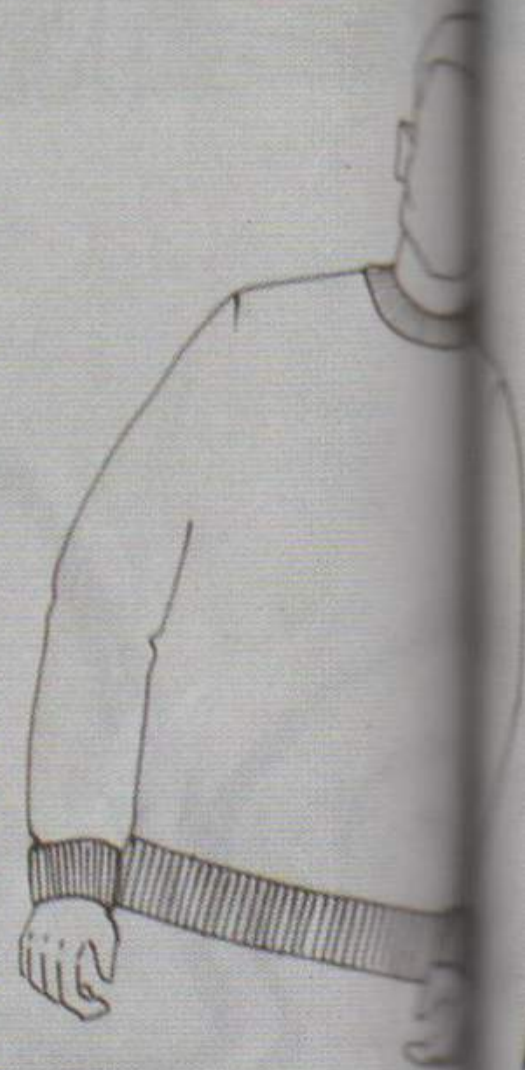
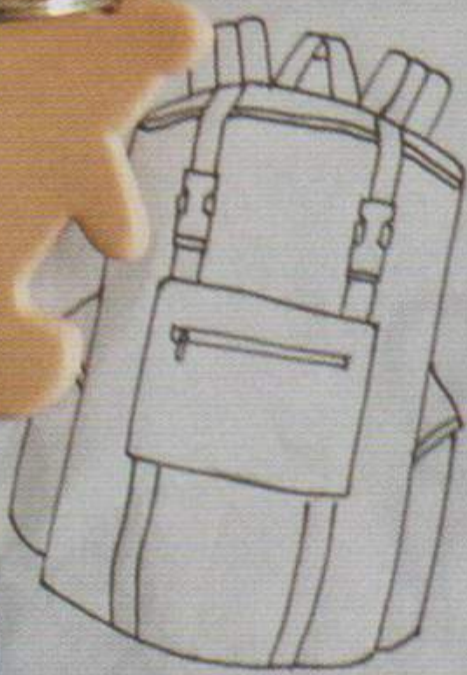
