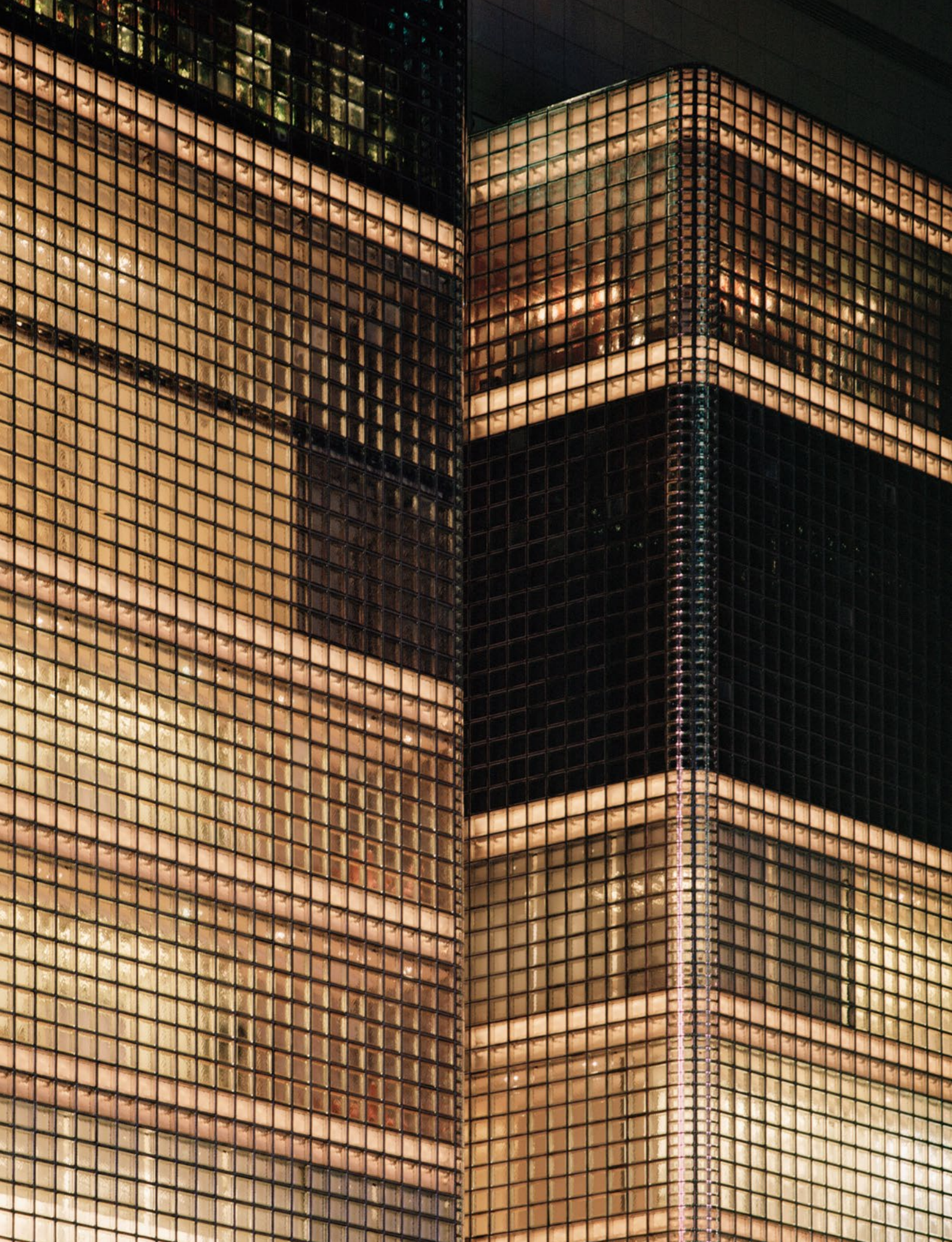


CEREAL

In this volume, we explore the theme of **process**. We converse with **Faye and Erica Toogood**, discuss garden design with **Luciano Giubbilei**, and perfumery with **Lyn Harris**. We visit the studios of **Stanley Whitney** and **Elliott Smedley**, and travel to the mountains of **Bhutan** and the hills of **Rwanda**.

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LAWS OF
THE UNIVERSE

Defining the

Hermès Woman

words

Jenny Bahn

photos

Rory Gardiner

Green ginkgo leaves shudder in a thankless breeze. Cicadas scream, unseen, from branches, setting the stage with their furious score. The days and nights are hazy and inseparable. For the last two weeks, Tokyo has been transformed by record-breaking temperatures that threaten to strip the city, wholesale, of its poise. Men and women drag pilled cotton washcloths across glistening foreheads and slippery necks. Sidewalks and subway platforms flutter with the frantic back and forth of paper fans. The heat is thick, relentless, consuming — a graceless reality from which no one is immune. Except, it seems, Bali Barret.

Barret is the enigmatic creative director behind the Hermès Women’s Universe, the umbrella under which everything the house makes for women sits. Like Barret, Hermès does not appear to readily succumb to the laws of mere mortals. The house’s catalogue of goods represents the apex of luxury, audacious and whimsical in its vision. Here, crocodile can feel as common as cotton, and the thread of 1,000 silk *carrés* could, as fashion lore has it, make the trip between where you stand and the Moon. It is a house built by dreamers, and Barret is one of them.

