

BY MICHELE MEYER

Stefan Beckman

SET DESIGNER



When he was a shaggy-haired, blond 6-year-old living in San Francisco, Stefan Beckman loved creating fantastical window displays alongside his father in his Union Street gift shop, The Enchanted Crystal, which still stands today. More than 40 years later, he’s still at it—conjuring up beautiful worlds, that is—only on a much bigger scale.

Beckman is the creative genius behind some of the most immersive, surreal backdrops for runway shows, parties, art exhibits, and artistic magazine editorials and advertising campaigns. It was Beckman who dreamed up a Pinocchio workshop with Tim Burton as the wood carver and Amy Adams as his creation for a *Vogue* spread last December. He also built the sky-high plywood skate ramp that graced the runway at Coach’s first full show in London earlier this year and set Paris on fire with a re-creation of late *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland’s living room—which she called her “garden of hell”—for Marc Jacobs.

At 48, Beckman is the most in-demand set designer in the world, jetting between London, Shanghai, and his studio in Manhattan to create work for A-list clients like Versace, Valentino, Marc Jacobs, Alexander Wang, and *Vanity Fair*.

“Good design inspires,” says Beckman. “It should be an emotional experience, not a set for a set’s sake.” That emotional experience begins with an initial two-week to three-month conversation between Beckman and the fashion designer. “It starts with a feeling and a mood,” he says. He then finds inspiration from all around—history, architecture, music, ballet, art.... His vivid visions derive widely and wildly, from Monopoly pieces and *American Horror Story* to a Bernardo Bertolucci film and an Ed Ruscha painting—and sometimes all at once. “Very Busby Berkeley meets Fellini meets Dalí” is how he describes one particular set he created for a Swarovski art exhibit in Paris.

He likens his process to putting on a play—collaborating with top fashion photographers, lighting specialists, hair and makeup professionals, models, and music producers to create “one world where everything comes together.” It’s a process he became familiar with back in college, making props, building sets, and shooting and editing shorts as a film and theater major at the University of Texas at Austin. After graduating, he worked in Los Angeles for a while as a film production assistant and television set dresser before moving to New York.



Top to bottom: Some of Beckman's work in a *Vogue* fashion editorial; Beckman; his work on a Gucci campaign



Top to bottom: The Beckman-designed sets for Marc Jacobs' Fall 2014 collection; Oscar de la Renta Spring 2009; Marc Jacobs Spring 2015

It was there that his career really took off. For a fashion spread in *The New York Times Magazine*, Beckman created what he calls “an *Alien-meets-Blade Runner* set built from packing crates.” After seeing it, photographer Steven Meisel hired him for *Vogue*—which led to a regular gig creating elaborate and memorable sets for Marc Jacobs, which he’s been doing since 2006.

As busy as he is, Beckman can’t help but be consumed by every detail of a project. Whether it’s just the right height (8 feet) to hang the foam-filled Spandex clouds at Marc Jacobs’ Fall 2014 show in Paris, or the right shade of sand (“pebble,” which he still felt was a tad too gray) for a Tom Ford beach set, it has to be perfect.

“There’s never enough time, but a deadline is good,” Beckman says. “It makes me focus. I also think, Just go with your gut and you’re probably right.”

While he gears up for another year of museum exhibits, ad campaigns, and highly theatrical runway shows, Beckman also has a few other plans. He says he hopes one day to make a movie and maybe design housewares. Most of all, “I’d love to do the Met Ball,” he says of The Costume Institute’s annual fashion party.

“There’s so much more I want to see, do, and say that I’m a little angst-ridden,” he adds. “It’s not about the money. I want to do things that push me and open my mind. I like to be busy.”