

# UBIKWIST

#4

Harmony



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DESMOND, 1983  
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# DESMOND CADOGAN

## will always find a way

Desmond Cadogan by Gary Robinson  
 Portrait Robert Mapplethorpe  
 Photographs Christian Kilrain Carter Coleman  
 Styling Giannie Couji

### "Black Face" as told by Carlos Taylor

It is Halloween, and we are in our apartment near Père Lachaise Cemetery. And Desmond talks me into going to our model agency party at the Les Bains Douches in blackface. The Paris fashion scene of the 1980's pigeonholed Black models into playing stereotypical roles or simply didn't hire them. These murky practices were often discussed with casting directors and objections to their "NO BLACKS" policies were openly voiced.

Desmond's plan of attack on this particular night was of visual protest: faces covered in black shoe polish, yet resplendent in black tie and white gloves. Upon entering this renowned boîte de nuit, we relished the reaction of the fashion set. Two Black men in blackface? What would anyone dare say, while we stood tall in defiance of a system of racial bias? That Desmond was this brave, this bold, best illustrates his willingness to confront racist tropes and to disrupt the status quo. This early act of transgression would foreshadow the political activism we would see more of from Desmond in the years to come.

Two Black men in blackface?  
 What would anyone dare say,  
 while we stood tall in defiance  
 of a system of racial bias?

### "DESMOND brown" as told by Connie Fleming

Mondays were never my thing, yet Monday it was – and morning at that... phone ringing, roommate yelling PHONE!!!

**Me:** "WHAT?!"

**Desmond (unbothered):** "Girl get outta bed. We're going to Paris."

**Me:** "For what?"

**Desmond (cooly):** "Westwood Bitch! Come over. We have to find a place to stay."

Awake, something from the past week came back through the haze... "Desmond brown!"

... Got dressed – or was I still dressed? Whatever! Awake enough to remember to bring two very important pennies. Ms. Vivienne Westwood requested a quite specific hue to dye a suit to match Desmond's skin to perfection. OK for the monochromatic chic... the task fell to me to find the example. Hence the pennies. The very color of DESMOND. Brown.

Now at his flat, barely had I knocked, the door flew open.

**Desmond (out of nowhere):** "Girl! What's the name of the guy? He lives for you? He has a place in Paris."

**Me (stumped, I wait a beat):** "No, he lives for You, and I can't remember his name."

... spouting forth a list of names... Nothing. No hits.

**Desmond:** "Never mind, we'll figure it out when we get there."

And before I had a chance to ask about the how and when, we were landing at Charles de Gaulle and sped off to our fittings. As we rode along reminiscing, he teased me about my first season for Mugler. He was my champion, as he was to become for Vivienne. My champion, chatting me up, so that I'd be booked for the show. But what I remember most was how he took me under his wing, gently guiding, and making sure my nervousness didn't get the best of me. He made sure that I met all the right people and was seen at all the right places.



After the show, I realized we still had no place to stay, and Desmond was nowhere in sight. So I hightailed it backstage, only to find him holding court and demonstrating the proper form of an arabesque. All the while, he was discussing the important events and parties to attend.

"But Des... We don't have a place to stay?!"

"Yes, we do. And I changed our return date! Girl, you have to see Thierry - be introduced to Pierre et Gilles. And we have to attend the party of the season!"

With plan in place, we were off to set Paris ablaze.

As I sit here recalling these memories, I feel an overwhelming pride at his fearless, go get 'em spirit, and his largeness of heart. He's taken all of his incredible talents as dancer, model, muse, and promoter and let them blossom into an unstoppable force of political community activism. He is always at the ready - to be a champion for a better world as he had once championed me.

DESMOND brown. What a brilliant, sumptuous color to be.

### "Facets of Cadogan" as told by Rainer Fetting

"A mixture of personal charisma and physical characteristics like his lean, tall, and muscular body. I certainly was attracted to African Americans when I came to live in New York... even before I met Desmond."

"Something felt more familiar to me than with White Americans, for perhaps cultural or historical reasons. They were people I better identified with."

"When first introduced to Desmond, I was a bit intimidated by both his beauty and charm, but of course that must have been exactly why I wanted to paint him."

