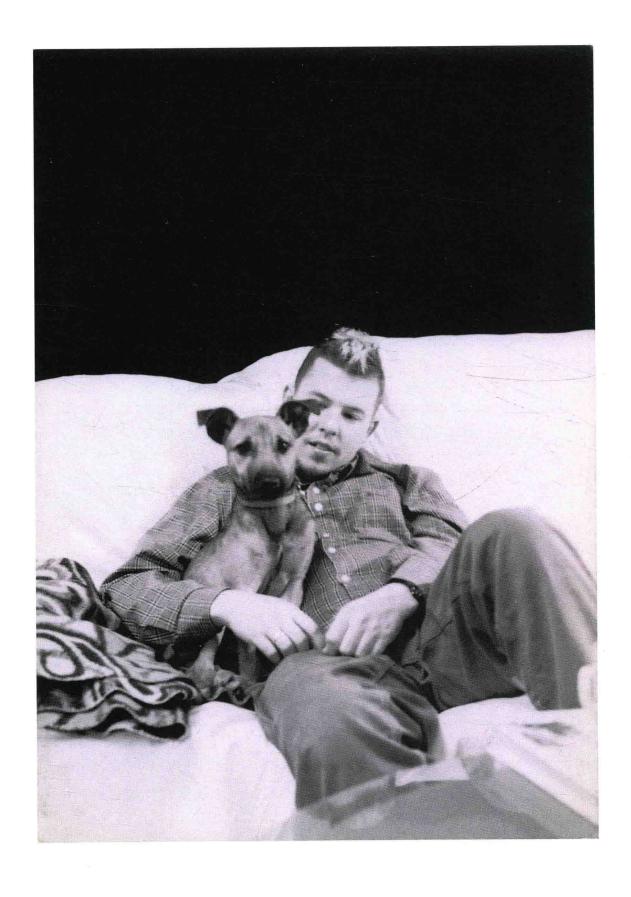
DANTE

'I oscillate between life and death, happiness and sadness, good and evil.'

Lee McQueen



Dedicated to Issy and Lucian



Foreword

Kent Baker

first met Lee Alexander McQueen backstage at his show Highland Rape in 1995. Isabella Blow was championing him and she had kindly arranged a ticket for me. A friend of mine, Zanna, told me that Katy England had raided her wardrobe before the show for accessories. I couldn't take my eyes off the girls staggering down the catwalk. From what I remember, the end of the show was met with applause and disbelief in equal measure.

The next time Lee and I met was when he moved into Hoxton Square in London a few months later. My friend Mira Chai Hyde lived upstairs from him and they struck up what would become a close friendship. Lee spent an evening with a few of us and he wasn't at all what I had expected (not that I'm sure what sort of personality I had preconceived). He was funny and very down to earth. I liked him right away.

Later on, we hung out on another night, ended up driving to west London and stopping off for a few drinks. Some hours later we were back in his studio. He was getting started on an all-nighter, cutting patterns ready for the morning, for what would become the *Dante* collection. I watched in amazement as he sat in front of his cutting table; he was so unbelievably fast and totally faultless, no mistakes. I just sat in silence, impressed by the focus he could summon up in the early hours. I got the feeling he could cut the patterns with his eyes closed — he looked as though he'd worked out every detail in his head and it was now just a case of letting his hands get on with it.

I said that night that I'd like to bring a camera backstage at *Dante*. I promised to keep a low profile. To my surprise Lee said okay. As it worked out, everyone there, including me, knew each other socially as well as being colleagues and I'd shot many of the models at one time or another, so my presence wasn't out of place. In the end Lee was even suggesting shots for me to take.

