

CULTURED

DESIGN | ART | ARCHITECTURE

THE DISRUPTORS

SWIZZ BEATZ
IS SERIOUS
ABOUT ART



KASSEEM DEAN

CREATIVE KISMET

Nir Hod and Yigal Azrouël's recent edition of cashmere scarves just scratches at the surface of the artist's collaborative capacity.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE PORTRAIT BY GREG KESSLER

When Nir Hod was a student at Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Israel was being inundated by new technologies, high fashion, MTV and Tower Records. "The way I understood art, it was much more open, something that was part of the culture, people, society," says Hod, who became obsessed with merch stands at rock concerts and the low-culture souvenirs of Jesus and Mary, the Holocaust and revered rabbis being sold at the city's high holy sites. "I loved how you could have something so glamorous, so romantic, so sacred turned into merchandise."

So Hod became the rock star of his own art. In 1993, he glazed porcelain plates with his own image, followed by necklaces and dog tags printed with androgynous nudes of himself as a soldier, and T-shirts of him playing Michael Jackson. Less than a year after Yitzhak Rabin's murder, he used gold thread to embroider 500 yarmulkes—on one edge, the image of a raven eating the yarmulke of Yigal Amir, the prime minister's assassin; on another, an image of Benjamin Netanyahu as the devil. He then inscribed each of them with "A Souvenir From November," the title of his controversial 1997 exhibition at Tel Aviv's Mary Fauzi Gallery.

"I wanted to sell them at the gallery," says Hod. "But the police had to protect me for a few days because they received threats."

When the artist studied at New York's Cooper Union, one of his favorite spots in town was, of course, the gift store at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "It was so beautiful for me to see all these old masters translated into a scarf or jewelry box or

calendar," says Hod, who would airbrush postcards from the shop with floral pastels. "At some point there's no difference between a sunset in Thailand, a pyramid in Egypt, the Mona Lisa or the flowers of van Gogh. To me, there's something very charming about this."

Hod made his biggest splash in the world of merchandising with *The Night You Left*, sets of mirrored coasters embellished with lines of cocaine after his titular series of paintings. Since their 2012 debut at Paul Kasmin's PK Shop, Hod has sold more than 12,000 editions of the coasters everywhere from The Standard hotels to the New Museum.

"There are many crazy benefits to these souvenirs, because so many people can appreciate art and artists but they can never buy anything," says Hod. "Many artworks you work so hard on and then some collector buys it, but who is really going to enjoy it or see it? I like volume. I want people to know what I'm doing, to have a part of me, and this is another great way to do it."

Hod's latest souvenirs come in the form of fashion accessories. After years of talking about collaborating with his friend Israeli-born fashion designer Yigal Azrouël, the two printed a few of Hod's *Genius* portraits of aristocratic children smoking cigarettes onto limited-edition cashmere modal scarves, launched at PK Shop last winter. Aside from being functional, Hod sees the scarf as a link to the art history and pop culture—van Dyck and Velázquez, Bowie and Jagger—which originally influenced the *Genius* paintings.

For Azrouël, the collaboration is also a

celebration of Hod's luminous brushwork. "Nir's craftsmanship conveys such a uniquely luxurious feeling," he says, "which makes it very easy for him to seamlessly collaborate in this market."

Art advisor and curator Maria Brito agrees. After placing some of Hod's paintings, the two became friends and Brito spent the past year designing 10 leather handbags printed with a range of images from the artist's early figurative paintings to his new chrome abstractions.

"I looked for images that matched our vision: a little punk, a little rebel, sometimes dark glam, sometimes romantic," says Brito, who likens the collection to a "mini retrospective." It launched at New York's Soho House in February. "Nir's work is soulful and deals with issues that everyone can relate to. Things are complicated in the world we live in. There's drama and there's beauty and he captures very contradictory aspects using the most extraordinary painting techniques."

Hopefully, he won't keep the fashion plates waiting too long for his next collaborative concept: dictator sunglasses based on the glam/feminine styles worn by Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi.

"They try to look like something between beautiful, important rock stars and rich people, but because they don't have the right taste it's either feminine, ridiculous or out of fashion, with the attitude of the '70s," says Hod. "It's almost like some kind of crazy Halloween costume."

Sacha Baron Cohen might want to revive Admiral General Aladeen.

Nir Hod and Yigal Azrouël at Hod's studio in New York.