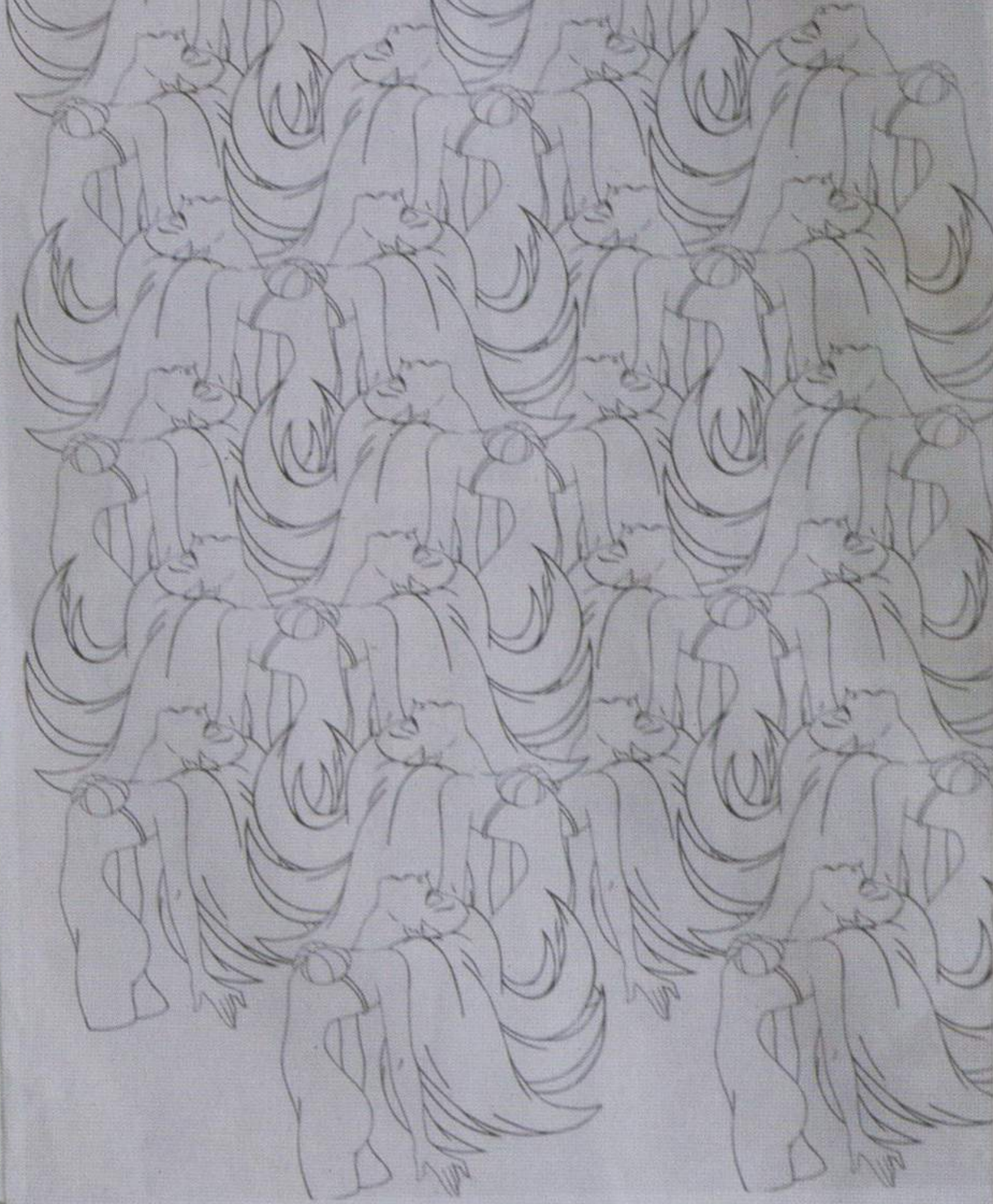
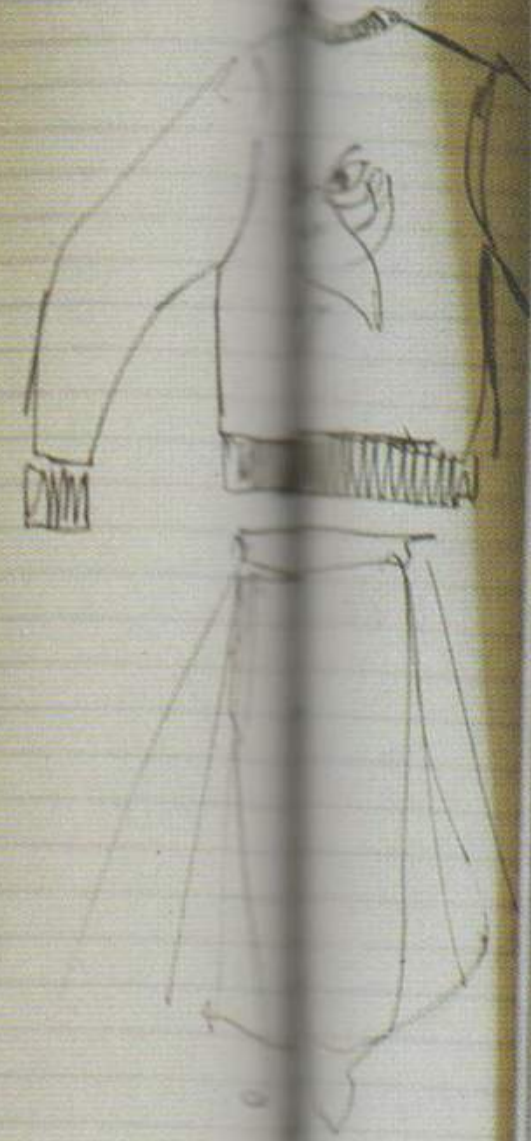