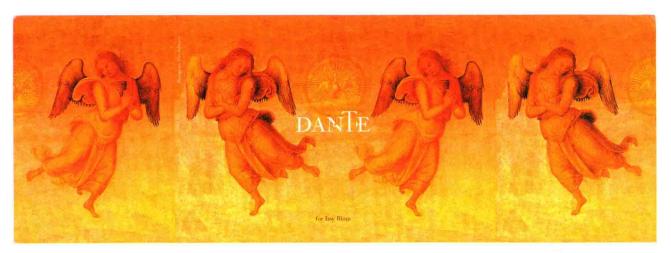
There was an electric atmosphere. Lee had built up quite a stir telling everyone about how the architect of Christ Church Spitalfields, Nicholas Hawksmoor, was a Satanist who sacrificed a baby for every church he built. Minter, Lee's dog, had to be taken home because he was growling at everything. Whatever the cause of these events, Lee's idea that the show should be at a creepy run-down church in the oldest part of the East End, in the midst of Jack the Ripper's killing ground, had the desired effect. A lot of people were spooked.

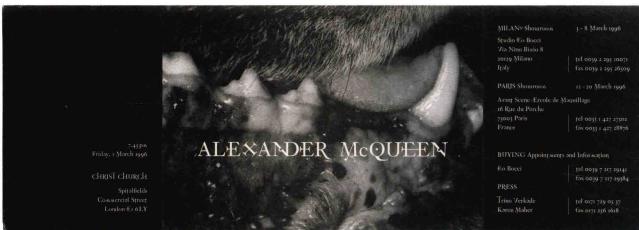
Lee was as brilliant a showman as he was a designer. In my mind, the show was of equal importance to the clothes; the design statement wasn't complete without the theatrical performance.

What I loved about this show and its equally amazing New York re-run in a Lower East Side synagogue — which many of the original team worked on and which I also went to (I've never seen such a scramble to enter a show before or since) — is that it felt like a truly underground event. It was put together on a tiny budget, helped along by Lee's friends out of sheer belief in what he was doing in fashion. Not for money, but out of a shared excitement and for a chance to be involved in something that felt vital.

As with many of the stories in this book, the one that brought this project into being started over a drink in a pub, with Olly Walker, who realized this book with me, and John Gosling, who had done McQueen's music since the *Dante* show. I had told them about the negatives I still had and we agreed they deserved a wider audience — and we thought some other people might also have treasures tucked away from that night nearly 20 years ago. We invited Melanie Rickey, a fashion journalist and old friend, into the team and together we started our detective work. The result is this book, which for me is really about the rest of McQueen's team on *Dante* — everyone who supported him, donated their time, skills and energy to help him achieve one of the finest collections and shows of his career.

When I was gathering material for this book, Olly and I went to LA and stayed with Mira, who owns many McQueen pieces given to her by Lee over the years. We got talking, as you do, about that whole time together. Now, I rarely dream but that night I dreamed vividly — no doubt brought on by so much reminiscing — that Lee and I were chatting. It felt as real as if he were in the room with me now. Afterwards, when Mira asked, I couldn't for the life of me remember any of what was said, but he looked his old happy self. He was probably taking the piss out of me for not taking enough rolls of film that night.





'Thence We Came Forth to Rebehold The Stars'

Introduction - Melanie Rickey

A fashion show named *Dante* contains an implied reference to the fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri's masterwork *The Divine Comedy* and its protagonists' epic journey through Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. Presented in a decrepit sixteenth-century church in Shoreditch, east London, the collection was certainly skewed towards hell and death, though at first it felt like we were looking at a mature and luxuriously beautiful Alexander McQueen show — a shock in itself. We should have known from the skeleton perched on the front row that even darker elements lurked in the shadows.

It opened with aristocratic, medieval-looking models walking primly in perfectly slim-cut grey wool tailoring spliced with sheer chiffon chevrons, their hair twisted severely into serpentine braids. Later, a demon's tail in palest lilac, once traditionally a mourning colour,

snaked around the body of model Debra Shaw. On closer inspection we could see these finely boned creatures had bloodstained lips and ghostly skin. When swaggering Asian men in shiny shirts and big coats, loaded with cheap gold jewellery strode onto the crucifix-shaped catwalk and began menacing the models, a commentary on both the local Brick Lane population and Jack the Ripper, who had killed nearby, was skilfully embedded into the sinister narrative.

The architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, who — if Peter Ackroyd's fictional account of his life is to be believed — was a practising Satanist, completed Christ Church Spitalfields in 1729. By 1996 the church was run down, which suited Lee's impish intentions. He was out to spook people. 'I'm about what goes through people's minds, the stuff that people don't want to admit to or face up to,' he said. But it was the Hawksmoor Satanism myth that gave *Dante* a serrated, nervy edge, creating in its audience the heightened emotional state that later became a calling card for all Alexander McQueen shows.

Looking back, what struck us fashion editors at the outset of *Dante* was the haute commerciality and prescience of the sinuous tailoring and Italian-made military coats, with their luxurious and plentiful tufts of Mongolian shearling exploding from collars and hems. Not to mention the jolt of surprise that came from seeing models trussed in shredded lace pieces which covered both head and face.

Twelve minutes into the show darkness fell and LL Cool J's 'Mama Said Knock You Out' was subsumed by disembodied Gregorian chanting as lighting designer Simon Chaudoir's 20-kilowatt light exploded through the giant stained-glass window of the church, rendering everyone, as I remember it, utterly mute.

In the months before *Dante*, fashion itself was decidedly out of fashion. In 1996, the 'it girl' of that time, Chloë Sevigny, 21-year-old star of Larry Clark's *Kids* and face of Miu Miu, announced 'I'm trying to be anti-fashionable', while Hollywood's most glamorous star, Sharon Stone, wore Gap to the Oscars. The women's collections created for Spring/Summer 1996 were notable for their lack of a coherent fashion message and a global recession meant designers were scaling back, not ramping up, their catwalk shows.

Eighteen years may have passed, but *Dante* still feels recent enough to believe we can simply log on to re-live the night. We can't. There is nothing but grainy footage imprinted within the digital sphere. That powerful sense of wanting to dive into the clear waters of what was a radical and visionary moment in contemporary fashion history propelled this book into existence. It started when photographer Kent Baker, an old friend of Lee McQueen's who had been invited to snap backstage at *Dante*, found the negatives — how archaic! — and was immediately sucked back into that extraordinary night.

Dante, which was shown on Friday, 1 March 1996, was McQueen's seventh London show, not counting his 1992 Central Saint Martin's MA graduation collection Jack the Ripper Stalks his Victims, famously purchased by Isabella Blow and paid for in instalments of £100 a week. It was also his first catwalk show for a while to be held outside the confines of the official and rather boring London Fashion Week tent.

Lee's work had been building momentum for a while. The intense Savile Row training, costumedesign work on the musical Les Misérables and work in Milan with Romeo Gigli had led finally to a Masters at CSM. From these he emerged fully formed, with the irrefutable triple skills of cutter, machinist and designer, and an aesthetic straddling precise, innovative tailoring, military outerwear, historical costume and a lot of 'fuck you' attitude. Throw in the complexities of McQueen's psyche - which flipped between punk agitator, sensitive soul and arch romantic - and the influence of Isabella Blow, who was tutoring the essentially uncultured designer in art history and exposing him to such upper-class country pursuits as falconry, and a powerful cocktail is created. These threads, seemingly impossible in combination, came explosively together in Dante.

His first six catwalk shows had put him on the international map. The fashion press noted McQueen as talented, misogynistic, confrontational and loutish, in equal parts. He delighted in shocking the front row, thinking he was shaking up their prim, safe little world of 'girls in pearls', but most were simply fascinated by the disparate references that he harmonized into unexpected, sometimes beautiful, clothes.

To his contemporaries in 1990s London, though, Lee was one of them. As the self-described 'pink sheep of the family', he lived the thriving house music and clubbing side of the gay scene to the max. The majority of his female friends were lesbians, for whom dressing 'normal' was ripped denim, unisex sportswear and fetish wear.

