



Storetelling

Merchandise seems secondary in GENTLE MONSTER's eyewear stores, which set the stage for retail theatre.

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Each of Gentle Monster's outlets has a different interior design, including the Shanghai location, which is inspired by an artisan's workshop.

WITH ESTIMATED REVENUES of US\$250 million in 2016, South Korean luxury eyewear brand Gentle Monster continues to defy expectations for performance in an industry at once oversaturated with start-ups yet firmly hinged to classic business models. From the outset, a mere five years ago, Gentle Monster secured its place in the market by challenging the predominance of frames constructed exclusively for Western facial contours, while offering a broad range of looks that catered to both traditional and avant-garde tastes, as well as the streamlined customer-service policy initiated by competitor Warby Parker.

Under the auspices of creative director Hankook Kim, Gentle Monster's ground-breaking retail concepts sustain the firm's disruptive force. Underpinning each of

its stores is an immersive, multisensory art installation that boldly announces a unifying theme. One example is Platform, which marks the Hong Kong flagship and refers to the city's intersection of diverse cultures. Another is Secret Neighbours, a concept that turns several of Gentle Monster's national locations into the jigsaw pieces of a mystery story. Such manifestations provide a clue to the brand's subtle evolution, which includes a perhaps prophetic solution to a two-pronged problem: how can physical stores remain relevant in a digital age, and how can they best appeal to millennials?

Inaugurated in 2014, the Quantum Project in Gentle Monster's Hongdae Seoul location is the brand's most radical experiment to date. The store's ground floor welcomed shoppers with a new »



Courtesy of Gentle Monster

The Artisan From Manufacture to Merchandise

The Artisan, Gentle Monster's Shanghai location, is a mythologized atelier that adapts to both its local context and the universal human qualities of creation and handcraft. At ground-floor level, products seem secondary to their environment. Merchandise only begins to appear in a more distinct and recognizable way on the upper floor. After entering, shoppers feel as though they are inside an art installation, curated as a tangible brand narrative unrelated to eyewear.

theme every 25 days for over two years. Among its bizarre, otherworldly guises were a post office-cum-greenhouse, a crystal palace of mirror fragments, and an urban hotel that invited customers to take a nap. The concluding installation, *Final Symphony*, was presented this past autumn. The changeability of the space presumably encouraged people to revisit it. An appreciation of the physical space gave the store a value beyond its commercial function.

Though static in theme, Gentle Monster's latest incarnation – The Artisan, in Shanghai – is no less visionary in terms of its breadth of imagination. Occupying the first two floors of a building in the city's French Concession, a vast landscape of rustic materials juxtaposed in various states of refinement alludes to different eras of craftsmanship in Shanghai, a hub symbolizing Chinese prosperity. Products displayed here – think of the space as the atelier of a hypermodern Hephaestus – have an ancillary presence within the themed spaces. It's on the upper floor that the retail experience guides visitors through a surreal, mythical procession, from manufacture to merchandise, with the latter cyclically present as models for the artisan's future inspiration.

It is no secret that bricks-and-mortar retail spectacles are becoming ever more necessary for consumers that demand an 'experience' to draw them away from the comfort of home and the convenience of apps. What's equally obvious is the degree to which Western designers view Asia as a laboratory for such concepts. Even the most flamboyant or otherwise art-for-art's-sake interiors are, however, strongly linked to fixtures or fitting rooms that reveal the function of the space.

Hermès' recent concepts – by StoreyStudio in Seattle and by HEAD Genève students in Geneva – come to mind. Both attempt to supplement or enhance the editorial content that today's consumers are accustomed to finding in online stores. The Hermès outlets entice shoppers with interactive displays or even connect to the devices they want visitors to forget about as they move through tangible space. Standing out prominently in this category is Nike, with its visions of 'future retail' worldwide: consider the brand's Amsterdam flagship, with its multimedia demonstration of the Free Outsole's technology by Ink Associates and Random Studio. Some brands try to evade these pitfalls by repurposing retail space as an art gallery, perhaps in collaboration with

local artists. In such cases, the experience can feel secondary to the product and the brand – and the concept no more than a means of harnessing social and cultural capital.

Gentle Monster's stores, on the other hand, appear to shatter current retail norms. What if a retail space could offer an aesthetic and cultural experience that doesn't have to serve any of the aforementioned ends? What if a brand was not equivalent to its products, existing instead as an autonomous entity with multiple alter-egos? Envision a store where objects, rooms and entire floors are empty or almost empty of merchandise: a place where imagery and technology are seldom used to heighten the experience of products that the visitor will eventually stumble upon. 'Handcrafted' and 'artisan' – buzzwords that describe the requirements of consumers who ask for detailed product information – have little to do with the workshops in which lenses are ground or the materials from which they are made. Today these words refer to 'the pure emotion and thoughts of a master artisan and his atelier' and a possible connection to a product's sociocultural context.

At The Artisan in Shanghai, each part of the interior tells a unique story with a sensory eloquence that combines historically universal aspects of the human condition – memory, movement, meditation, mundanity – with the immediate spatial and temporal setting. Adapting to an increasingly unpredictable retail climate begins neither with a product nor with how it's displayed and marketed. It is a matter of drawing the outside world in, not in actively seeking to infiltrate it. The process prioritizes brand identity, which should be experienced tangibly as a reflection of the shopper and as a playful distortion of reality. The enigma sells itself as easily as the products do. ●

gentlemonster.com

The Shanghai store has the look and feel of an art gallery rather than a commercial space. The products themselves have an ancillary presence.