Given the brand’s penchant for working beyond the borders of reality, the premise of this Hermès Women’s Universe event — a showcase of their AW 2018 collection and the reason I am here — seems especially fitting. In a departure from their usual format, the event took the form of a month-long, cinema inspired exhibition at Tokyo’s National Art Center. The immersive experience, titled *Avec Elle*, moves viewers through a series of elaborate vignettes, each a scene in one man’s quest to find the titular Elle. There is a film crew and a beauty crew. Stage lights are strung on scaffolding. A clapperboard snaps, the camera rolls. Between takes, the audience moves through neatly staged piles of merchandise from which — you’re meant to imagine — a costume designer sources their gorgeous supplies. Barret, with the help of filmmaker and curator Laure Flammarion, has created a world within a world, wherein viewers are invited to engage not simply with products, but the Hermès woman herself.

And who, exactly, is the Hermès woman? “She’s a woman who can decide for herself,” Barret declares over lunch, chopsticks in hand, globes of polished stone orbiting her fingers. She leans forward, her piercing blue eyes complimented by the cobalt scarf tied around her neck. Her gaze shifts between a childlike effervescence and the keen, unyielding awareness of a seasoned observer. “You have to know what you want and who you are,” she says firmly.

Barret’s own confidence plays out in her willingness to execute ambitious projects such as *Avec Elle*. The leaps of faith she takes as creative director serve not only to challenge herself, but also to push the boundaries of people’s notions of the brand. In particular, she warns of the dangers of being “an old house” — the trap of being seen as too classical or conservative. For Barret, unpredictability is the key to upending expectations. “We are not a museum,” she says. “We’re not an old house doing the same things over and over again.” Instead, Hermès marries the traditional to the contemporary in unexpected ways. “When someone sees something and says: ‘Is that Hermès? I didn’t know they were so cool.’ I am happy. The mission is achieved.”

Collaborations with artists such as Flammarion are just one vital component in keeping the brand fresh and invigorated. This tradition of curiosity and openness is one that Hermès has long embraced, and it is actively encouraged throughout the house. “It’s not all about us,” Barret explains. “It’s about having new people and new eyes. It’s very natural, but also challenging — because those people also *ask* things.” She cites a 2012 collaboration with Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, who, at the behest of Hermès’s Pierre-Alexis Dumas, transposed his decade-long research into the complex prismatic system of Polaroid film onto silk *carrés*. The fine gradation of Sugimoto’s colours, one bleeding wonderfully into the next, was something Hermès had never attempted before. The house had to develop a new method to accommodate the artist’s work. “It moves us forward,” Barret says of such challenges. “We have to find a way.”



The National Art Center in Tokyo hosted the Hermès Women’s Universe event, showcasing their AW 2018 collection. Titled *Avec Elle*, the event was a month-long, cinema inspired immersive exhibition, created by artistic director Bali Barret, in partnership with French filmmaker Laure Flammarion.

Fear of the unknown is not an affliction Barret suffers from. “I am an agitated person,” she confesses with a laugh. “I always want change. I am famous for that. I have a very critical spirit. I see what’s wrong, and I see what we should do about it. Every day, I am trying to change things.” With the help of each *métier*’s design team, Barret moves the house forever forward. There is room for innovation, play, and personality. There is, however, one Hermès tradition Barret can never get away from: craftsmanship. “Knowhow is not just an idea; it’s a fact,” she states. Quality infuses itself into every Hermès product, no matter the design, and, for Barret, it is not enough for an object to be simply beautiful. It must possess utility, and function, and it must withstand trend and time. “The question I’m always asking myself when creating something is: ‘Will I like it in five years? Will I like it in 10 years?’” Barret remarks. “Making things that we will love forever is the hardest thing to do in design — it’s the ultimate achievement, but it’s difficult. We don’t always succeed.”

It could be argued that Barret succeeds much of the time. Since accepting the position of creative director in 2009, she has overseen celebrated collections and elaborate events. Her good judgment and exceptional taste are attributes that are innate, well honed, and, in many ways, alchemical. “It’s a mix of intuition, analysis, scanning the situation, understanding, and a lot of ...” she pauses, searching for the right words, “being unconscious. Daring.” This readiness to take risks is a process that Barret, decades into her career, understands she must put her trust in. “The creative process takes time. Sometimes I don’t know the answer, and then, I just say: ‘I don’t know.’ I just leave things and then go back to them later. I think in the meantime, and it gets clearer. It’s like a little game, but you have to know how it works, so you don’t feel so anxious about it. When you are very young, you say: ‘It’s not going to happen. What am I going to do?’ You still have those feelings when you’re older, but you know they’re not true. That’s the difference. You just have to wait, and it comes.”



Avec Elle was made up of a series of elaborate sets, equipped with lighting rigs, cameras, actors, and film and beauty crews. Each set depicted a scene on the quest to find the titular Elle.





Prod. 彼女と@HERMES
Roll Scene Take
#1 1 1
Director L. FLAMMARION
Camera D. KHONDJI
Date



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— Bali Barret