By the time of *Dante* there was finally a bit of money coming in. The firm Onward Kashiyama was in the process of licensing the McQueen name in Japan and the military-style black wool felt coats embroidered with gold bullion, bumster trousers and sharply sliced suiting in grey and lilac were being made in Italy. The haute corsetry, the face shrouds and body suits of cheap lace purchased in Berwick Street market and the draped devore velvet dresses and skirts were created in-house. Meanwhile, punk bleached denim was knocked up by Andrew Groves in the bath of his studio flat and denim-style jackets, coats and T-shirts featuring the pirated work of war photographer

Don McCullin were sneakily printed by Lee's friend Simon Ungless using CSM's print-room facilities. Ungless also provided rare feathers and horns for accessories, borrowed from his gamekeeper father and Philip Treacy mounted a set of antlers onto a headpiece.

Many of the people who worked on that show were just kids in 1996, embarking on their careers much like the 26-year-old McQueen. Everyone on Team McQueen was working for free - from his clubbing friend, the jeweller Shaun Leane, to the show's lighting designer Simon Chaudoir and set designer Simon Costin. John Gosling, a musician, was drafted in to create music for the show. Back at Hoxton Square, Lee McQueen's in-house team of right-hand woman, Trino Verkade, Karen Maher, who did his PR, and stylist Katy England, was preparing for the fashion show that, though they had no idea then, would forever change the course of both Lee McQueen's life and that of the Alexander McQueen label.

In creating this book we tracked down all of the people involved in the show so we could hear how they became involved with Lee and what they contributed to *Dante*. We took them on trips down memory lane, bringing the story to vivid life as if it was yesterday. We hunted out *Dante* memorabilia, finding all sorts of treasures we wouldn't have expected, to make this book a unique scrapbook of the event, alongside Kent's extraordinary photographs.

Lee had a lot to prove in *Dante*. By this time the fashion press had become attuned to McQueen's variously oblique and stimulating references. He had confronted audiences with his largely misunderstood *Highland Rape* show one year previously. The show that followed it, *The Hunger*, was called a 'mess' by the critic Colin McDowell (contributing to the lacklustre season) and, what with its models giving the audience the finger and a corset top featuring live worms wriggling between two sheer layers, only a few stores had shown interest. *Dante* had to be good. So it was out of the British Fashion Council tents and into Christ Church to put on a show nobody would forget.

Immediately following Simon Chaudoir's and John Gosling's memorable blast of light and chant, the lights came back on and the show descended to hell. 'Paint it Black' by The Rolling Stones and the fragmented sound of helicopter blades from the movie *Apocalypse Now* filled the church, while McQueen's sharply tailored divas have fallen from grace. Now these angry girls staggered with crucifixion nails through their hands, thorns piercing their skin, wearing jackets and tops featuring imagery from the Vietnam War along with shredded, patchworked and crudely bleached denim. Later, as the show reached its final, haunting conclusion

with Samuel Barber's tear-jerking 'Adagio for Strings', the models are in mourning lilac overlaid with black lace.

Writing in *The New York Times*, its chief fashion critic Amy Spindler said McQueen 'brought the excitement, edge and theatrics he is known for but added a wonderful fourth element for the first time: maturity'.

As a fellow club kid, four years younger than McQueen at the time and fresh from university, I could only look on in wonder at what I was seeing. Now, with the Lee Alexander McQueen life story concluded, one can see how influential and important that show really was. Afterwards, Lee got the job to design Givenchy. The way he put Dante together with button-pushing music, an uncomfortable venue and themes relating to life, death, vanity and fear were repeated over and again. But the fashion! Lee tried to distract us, but the clothes really were the thing. That shoulder. The way his clothes looked brilliant from every angle. How he mixed punk denim with couture corsetry or shredded lace with a bullion-swagged military coat: that was his normal. As with the music, so with the clothes. Juxtapositions! Luxury meets streetwear. Victoriana abuts contemporary tailoring. Low-cut trousers were popular for years after McQueen introduced his 'bumster'. Mixing denim with luxury fashion became a thing. The clothes in Dante were a blueprint for the way we would dress for the next 15 years.

