They despise the fashion establishment, are inspired by angsty Amish villagers and 1990s riot grrrls, and their hand-stitched creations are coveted by the front-row cognoscenti.

Lena Corner meets Meadham Kirchhoff, England’s oddball design duo

‘IT WOULD TOTALLY DEPRESS ME IF OUR CLOTHES WERE SOMETHING PEOPLE LIKED IN A MEDIocre WAY’ EDWARD MEADHAM

FOR THIS SEASON, DESIGNERS MEADHAM KIRCHHOFF imagined their own funerals. They created shrines to their lives on the catwalk, decorated with mementoes and memorabilia of the type you find by the grave-stones of the famous. They also decided to send the models down the catwalk all at the same time, so the thousands of man-hours that went into the collection flashed by the audience in a matter of seconds.

It’s been said of Meadham Kirchhoff, who have been doing ready-to-wear since 2008, that their shows are becoming more and more extreme. Some say they are losing the plot; others love them more than ever. They think nothing of sending models out wearing no make-up and sporting untouched roots. For their latest collection (A/W 2011) they teamed traditional Amish-style costumes with thick knitted socks and severe Hassidic hairstyling. They have a knee-jerk reaction to anything that suggests good taste and zero interest in current trends. But beyond the theatrics of the catwalk there is a serious, single-minded fashion house stocked in 30 stores around the world and getting bigger by the season.

‘People will not necessarily like what we do, but we give our entire selves to it. It would totally depress me if our clothes were something that people liked in a mediocre way,’ says one half of the duo, Edward Meadham. The other half, French-born Benjamin Kirchhoff, agrees: ‘In this day and age there is so much product out there. Do we really need to see yet another digitally printed shift dress?’

‘We meet in the little Formica kitchen of their studio in Dalston. A Bauhaus poster covers the pretty floral wallpaper on one wall and on another perches a taxidermy spider. Mercury Prize winner PJ Harvey, Hole and Patti Smith play on the stereo.

The pair met at Central Saint Martins in 2002 and have been together ever since, both as boyfriends and business partners. Home is a space partitioned off from the studio, so getting to work literally means opening the door and stepping past the bikes in the hallway. Meadham is the smaller and younger of the two (he’s 32; Kirchhoff is a year older) and is the creative force behind the brand. Today he seems at the same time both a bit weary and full of nervous energy. He is wearing a fluorescent yellow jumper, tights and little matador shoes, and chooses to stand for much of the interview, staring out of the window, smoking. By contrast, Kirchhoff, who runs the business side of things, is dressed head to toe in black – Yohji trousers, Nike trainers – and is affable and relaxed. They are not quite the odd couple but they’re not far off. They speak over one another and disagree wholeheartedly. When they first came across each other, neither spoke to the other for a few years. ‘We were too dumb and too shy to say anything,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘We only got speaking at the very end of our time at Saint Martins.’

This was despite working in the same room. Kirchhoff studied menswear and Meadham did womenswear. ‘I hated everyone in my class, so I used to go and work on the men’s floor,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘I was desperate to escape. When I first hated growing up and I hated everything about it. I lived in a hideous village in bumf***,’ he says. ‘My parents were bitterly angry 13-year-old living in West Sussex when he first heard their music. ‘My parents loved them more than anything, and I shared a spirit that was defiant, rebellious and highly political. When they say they are inspired by strong females, it’s not in the creepy way that many designers do, who declare they love women but are just talking about their bodies. ‘One of our permanent themes is all about girls’ creativity and self-expression,’ says Meadham. Feminism and rebellion are recurring ideas. Their work also heavily references the riot grrrls – the early 1990s indie movement fronted by all-female bands such as Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill, who came with a fierce punk ethos all dressed up in baby-doll frocks. Meadham was a bitterly angry 13-year-old living in West Sussex when he first heard their music. ‘My parents lived in a hideous village in bumf***, ‘he says. ‘It was one great big, grey estate, just gross. I hated growing up and I hated everything about my life. I was desperate to escape. When I first saw the riot grrrls it was amazing.’

They are both unashamed feminists, who are so used to seeing tall, skinny models that they would happily spend hours debating the horror of Heat magazine, late-1990s ladette culture, the reductive nature of the Spice Girls’ girl-power message and how encouraged they have been recently by the SlutWalk movement. ‘It’s a constant constraint that women have to deal with,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘It’s never resolved. There wouldn’t be feminism if society was fair in the first place.’

It’s a tricky position to occupy when you work in fashion, however, and I wonder how they justify sending stick-thin models up and down the catwalk. ‘I have a fear of using different kinds of models because I wouldn’t want to put them in a position where they are going to be judged by all the people who are so used to seeing tall,
skinny things,’ says Meadham. Kirchhoff agrees: ‘It’s a strange industry standard. Models have always been really, really tall and really, really thin, no matter what people tell you. It just kind of happened. It’s a weird measuring unit that we just have to deal with.’

They go out of their way instead to rail against other industry codes – the way fashion magazines, for example, dictate how we should be dressing. ‘I think it’s rude and insulting to tell women what they want, who they are and what they should wear,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘The market has become dictatorial of what the designer should or shouldn’t be doing. It’s like all products have to fit a set of rules. It’s extremely limiting for creativity and it frightens the hell out of me. All we ask is that we can work independently of that. That we can show our clothes exactly how we want to, exactly how it comes out of us. What people make of it after that is up to them.’

Testament to their refusal to be told what to do is the hapless man doing their accounts, who they sacked only the day before our meeting. ‘He was trying to tell me how to spend my budget,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘Well, I make it happen somehow every season so who the f*** was he to tell me what to do? I won’t have it. I just said bye-bye.’

As a result of this unyielding stance, they have developed something of a closed circle around them. Although they live in London’s fashion epicentre, they rarely venture out. ‘When the whole Dalston scene started we tried it,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘Never in my life have I felt so old and fat and ugly. It was like, “You are all skinny, you are all 19, you are all the same person and I hate you all.” ‘I barely leave the house,’ concurs Meadham. Instead they stay in, working, and sometimes have friends over. ‘We do work a lot,’ says Kirchhoff, ‘and if we’re not working, we watch movies, we contemplate, or we go for walks. It’s not like we’re totally hermit-like. We’ve lived and worked together for ten years now, we have our routine.’ They do have some friends: Louise Gray and Lady Gaga’s milliner Nasir Mazhar.

Meadham has also recently struck up a good friendship with teenage blogger Tavi. ‘At first I refused to even look at what she was doing,’ he says. ‘People kept talking to me about her in a way that I hate. And she was on the cover of Pop magazine. But now I think she’s really important. She doesn’t actually write that much about fashion – she talks a lot about feminism and about her views and the world in which she lives. She is utterly, endlessly fascinating.’

And with that it’s back to work, back into the Meadham Kirchhoff bubble where a delicate pale yellow dress needs repairing because someone stuck a stiletto through it. ‘We just want to be one of those nice, quiet couture houses that is left alone to do what it wants,’ says Kirchhoff. ‘People understand our choices. Interest is growing and there is a certain respect there. I think it’s slowly starting to happen.’

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