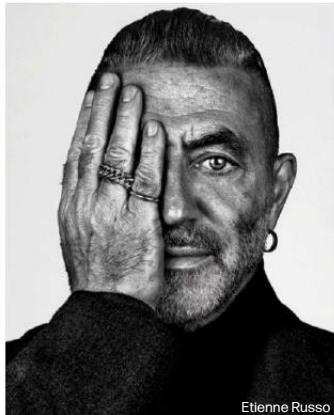
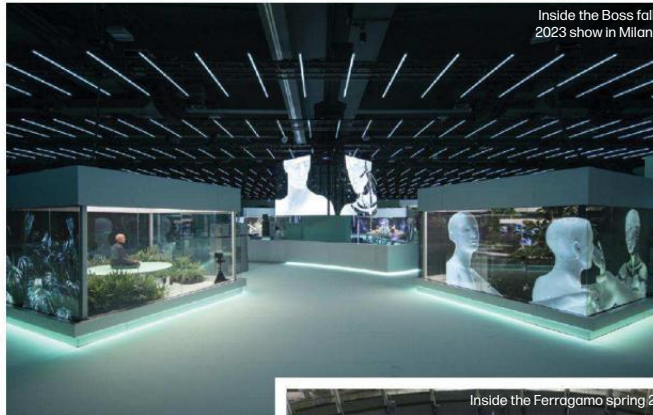


FASHION

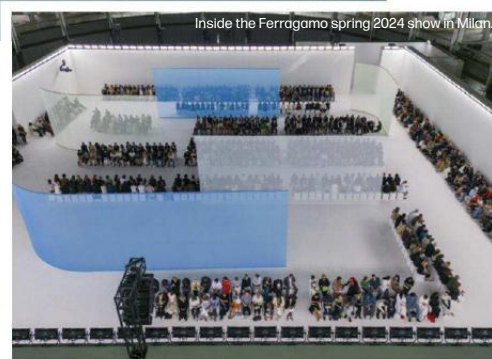
Villa Eugénie's Etienne Russo: The Mastermind Who Brings The Runway Magic to Life



Etienne Russo



Inside the Boss fall 2023 show in Milan.



Inside the Ferragamo spring 2024 show in Milan.

● The international creative agency opened Milan headquarters in 2022 setting foot in the fashion capital after having cemented its reputation in Paris and New York.

BY MARTINO CARRERA

MILAN – Runway fireworks are not only fashion-related: The alchemy that brings to life what's essentially a performance has to do with many elements that contribute to the spectacle, be it a gargantuan production or a demure affair.

As Milan Fashion Week is underway, WWD sat down with Etienne Russo, the mastermind behind international creative agency Villa Eugénie, which opened Milan headquarters in 2022 after having cemented its reputation in New York and Paris and working with such designers as Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, Alber Elbaz, Véronique Nichanian and Dries Van Noten.

Russo established Villa Eugénie in 1997 in Brussels, his hometown, after modeling for Van Noten. Soon thereafter he solidified a creative partnership with the Antwerp-based designer, who was charmed by Russo's multidisciplinary approach to event production and boundless curiosity.

By the time Paris Fashion Week wraps on Oct. 1 Russo will have handled 15 shows between the French capital and Milan. In the latter city, Russo's gigs include the Boss show, to be held at the Palazzo del Senato venue on Wednesday.

"It always starts from the point of view of the collection. That sometimes gives us a direction. And sometimes we leave the point of view of the collection to come back to it a bit later," Russo said in discussing the creative process.

"It's about taking all the elements, as disparate as they can be, and blend them in to bring the collection concept to life via a mix of set design, music, lighting, seat arrangement," he explained.

The thorough process involves multiple exchanges hinged on references and mood boards, "extensive" ones, Russo said.

"We do not design any catwalk, it's more an exchange of images... it's architecture, it's images inspired from contemporary art, from installations... to basically try to get on common ground," he explained.

Russo and the Villa Eugénie team

engage with almost all brand departments, from marketing and communication to design and logistics. Show production is a collective job.

The pre-production stage is perhaps what fascinates him the most. Sourcing materials and props, looking for the right suppliers and seeing the vision slowly come to life is the essence of Russo's job. In sync with the brands' pledge to do business responsibly, Villa Eugénie has become mindful of taking CSR principles into account while sourcing props, Russo noted.

"Then comes the production moment, and that's when, basically, we enter the venue of the show, and we start putting together all the elements that it takes. The sound, the light, the seat, whatever the floor is, whatever the backdrop is, everything. We try to transport as much emotion as possible," Russo said.

No one element is more important than others, he said. "They link up and work together. I think this is when you get the right connection. Everything has to kind of match, and it becomes a puzzle that comes together to have the final picture."

This is true for runway fireworks and demure catwalks alike.