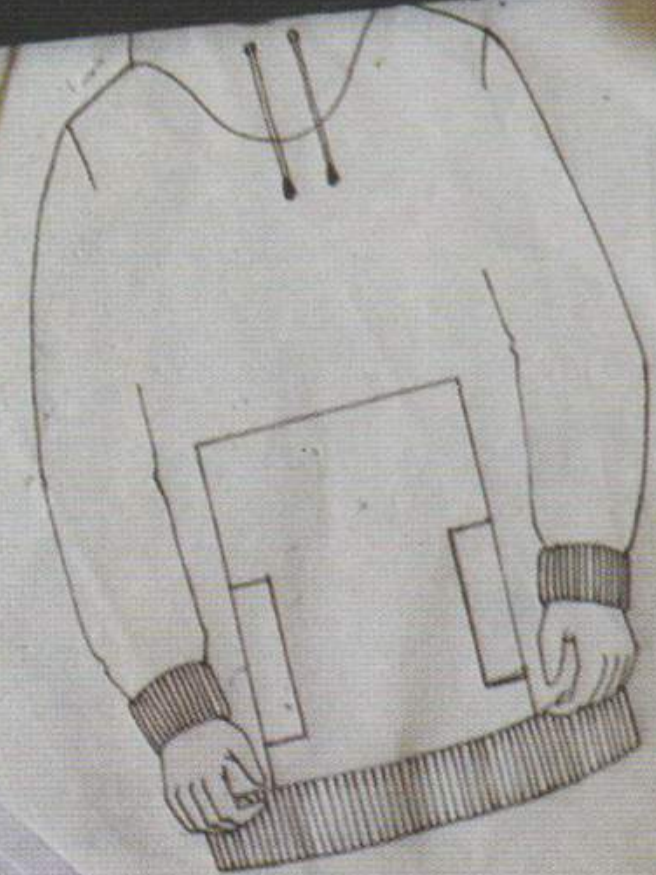
# Bobby Abley, Disney's Tattooed Prince

Hello Mr. talks to the London-based designer about finding fairytales in fashion

Interviewed by Christopher Klimovski  
Photography by Kenneth Lam



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From the time between his childhood in Scarborough, North Yorkshire to the moment he landed in London at age 19 to work with famed designer Jeremy Scott, Bobby Abley had a singular motivation driving him toward the “Magic Kingdom” of the fast-paced world of fashion.

“Fantasy,” Bobby says. “I started to realize the fantasy you can create around a collection.”

For many people outside of the fashion world, the idea of designing for the runway has a certain aspirational quality you can only equate with something as unattainable as pop stardom or being named Princess of Nova Scotia. It’s fashion’s high-profile clientele and aura of extravagance that give it this otherworldly quality, the “fantasy” that at once draws us to it and holds us at bay.

For Bobby, this distance never existed.

“I found myself at a sewing machine trying to make my own jeans when I was 14 or 15,” he says. The first garment he created was a pair of twisted Levi’s jeans he desperately wanted but could not afford, so he took matters into his own hands and made them from scratch. Encouraged by his parents, his creativity grew, and his technique improved, and the teen seamster began moving toward a full-time career in fashion, never questioning that it was where he belonged. “It was a no-brainer,” he says.

It’s easy to get lost when you’re young and trying to turn your dreams into a full-time job. This is especially true in the world of fashion. For Bobby, that aspiration became a possibility when he earned the opportunity to work with Jeremy Scott. He put his head down and didn’t stop working until that fantasy became—well—more fantasy. Despite acknowledging that a little antagonism in the design world helps creative flow, he humbly thinks of other designers as peers rather than competitors. This placid mindset and

playful approach to fashion permeates not just his work, but his worldview.

