

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. SCHWAB

Are the rumors true? Is Marios Schwab now overseeing Maison Martin Margiela? MICHELE MEYER tracks him down at Audi's Fashion Houston to find out.

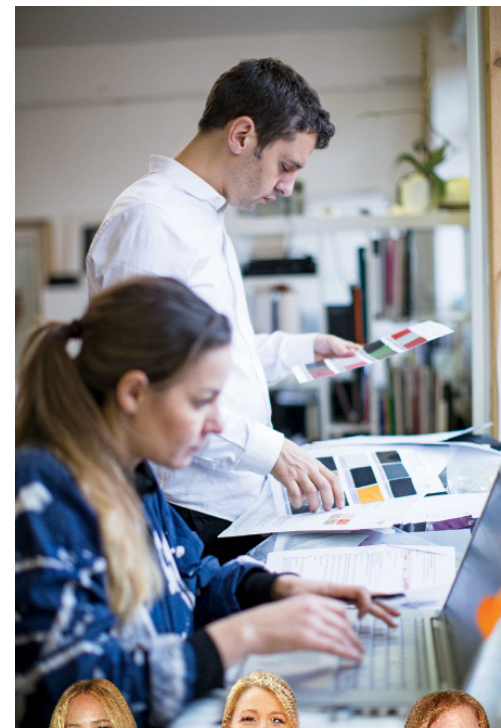
Photography by TIM WHITE

WELL, I'M not allowed to talk about these things," says Marios Schwab, his eyes averted and his soft voice conveying an elusive Anglo-European accent. "My publicists told me not to touch that. Sorry. I'd like to concentrate on my own brand."

"These things" are the rumors—circulated by *Women's Wear Daily*, *Elle*, *British Vogue* and others—that the 36-year-old London-based designer is secretly >

SHEER GENIUS

Clockwise, left to right: Schwab's Spring 2014 collection on the runway at Audi Fashion Houston; the designer photographed outside his London studio and inside at work; celebrity fans Jessica Chastain, Blake Lively and Jennifer Lawrence wearing Schwab's namesake line



helming Maison Martin Margiela, succeeding the Parisian label's namesake, whose departure was announced in 2009.

There's certainly enough circumstantial evidence to support such whispering. The Margiela Fall 2013 Haute Couture collection bears Schwab's familiar fabric treatments—quilted and stapled bibs, rolled latex jeans and shoulder-baring sleeves. And Margiela owner Renzo Rosso and CEO Giovanni Pungetti were reportedly sitting front row at Schwab's own London show last September. There's also the fact that Schwab doesn't flat-out deny the speculation, unlike when I bring up the talk that he outfitted Kanye West on his recent tour, which featured remarkably Margiela-like masks. ("I did not do Kanye West's tour. I know Kanye. We've been introduced. I like his dynamic as someone really hands-on.") Not to mention Schwab is no stranger to taking over a historic label, as he did with Halston's revival in 2009.

But he and his publicist needn't worry. My question about his alleged role at Margiela is merely journalistic duty. In fact, discussing Schwab's own brand—unfairly overshadowed amid all the swirling gossip—is the very reason I've come here to Audi's Fashion Houston week, kicked off by a runway show of his 2014 Spring collection.

The collection features Schwab's signature touches: Swarovski jewels glinting through chiffon, bodices contoured with airbrushed inky swashes and surgically sliced away to

reveal slivers of skin. (He uses this tactic better than anyone since Geoffrey Beene.) But new twists, namely harness-topped sheer lace, seemingly owe much to the lingerie line he launched early last year exclusively for British online retailer ASOS—which itself owes much to Schwab's upbringing.

He was born in Athens, not long after his father relocated the family from Austria for a project director job with lingerie-maker Triumph International.

FASHION HOUSTON (RUNWAY)

GETTY IMAGES (LAWRENCE AND LIVELY); FILMAGIC (CHASTAIN)

"As a kid, I was always surrounded by the technical aspects of lingerie," Schwab tells me in a small conference room at Houston's Hotel ZaZa, where he is staying. "My dad's machines gave minuscule lace pieces a hard-edged femininity, and I was drawn to that aesthetic."

By grade school, Schwab was sketching dresses in class and whipping up clothes for his friends' dolls, his classmates and his female relatives. His "mum" still wears a subtly

embroidered, antique-lace-trimmed black skirt he made for her one Christmas. And his aunt used to bring him back bolts of fabric from their summer opera trips to San Marino and Milan. The stylish women in his family also introduced him to old movies—Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman remain his idols—while a French tutor acquainted him with the fashion photography of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton.

At 15—after briefly considering architecture and ballet ("The teacher told me, 'You're too skinny to carry girls'")—Schwab returned to his father's Austrian homeland, where in Salzburg he became the first boy to attend a girl's design trade school. He was lonely at first. "It was strange to be surrounded only by girls and not to know the language well," he says. But in hindsight he considers himself lucky. "I learned to love the inside of a garment as much as the outside, which shaped my aesthetic."

Schwab's education continued at the Berlin campus of prestigious international fashion university ESMOD, followed by a master's from London's Central Saint Martins. Despite the post-9/11 recession, his namesake line, launched in 2005, was quickly snapped up by prized stores, including Barneys New York, Colette in Paris and Browns in London. Then came industry accolades (the 2007 Swiss Textiles Award with its 100,000 euro prize), celebrity fans (Jennifer Lawrence, Jessica Chastain, Blake Lively) and the appointment as creative director of Halston, resurrected with backing from Harvey Weinstein and Sarah Jessica Parker.

After that two-year association, Schwab returned to his two-story studio in East London to refocus on his own line. There, he typically puts in 12-hour-plus days, working with a full-time staff of seven and at times more than 20 freelance assistants. "I'm a bit of a nightmare to work with," he says. "A control freak. I'm hands-on with artwork, embroidery and draping. I want to be more relaxed, because that could trigger something fresh."

However stressed he might feel, he hardly shows it. "He's very mild-mannered and remains calm even when everyone else runs as if their heads were cut off," says Shannon Hall, co-owner of Sloan/Hall, a luxury boutique with locations in Houston and San Antonio that carries Schwab's line and has hosted his in-store appearances. "He really understands women individually. If a look doesn't quite gel for a customer, he'll add a purse and suddenly it makes complete sense."

That alone makes Schwab's supposed stewardship of fashion's most mysterious label hard to fathom. During his 20-year reign, the hermit-like Martin Margiela was rarely photographed, never took a catwalk bow, never communicated with the press except via fax machine and certainly never traveled to southeast Texas to do a meet-and-greet with shoppers.

Then again, there remains Schwab's refusal to offer an outright denial. As he says of the unassuming white dress shirt/navy jeans/black Clarks desert boots ensemble he typically sports: "There is something beautiful about not showing everything to the full extent. That's a bit Greta Garbo, isn't it?"