

# RUNWAY SUCCESS

Robert Such talks to French lighting designer and artist Thierry Dreyfus



**W**hen you work with light, you work for somebody to feel this light,' says French lighting designer and visual artist Thierry Dreyfus. 'They feel it with their eyes and they feel it with their skin.'

Over the years, his growing interest in light has driven him along a career path from assistant lighting designer at the Strasbourg Opera to the creator of imaginative fashion lighting for Yves Saint Laurent, Helmut Lang, John Galiano and other top designers in Paris, Milan, London and New York. And over the past decade, he has also explored the interaction of light, materials and people in his art, product designs and on various interior lighting design projects.

Now based in Paris, Dreyfus's career in lighting began in the early Eighties when he began working as an assistant lighting designer to Hervé Audibert in the theatre and opera in Strasbourg. A change in career



**Rodolphe Menudier shoe shop in Paris where floor-level fluorescents light customers' own shoes for comparison (left); lighting for a Rick Owens fashion show**

direction, and an important turning point in his life, came in 1985, when US fashion designer Patrick Kelly hired him to light one of his collections. Dreyfus left his theatre 'family', entered the fashion world and 'became a renegade', he says.

Although initially working with light 'as an element of the scenery', Dreyfus says he soon developed a passion for it. 'I felt the need for sharing with people this substance by itself, both its fragility and its incredible force and its beauty. Light became for me a real material.'

Planned months in advance, the lighting of fashion runways requires close attention to 'the interaction between skin, clothes and volume', says Dreyfus. He also has to find a way to express the designer's concept 'while respecting the eye of the audience, and the technical constraints imposed by photographers and cameramen'. Even though digital photography is slowly taking

over, film photographers must know what type of film to load in their cameras. And the responsibility for making models' skin look appealing lies with the make-up artist and the lighting designer. 'In the fashion business, it's about the models,' he says.

In the late Nineties, Dreyfus started to branch out into product design, architectural lighting and the creation of light-based artworks and installations to allow him to express his own ideas about light. When working on interior design projects such as shops or restaurants, he still applies the lesson he learned on the catwalk: 'I try to flatter the skin of the people to make them feel good.'

Dreyfus has been involved in lighting three Parisian boutiques. Six years ago, the French designer Christophe Pillet commissioned him to light a new Rodolphe Menudier shoe shop in Paris. The lighting had to both enhance the shopping

Dreyfus used Syncrolite 5kW xenon lamps in an installation to mark the reopening of the Grand Palais in Paris



**'THERE WAS A WAVE OF MOVEMENT OF LIGHT FROM THE CENTRE TO THE OUTSIDE OF THE GRAND PALAIS'**

experience and help define the luxury brand identity. The result was a black lacquer, brushed stainless steel, slate and crocodile leather interior lit by a mix of warm and cool light. Dreyfus installed floor-level fluorescents to imitate daylight and to illuminate the shopper's own shoes, so that they could compare their own footwear with the products on display.

When lighting another shop for fashion company APC, Dreyfus designed the lighting 'to create a depth when you see the clothes on a rack'. Hanging on rails near the wall, the clothes were backlit from above and below. To achieve the effect, he mounted angled mirrors on the walls to bounce light from lamps installed along the wall base on to the clothes. As in his fashion

show lighting, Dreyfus managed harsh shadows by producing a diffuse light throughout the shop interior.

A frequent traveller, Dreyfus continually observes the subtle variations in natural light in cities around the world. Parisian sunsets have, for instance, been a valuable muse. His admiration of the evening light inspired a neon artwork in 2000, the lighting for a Martine Sitbon fashion show and, in partnership with acoustic artist Frédéric Sanchez, prompted him to construct one of his largest installations so far – a colourful lightwork to mark the reopening of the historic Grand Palais in Paris.

Using Syncrolite 5kW xenon lamps, Dreyfus illuminated the museum's voluminous interior in shades of amber,

lavender, pink, blue and red. 'There was a wave of movement of light from the centre to the outside of the Grand Palais,' he explains. 'Then all became slowly red, beams reflecting in the mirrors, so when people were walking they had monochrome paintings around them. Then the red turned to white, and the beams hitting the mirrors went back to the sky through the glass roof.'

Dreyfus wanted people to suspend their thoughts and to appreciate the space and the light. The reflections from 18 mirrors created a feeling of serenity, he says.

He is not given to lengthy explanations when discussing his work. 'Light is not words,' he says. 'If I really knew how to speak about it, I would not need to express myself with light' □