“I feel like I always related to fictional characters more than real people, especially when I was younger,” he says. “When you’re young, your mind stays open to thinking all these things are or could be real. Maybe my mind just never closed on that.”

Bobby says he wants people to wear his fantasy, a concept that almost perfectly represents him as a designer, as well as his recent Fall 2015 collection. These looks are inspired by *The Little Mermaid*, at once cartoonish and dark, humorous and macabre.

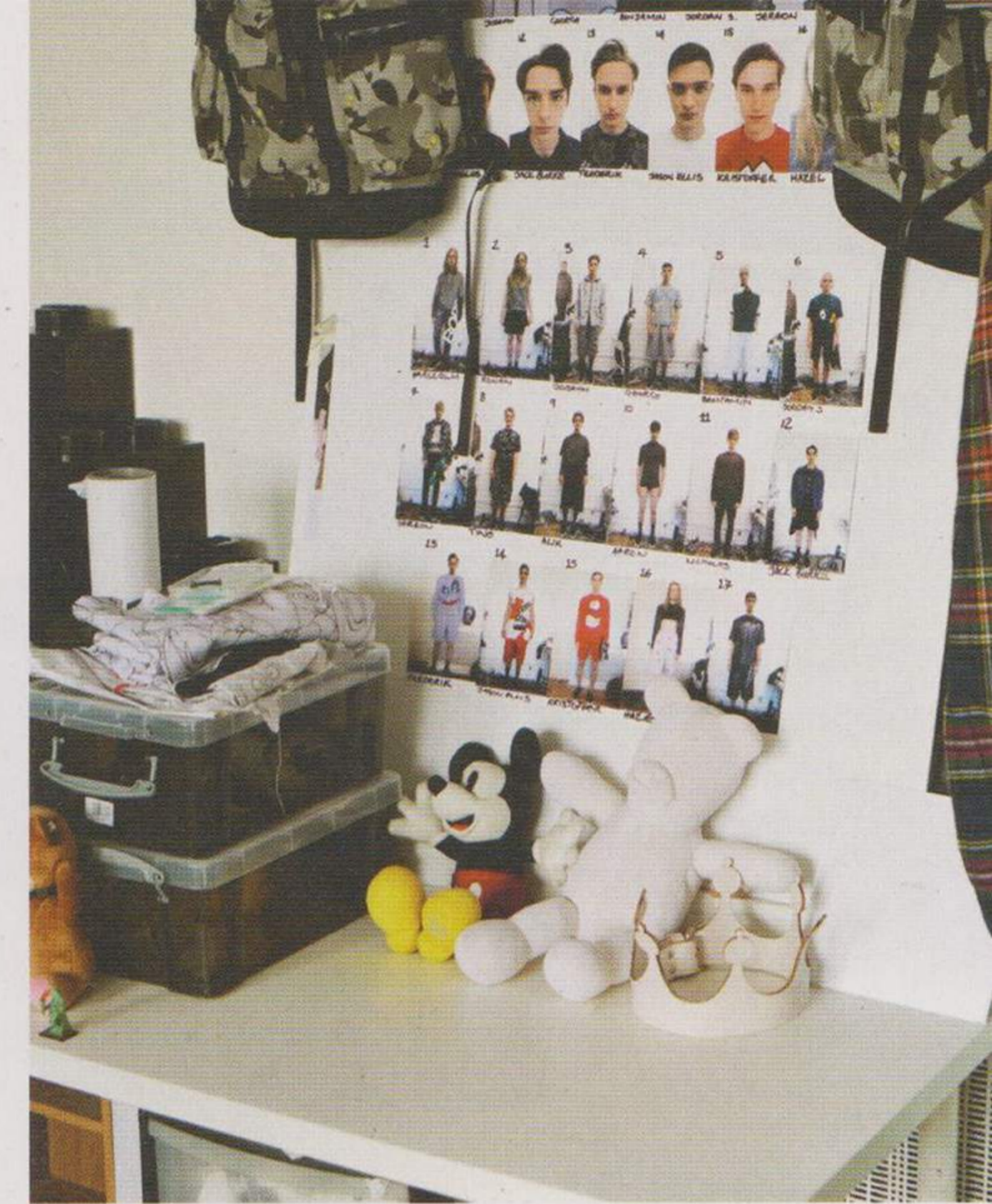
“I like to feel nostalgic and revisit that feeling of adventure—that everything is possible,” he says. “Disney movies kind of gave that to me. So I like to keep it alive in my work.”