At the *Dante* finale, Lee was pulled onto the runway by his then muse, Honor Fraser, and took the applause for longer than he did at any other show I remember since. He kissed his mum and accepted flowers.

Meanwhile, Kent was backstage with his camera, capturing the unadulterated moments that went into creating a masterpiece. 'Real' is the word that sings out here. For, while McQueen was making magic on the stage, the realness of the models and creative team having a laugh, poking out their tongues at the camera, at someone they clearly knew well, spins its own magic. In an era before everyone was a walking camera, and just before the advent of backstage catwalk photography, the raw and beautiful images in this book represent a moment of intimacy and innocence amongst the devil-worshipping yarns. What is truly unique about this book is what makes it a compelling portrait of McQueen. Inferno captures a precise moment in time. One fashion show. One crew. One night.

To those who attended *Dante* it remains unforgettable and its memory sublimely vacuum-sealed, intact from the dissembling forces of social media. Until now.

Enter at your peril.



Suzy Menkes

Journalist From 'The Macabre and The Poetic', International Herald Tribune, 5 March 1996

wo movies are currently defining British society: *Trainspotting*, a gutsy, gaunt and surreal story of Scottish heroin junkies and Sense and Sensibility, lush period romanticism laced with irony. As in film, so in fashion. Alexander McQueen brought those elements together in an exceptional show that was a dance of death in an empty vaulted church — lighted with candles and with a skeleton as a macabre front-row guest.

... [McQueen] hit a fashion moment with his theme of wars of religion through the ages. The show opened with brilliant illumination on a stained-glass window, as organ music was drowned out by gunfire — and then by a hard-core club sound track. Out came strong and sometimes disturbing images: dresses showing flesh through scars of chiffon; torn lace below a braided hussar's jacket (a reminder of McQueen's training as a royal palace tailor); T-shirts photo-printed with children in Somalia or soldiers in the Vietnam War.

Interspersed were impeccably tailored clothes with the merest hint of the armed services, like an elegant grey flannel jumpsuit, matelot trousers wrapped around the body with asymmetrical buttoning or a Mongolian-lamb-trimmed coat. A romantic white cashmere dress with medieval print and trumpet sleeves was contrasted with harder stuff: McQueen's signature ultra-low-slung pants and a lace tunic sheathing the head like a hangman's outfit.

Everywhere, there were references to death: masks set with crucifixes; earrings of dangling bird claws; arms caught in silver crowns of thorns; Victorian jet beading and a mourning color palette of black, bone beige, mauves and greys.

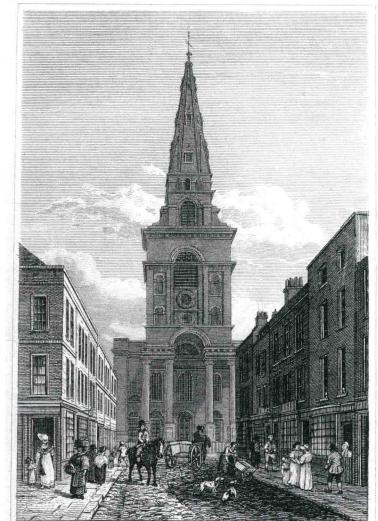


Mira Chai Hyde Men's hair and grooming

ee told me that the Spitalfields church we used for Dante was built by the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, who also built other churches around London. When viewed from an aerial position, the locations form a Satanistic pentangle. To Lee, this meant that the architect was into black magic and of course he loved what that brought to holding the Dante show there. It was only a few blocks away from Geller House in Hoxton Square, where his studio and our loft that we shared were.

