



Little Bursts Of Joy: In Conversation With Massimo Alba At His Milan Showroom

“The real secret to fashion’s wonders can be found in a sort of collective memory, with fortuitous, whimsical, light-hearted and joyful references in a form of unconscious sharing that brings people together and lets them enjoy the same memories and marvels. We wear things that make us feel good and closely reflect the images that we have of ourselves, so that we can reveal as faithfully as possible how we see ourselves, not to mention what we would like to be or become. In this respect, fashion creates a sense of déjà vu for a brief moment in time, deceiving the heart and the mind. We think we know how things are going to be... Nonetheless, sometimes we manage to surprise ourselves when a top, a jacket or an overcoat grabs our attention. My interest lies in these moments of amazement—these little bursts of joy—that sometimes sneak into everyday life.”

-Excerpt taken from Massimo Alba’s Fall/Winter 2018 press release.

I’ve only met Massimo Alba a handful of times in my life, but I would call him a friend. Not just because he once took me to eat the best bowl of pasta I’ve ever had (that was four years ago and trust me, I eat a lot of pasta), but he is very warm, and we always have great discussions about life, and our own philosophies regarding it. I love how open he is, and his energy is extremely calming. Plus, his family is typically around the showroom (his wife, Maria, his Labrador, Jasper and, sometimes, even his son) and there’s this wonderful blend of Massimo’s personal life and brand because, for him, there really is no distinguishing between the two.

I own a few pieces from his collections: a pair of thick, khaki-colored, wide wale cord pants, a soft, slate-esque cotton-cashmere hoodie and a brown, washed linen, rounded collar shirt. There are things in my closet I will donate, sell and toss, but I will never discard one of Massimo’s pieces. There’s a special, lived-in quality each piece carries and it’s hard to believe they’re brand new when you purchase one. It falls into the category of Italian sportswear, but it feels like something greater than that simple categorization. Perhaps the word timeless is overused, but I’m not sure how else to describe Massimo’s collections. There is a piece for everyone, regardless of which style archetype one thinks they fall into. His showroom, filled with trinkets, antiques, fabrics, and of course, clothes, is simply inviting. You want to spend hours in the showroom—you want to sit with your thoughts, and pinpoint what you’re feeling, and hold on to it.

When I visit, Massimo greets me with a hug, and Radiohead's *OK Computer* is spinning on a record player in his office. "Do you like Radiohead?" he asks me, and I'm prepared to begin the interview, whether or not he's starting with the questioning instead of me. When Massimo speaks to you, he makes sincere pauses and eye contact, and you feel he is really devoting himself to the conversation, both for himself and for you. It's really refreshing, particularly in an age where we keep our cell phones on the table at dinner. I also wanted to speak with him because as brands come and go and attempt to keep up with the speed of fashion calendars, trends, and the market as a whole, he is continuing to forge on in his own way, not beholden to these pressures.

"You are wearing my pants. This makes me very happy! But I must ask, do you like Off—White?" I'm wearing his cords, indeed, with a pair of Off-White Zoomflys. He doesn't ask this question with malice, but rather with genuine curiosity, because I think I must be the only person to wear a pair of Massimo Alba cords with Off—White sneakers (at least that he's seen).

What was your childhood like? Where did you grow up?

I grew up in a small town which is very close to Venice. When I was 18, I started traveling and decided to live in Milan. I feel Milan is the city for me. I feel very comfortable here. My home is here. The business is here. The showroom, the company.

Where did you work before you started your own brand?

When I was really young, I launched a collection called 97 Rue de Mimosas which was Magritte's address in Belgium. At that time I was used to producing sweatshirts and activewear, cotton-cashmere cut and sew, and it was the beginning of the '80s. I met Mr. Canessa from Malo and became creative director when I was 17. I was involved in the process of the collection and retail, and it was very interesting for me. After, I was a partner in the relaunch of Ballantyne, which is a really beautiful Scottish company. I spent a lot of time in Scotland, which I really like. I did a lot of other things but these are the most important. Then I launched my company and was able to produce a brand which, from my understanding, is an independent brand and company.

I know your brand and the clothes you create mean more to you than just making garments. Can you describe your brand for me, and how it started?

We start from the idea that you have to feel very comfortable in your clothes and that's what we work on. Touch, details, fit and colors, because colors also give you an attitude. Attitude is the right word for me and this brand. We are not interested in what's happening in the rest of the world, although obviously we are part of the world and are involved in what is happening. We

decided to produce our clothes first of all. I'm very happy when I meet a friend, like you, who is wearing our trousers; it makes me feel very happy. It means there is a possibility for us in the world. I'm happy any time I see someone anywhere wearing our clothing. Our goal is for you to feel completely at home in our clothing.

How do you begin a collection?