"In my mind, it is not just about painting the physiognomy like the way one learns in art school. I don't believe in any perfect right way to paint somebody. I'm not one to analyze or describe my own work. But I do have ideas, and intentions, and a clear direction that I want to go in."

"Desmond has the ability to create an atmosphere that makes artwork possible."

"I guess there exists something like an intellectual, mental exchange between painter and model. And they must have antennae for one another."

"After working with Desmond for 30 years already, there must be more to this tension that holds it together. A mutual inspiration? It's the phenomena that exists between the two of us that's just seems to work."

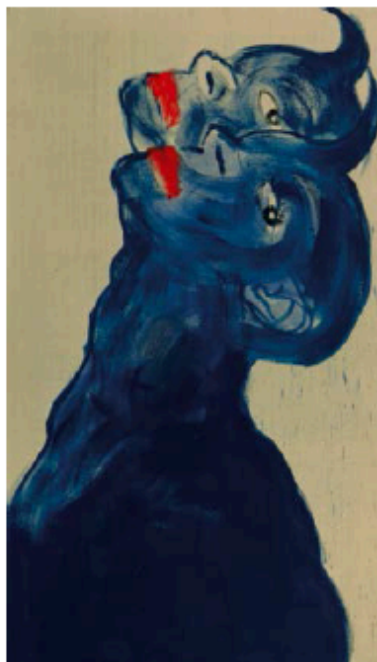
"Our relationship was not always easy with different cultural backgrounds. There must be psychological events in our childhood that we have in common... lots of moments when together we burst out, breaking the tension with crazy laughter."

"In my eyes, Desmond had a great special way of expressing himself in a way that is unique to him. This surprised me and impresses me still."

### "Misfit Isle" as told by Kier Kirby a.k.a. Lady Miss Kier

I can't remember the first time I met him. It was over 25 years ago, but I'm certain he is a permanent member on the welcoming committee to the island of the misfit kids. I do remember throwing a party at Trax with Richard Alvarez named Delovely: Lil' acid House on the Prairie in 1988... I was most excited to project a multimedia show. Dmitri was Djing, and it wasn't crowded. In fact, it was an utter flop. But Desmond grabbed my hand, and we started skipping across the dance floor... Others joined in... like some modern version of a conga line... skipping in an infinite loop of joy, like 4-year-olds who were accidentally locked in a candy store. We also elevated Mugler Runway together as Paris was burning. And, we chanted, "Bernie was robbed!" in front of the DNC in Philly and at the Gay Pride Parade, hand-in-hand, skipping again - this time in broad daylight. Back in New York after a decade in London, I ran into Desmond on 14th and 5th Ave. We started catching up, and before you knew it we were still talking 3 hours later! Desmond remains in my heart, keeping it warm, with his beauty, brains, and ability to see the bigger picture... I'll never let him go!

"We didn't come to be shady... we came to be fierce."



DOUBLE PORTRAIT, 1989  
PAINTING BY RAINER FETTING  
PICTURE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## "Runaway Desmond" as told by Gary Robinson

Perhaps it was the growth spurt... Somewhere in Ottawa, Canada, a transplanted Jamaican family had a son, a Black boy of exceptional brains and looks. In early adolescence, our Desmond Cadogan experienced something odd. His body, although rangy, lanky, but not too much above average for his age, began to physically hurt. Questions arose about this new strange development; the reasoned answer, it's a growth spurt.

We join this story here. Shooting past the 6-foot mark, along with his pants and shoes, something else started to seem too small. Still quite young, 14 or so, he became tall enough to see past any worldview that he may have held for himself, prior to his now a full-foot-taller self on to a horizon for a future self, topping off at 6 ft 4 inches.

Unprepared, he was nevertheless thrust forward into life's adventures all the same with both wanderlust and a grasping curiosity blossoming in this man-child's gut. The idea that such fine physical attributes were near perfect for classical ballet, fully flowered. This notion appealed to his sensibilities.

Combined with a Caribbean families' reverence for hard work, a rigorous education provided him with a somewhat profound sense of himself. It was perhaps a bigger heaping of self-worth for one so young than may be thought wise – for good or ill. This would support many bold leaps to come.