Bobby’s inspiration, particularly with *The Little Mermaid*, comes organically. His clothes don’t play games. They present themselves and their inspiration exactly as they are (e.g. a sweatshirt printed with the entire face of Ursula the sea witch).

Ursula paraphernalia is littered across his Soho studio and throughout his sketches. She has become one of Bobby’s muses. His attention to the Disney diva, as well as to Ariel, Sebastian, et al, has created a lot of bustle in media coverage, possibly because these characters are recognizable and invoke that deep sense of nostalgia Bobby talks about. It also goes without saying that these icons serve as inspiration to more than just Bobby; a large segment of the gay population resoundingly adores Disney and its villainesses, whether Ursula, Cruella, or most recently, Maleficent, as played by Angelina Jolie, with her “Born This Way” cheekbones and an accompanying Lana Del Rey anthem to boot. Ursula is, and Disney villainesses are, natural and unquestionable gay icons.

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**Favorite pastime activities?**

Disneyland and sleep.

**Favorite line from *The Little Mermaid*?**

Oh good question. There are a few, but I'll go with "The human world is a mess. Life under the sea is better than anything they got up there." Because it's very true and we should all be mermaids.

**Which Disney prince would win your heart?**

Prince Eric for sure. He's the most handsome one and his palace is right on the beach.

**What keeps you grounded?**

My dad is really good at giving me a reality check. Once in a while my head will be in the sky and he brings me back down to earth.

**What role does social media play in your life?**

Do you want to show a side to your life that is not afforded through your work?

I just post what I like. It's a mix of things I love, both personal and work. It allows people to understand my brand more and creates a connection to it. It reminds them that they are not just clothes—there is a little person behind it.

**If you could have a coffee or a cigarette with anybody, alive, dead, or fictional, who would it be?**

I do love a coffee and a cigarette. Fictional I would say Ursula because I think she'd be fabulous. Dead, I would say Marilyn Monroe, because there is so much conspiracy around her tragic death. I would ask her what really happened and give her a hug.





But gay iconography has little to do with how Bobby gets inspired. These are totems of his childhood, and his personality plays into his designs more than the recognizable characters do. This specific collection is somewhat cheeky, even mischievous. Bobby isn't concerned with playing by the rules of gay culture or fashion conventions.

"Skatewear" is often used to describe Bobby's Fall 2015 collection, which also comprises slouchy shorts, custom skateboards, Vans, sweatshirts, and prints made from copyrighted material. And might we say, we are not at all complaining about the occasional male crop top. Bobby's obsessions are referential but nuanced. Though Disney is already a household name, the reappropriation of the characters gives the collection a voice of its own.

"When I'm designing I don't like to go out of my way to find inspiration," says Bobby. "I get inspired at random times by random things. If I like it I'll expand on it; if not, I ignore it, but I do like to absorb as much as possible."

When he made the move to LA with jeweler Alan Crocetti, then his boyfriend, now his fiancé, they supported each other creatively and emotionally. Their mutual dedication to their work helped steady Bobby in a daunting new world as he prepared for his debut on the runway.

"[Alan] was the one person that made all the bullshit tolerable," Bobby says. The young designers found a common goal in fashion and provided support and calm for one another. And though breaking into fashion was a challenge for both of them, Bobby and his soon-to-be husband avoid letting their work life interfere with their personal life. Alan only inspires Bobby to be more and more himself instead of mucking through the politics of design:

"I'm quite a selfish designer, so when I have the theme, I think, 'Okay, what would I like to wear based on this?'" Much like the twisted pair of Levi's he created as a teenager, Bobby's clothes are projections of his own desires, and as viewers we're filled with awe and reminded of our own youthful desires. They're like seeing *The Little Mermaid* again for the first time. These icons speak for themselves and for the magic of things we knew as children.

"Someone once told me, 'an artist paints the same painting their whole life,'" he says. "I think in some ways, I'm always trying to tell the same story, but I'm getting it out in different ways each season." ●



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