Dreaming. Listening to music and speaking with the people I work with. Sometimes, it starts from a piece of fabric in an archive, sometimes it comes from a picture or a sketch. It's a detail or sometimes—most of the time—I arrive through other people. Anything I do comes from others. I have a very intense relationship with others, rather than with myself. I'm very open and I try to translate anything I receive from other people. It's a sort of déjà vu. It's very, very important, this feeling. New doesn't exist anymore—that is my understanding. It's a matter of being able to cut something which already exists and give it the right attitude, the right touch, the right details.

All of your clothing is timeless; do you have a favorite piece from your own collection?

Oh, yeah. Absolutely, yes. I cannot live without these trousers. These are made from a very soft velvet taken from interiors. We wash and dye them in a certain way and they're very, very comfortable and very cool. For me, it's a pant I cannot live without. In the last collection, there is a material we used which I really appreciate and like: yak. I like yak, starting from the name. It's a beautiful animal that lives in Mongolia and he has a good friend, which is cashmere, and they live quite well together. With yak this season, we produced a very soft and warm fleece that we made into a hoodie and I love to wear it with a double-breasted coat. It's a matter of mixing things together. There's a very interesting story that perhaps is only interesting to me, but I have a son and he's 13 years-old and he's teaching me a lot. It's interesting to see him and his approach to dressing himself, because today he's just a beginner and he's trying to understand. For the first time, he wants to wear clothes in a very specific way and it's interesting to see his choice and his attitude. He's more streetwear oriented. I can see for the future that the only way to maintain style is to mix different, original pieces. I don't know if it's streetwear or classic styles or higher fashion, but it must be, in a certain way, this kind of originality.

Your showroom really feels like a home; it feels like more than just a brand. Where do you find all the objects you've filled the space with?

Well, all around the world. There are a lot of people that bring me gifts too. I think I need a bigger space [laughs]. We need a refresh in here, perhaps.

Is your home anything like your showroom? Is there continuity between the two?

Oh yes, as well as my stores. They're all close to each other because I don't like to create the right environment just for living, or just for working, and obviously there is a mix of everything I like. There are bits of Scandinavian and Danish design because I really, really love original pieces from a lot of those designers. Generally speaking, I like design which is, not distinctly pristine design, which is imperfect in a way. I love when pieces have history and character. When they're kind of broken, this is more interesting for me. This goes for people, too. It's fun to get in touch with people that have a certain weirdness or quirk to them.

Imperfection makes people more interesting.

Yeah, I've formed the same opinion about clothing as well.

How does Massimo Alba start his day? Do you have a morning routine?

No! I just wake up and I try to feel comfortable. I have a dog, Jasper, and I take care of him and everything else just happens... it's all new.

What is your favorite meal to eat in Milan?

Traditional. Risotto, Cotoletta, I love Milanese food. I love Spaghetti Pomodoro, food is really so important.

What sort of music do you listen to?

I really like shuffle, but Radiohead makes me feel at home. I like jazz, I like Bach, it's a matter of feeling comfortable and it must feel like part of you. This is the soundtrack of a very important part of my life.

What do you do with your spare time when you're not working on your brand?

I spend time with friends. I'm really curious. I like to meet new people and make connections, see what they do, what they feel... I have a lot of friends. We have a tiny house in Ischia because my wife is from the south and we love to go there. We go to the seaside and countryside. I really like the country but in a certain way, my starting point is Milano. I'm happy when I'm here, and I'm happy when I leave, but I like to come home.

How do you feel about where fashion is at the moment? I think people are dressing in a way that's more so what they've seen on the internet than exploring style for themselves.

This is the worst. The worst is that there's an amalgamation. It's a bit too much now. On one hand, you have these huge big brands that promote themselves with a lot of marketing, and at incredible prices, but apparently everything is for kids. I have nothing against it because I'm totally separate but as I told you from the beginning, I'm interested in independent companies and independent attitudes because, in a certain way, a certain project must be able to grow and become interesting. Now there's a huge space in the market because I'm not sure that all people want to feel the same or look the same. I think people want something different. This is my opinion and I have to believe in this because I have to let this company grow. I want to open new stores and continue to position this brand properly, starting from the stores. There, everything is clear. If you have a store, which is like your house, in which you feel comfortable, with cool people that accept and respect you—happy and kind, you know—this is very important for me. What I can see, what I believe for our future, is growth through our retail and what I'd really like is to be able to select the right people and translate, with good manners, our project and our product, and accept everyone and try to get, in a certain way, our idea and our style across.

When I say the word "life," what comes to mind for you?

Opportunity. My first goal was to understand the reason why. I believe it's in meeting people because I'm quite sure that everything I discover starts from the people I meet. It's a matter of being touched, and staying open, without any prejudice. Having no enemy; this is my position.