The direction one show setup takes really "depends on the message behind the collection," Russo said. "Some designers don't need to shout out loud. They want to talk about the clothes, and they try to transmit that with lighting, hair, makeup and music, [but] they don't feel the urge to put [a lot] on the set... it's a bit [about] what you have to say and how you want to say it. And I always say that some people want to shout out loud and some others want to whisper. It also depends on the personality of the designer," Russo said.

The Boss show is Villa Eugénie's first for the season.

The last time the German powerhouse showed in Milan – a see now, buy now collection for fall 2023 presented in September last year – Russo was responsible for bringing to life the futuristic office space of a set, nicknamed Techtopia and filled with science lab booths, conference rooms and working stations, with special guest Sophia, a humanoid robot, in attendance.

"Basically [the collection's concept]

was 'back to the office'; it was responding to the post-COVID-19 [era]... when we all worked remotely... When you get a briefing like this, the first thing we did was to define benchmarks of what was done [before] worldwide in fashion... and we could see that there was a lot of retro futurism," Russo said.

"We challenged ourselves. We asked ourselves, 'what will the perfect office look like?' Let's project it in 20 or 30 years from now, and what is the office like where basically everybody will be super happy to go back and enjoy themselves?" he said.

The upcoming Boss show for fall 2024 is bound to be a different affair, Russo explained without giving away too many details.

It was originally planned at a different venue but "sometimes luck doesn't work in your favor," Russo said, and renovation works underway at the former location prevented the brand from securing it. "We then found Palazzo del Senato, still a beautiful place, sure... It's actually where I did my first Boss womenswear show in 2000. And then we had to say, 'OK, how do we deliver the message?'" Russo said.

The process involved thinking out of the box and reconfiguring the space beyond its architectural beauty. From what he says, one shouldn't expect the same gargantuan production of recent Boss runways, but an equally compelling output.

"There is always a little bit of a message behind [show setups], and that's specifically for Boss... but we try to deliver something where the guest can look up and try to sort of push them in a context and emotion they haven't felt yet," Russo said about his creative process.

Villa Eugénie is also a partner of

Ferragamo, where the creative dialogue with creative director Maximilian Davis is different to that at Boss, Russo said. The show takes place on Saturday at the Fiera Milano City fairgrounds.

"It was like we were trying to define elegance and we found a space, a harmonious blend of colors that exude a sense of warmth and richness, subtle elegance. The sound is soft and inviting, a soft and inviting atmosphere," Russo explained.

"You can call that minimal, because it's essential, but still within that... we just have what we need. I think there's the warmth, there's a welcoming [feel], there's intimacy, there's like all the elements that have to support a collection for Ferragamo done by Maximilian," Russo said.

Show setups can evolve and change drastically over the relatively short timeframe between the brief and final execution, with final tweaks and fixes implemented until the very last minute. It can be lights, color, seat arrangements – even the venue.

Take, for instance, the men's spring 1997 Dries Van Noten show, one that Russo remembers fondly both for the painstaking work poured into envisioning and bringing to life a Moroccan tent camp and for

the disruption caused by pouring rain that flooded the venue, scuppering plans to show at the foot of the Eiffel Tower in Paris on July 4.

"I had searched lamps and painted tables, carpets, every detail was coming from Morocco. It was really, really beautiful on paper," Russo remembered. "The night before it started drizzling a little bit, nothing much. So I went to sleep, and at 5 a.m. security called me... I woke up everybody on the team to get to the spot, and it was a disaster," he said.

"We tried for three hours to save this drama... and then at some point I stopped and I said, it's never gonna work. I had to find a solution," Russo explained.

He got to convince a manager at the Espace Eiffel-Branly nearby to use their tents and moved manually in a human chain every prop in just half a day.

"The show went on, we had big applause, not only for the collection, but also because people understood the kind of performance and the amazing human chain," he said.

"I started bursting in tears... I grieved at that time, I learned that you don't only need a B plan. You need a B and a C plan," Russo said.

Sometimes it's the designers changing their minds.

"It's like with most of the designers, when we have a show in September, there's always an evolution when they come back from the holidays, there's kind of, like, a bit of navigation" to be done, he said.

"Even if we have renderings that are as precise and as close as possible, sometimes you see them and you think it's a picture of the show, but despite that sometimes it doesn't have the same response that you have when you are in a three-dimensional room," Russo explained.

Although Russo has worked with marquee designers throughout his career, including Martin Margiela for about 10 years, there's one designer he wished he had collaborated with: Alexander McQueen.

"He was pushing the boundaries of what's possible. And Martin [Margiela] had something similar but in another way. Alexander [McQueen] sometimes was shocking people with elements that made people think," Russo said. "I think that would add something to fashion that sometimes we are missing now."