Lee and I felt a lot of energy in that church while working there. At one point a crucifix pendant fell from someone's neck, which really gave us a fright and was also a confirmation of our feelings about the strange energy in the church.

The Dante show was so successful that it was recreated - the only one of his shows that was. We went to New York City with it during the winter season. We used an old run-down synagogue to hold the event. I remember it was snowing and freezing outside and someone came backstage to shout that Anna Wintour was not being allowed in by security as they did not know who she was! The show was already at maximum capacity. I left my post - which was crammed in front of the bathrooms (we were so limited in space backstage) - where I was doing the male grooming, to take a quick peek and was absolutely amazed at the mayhem that was going on outside. That was when I knew Lee had 'made it' on an international level and was on his way to much greater things. Givenchy was soon to follow.



noravit by Littigham from a Drawing by Li mes for the Walks through London Christ Churche, Spital fields.

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"DANTE" I. II. Creative Director: Katy England III. Producer: Sam Gainsbury IV. Studio assistants: Ruti Danan, Anita Van Dongen V. Amie Witton, Emily Morton VI. Catwalk Producer: Russell Marsh VII. Lighting Director: Simon Chaudoir VIII. Lighting Supervisor: Dave Tyler IX. Music: John Gosling Χ. Hair: Barnabe and team. XI. Make up: Val Garland and team for MAC. XII. Mens hair and Grooming: Mira and Kinuko using Aveda. XIII. Candles: Prices Patent Candle Company: 0171 228 2001 XIV. Head dresses: Simone Valasquez: 0171 252 3440 XV. Silver thorn jewellery: Shaun Leane: 0171 405 4773 XVI. Jet jewellery by: Erickson Beamon: 0171 259 0202 XVII. Antlers: Philip Treacy:0171 259 0605 XVIII. Photographic fabric printing: Simon Ungless XIX. Real dog, looped wool: Kim Hassler: 0181 9695653 XX. XXI. White Printed Cashmere & Silk devorce by: XXII. Woolexpo By Brian Weisz London. XXIII. 01717346850 XXIV. XXV. Feather jewellery - Erik Halley XXVI. Hoisery: Jonathan Aston, c/o 0171 439 3748 XXVII. Mens slippers: The Kasbah XXVIII. Dressers: Thanks to Sidonie and Team XXIX. Thanks also to the following contributers: Agatha Jewellery, Perrier, Spread Eagle Antiques, & Levis for jeans. XXX. Buses provided by: XXXI. Airbus, 'The London Heathrow Connection, 0181 977 6665 XXXII. XXXIII. With grateful thanks to Liberty, Regent Street for all their help, XXXIV. and the support from Bus Stop, Onward Kashiyama.. XXXV. Press: Trino Verkade and Karen Maher 0171 729 0537

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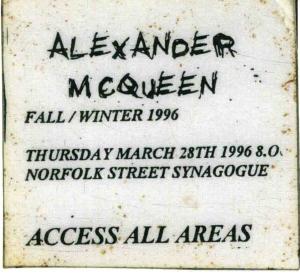
The Guardian 20 July 1996 p.A8

Letters

Alix Sharkey states in his article, 'The Real McQueen' (6 July) that Alexander McQueen held his last London fashion show in a 'deconsecrated' Hawksmoor church in the East End. This church was Christ Church Spitalfields and it is not, and never has been, deconsecrated. Your reporter assumed (always a dangerous thing to do) that no consecrated church would allow a fashion show to be held in it. Looking back, we do regret it. McQueen's rep (a very nice lady) had assured us that nothing would be done in the church that would be unsuitable, e.g., the dresses would be modest! Anyway, what is done is done.

Christ Church is a most beautiful building and we like it to be used for other things besides services, but we rely on the goodwill of those using it to do so in an appropriate way. Jesus said 'be as cunning as serpents and as harmless as doves'; perhaps we don't always get the balance right!

Fay Cattini (Churchwarden) Christ Church Spitalfields



XXXVI.

