

RETAIL

# Kengo Kuma provides a sensorial experience in the age of e-commerce



SDL Studio

**MILAN** – Despite having 81 years of experience under its belt, Valextra doesn't take a traditional approach to retail. Every year in late December, the Milanese producer of leather goods closes its Via Manzoni flagship for an 'inner facelift' – a radical transformation that's unveiled in January. The metamorphosis takes place under the direction of Valextra CEO Sara Ferrero. 'We are a historical company,' she says, 'but we're evolving and changing each year. The store should evolve as well.'

Taking on a role previously entrusted to the likes of Martino Gamper and Snarkitecture, Kengo Kuma is behind the latest year-long installation. Arranged throughout the ground floor of the 250-m<sup>2</sup> space are panels of floor-to-ceiling Lebanon cedar that resemble a dense forest. Mirrors that cover walls and ceiling add depth and a sense of perpetuity to the crafted woodland. In the eyes of Kengo Kuma, these key elements are 'enough'.

Instead of adding horizontal shelving to display products alongside one another, the architect spliced each wooden plank with a metal sheet that supports a single handbag. Although seemingly random, the composition of wooden sections – which are placed diagonally – affords the optimal distribution of light from the store's ceiling-mounted fixtures. 'Wood provides both tactility and the rich scent of nature,' says Kuma. 'In the age of e-commerce, these sensorial elements are important for physical experiences. I think the approach of a yearly facelift will prove relevant for the future of retail and its ever-changing social demands.'

Kuma was drawn to 'the fact that the commission was not about renewing the entire store and creating something permanent; it was an intervention in an existing space. You can be more experimental if the fit-out will last just one year, instead of ten or more.' – KH  
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