**"WE  
DIDN'T  
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WE CAME  
TO BE  
FIERCE."**

He was a reasonably happy boy, sitting smack in the center of a brood of 6 siblings and half siblings. Yet this particular family had been through a divorce, with the father remarried in the frosty north and the mother in the Bronx. So Desmond's life from early on was spent bouncing between two cities: NY and Ottawa, Canada.

Growing up, his same-sex loving inclinations couldn't have done much but create a sense of difference, an awesomeness often perceived by boys and girls with the realizations they aren't the same as others. So, into the wind went our Desmond. This rashness guided him – the result of the insensible, fearless decisions of young people too naive for the cares and worries that prudence provides.

"How to make a runaway." Enter Kenny Baird, an artist. He found Desmond asleep, on a park bench. Precocity and adventuresomeness could be blamed for having brought on this self-imposed homelessness. Now all of fifteen years old, brought in from the cold, he was shown up-close & personal what the life of an artist is, the process and rituals of someone who creates art. Observing an artist at work, he never suspected that this would greatly inform many events in his life to come.

New York seemed the natural and obvious next destination. The call or desire for a larger life took form, like the Sirens from the rocks calling to Odysseus. And just as that other ancient traveler was seduced, so too was Desmond. He was filled with self-doubt, and exuberance, and overconfidence – a heady cocktail often drunk by adolescent males overburdened as they are with exploding hormones and developing brains, struggling to catch up. He pointed his nose south. And, with that, lit out...

(Warning: artistic license incoming) I can imagine the internal monologue along these lines: "...Looks? Check. Brains? Check. Confidence? Check. Dream? Check. Youthful bravado and precocity? Check and check. Cash? Hmm... We'll sort that out later."

Thus armored, ready to travel... a scholarship from Dance Theatre of Harlem fortuitously proffered and off our young Desmond went to conquer the world of classical ballet in New York City at aged 17. A year later... another scholarship earned, the Joffrey Ballet School. HEY NOW! With a launching pad for a serious career from just about the most prestigious company in NY, a rise to stardom seemed a real possibility.

(Sidebar) It was about 1982 when Desmond and I met, both of us barely on either side of 20. I was a recent transplant to New York from San Francisco, by way of Tokyo, and an editor with an East Village style magazine. We became fast friends. These were fast times: nightclubs, fashion, music, drugs, sex – all props for the scene in the show we were living. Quickly I recognized that Desmond needed to be in one of our magazine photo shoots. Out of all the cute kids we were able to wrangle to our set, I knew that this one was born to be in front of a camera. I may have been amongst the first to see that, though I admit I was neither alone nor prescient enough to grasp the flash of light that I'd just befriended. This was borne out soon – in very short order – by the many photographers that were about to catch Desmond fever. Robert Mapplethorpe and Marcus Leatherdale were some of the most well-known, just to name a couple.

Meanwhile... in the ballet world, then as now, men of color were virtually unheard of as soloists, except in companies started by and for people of color: Alvin Ailey, Ballet Nacional de Cuba or The National Ballet of China, to name a few. The America Ballet Theater (ABT) or the Joffrey exhibited little interest in talent that was not Eurocentric, an absence not lost on Desmond. But this would not dissuade him. Talent and potential were never in question; the torturous discipline didn't scare him – not at all, even when practical reality held little guarantee of a reasonable shot at his dream. By the way, some 30 years later, we have yet to see a Black man permitted to dance in these companies and only in recent years have we seen a woman of African descent.

Then there was Paul Bridgewater, a divining rod of sorts for nascent talent. Rising art stars such as Peter McGough, David McDermott, and Mark Kostabi were all mentored at Mr. Bridgewater's scene-making gallery. The East Village was just becoming known as a petri dish for new art. Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, Ann Magnuson, Eric Fischl, Rammellzee, and Futura 2000 began to take their place in the firmament of rising stars. Mr. Bridgewater met and was duly taken by the charms of our dear Desmond. And with that, he was then ushered even further into the bosom of an exploding art community. Thus began his twin trajectory – that of model and muse.





DESMOND CADOGAN HIGH HEELS, 2016  
PAINTING BY RAINER FETTING  
PICTURE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

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Robert Mapplethorpe had started to photograph Desmond just before the National Endowment for the Arts scandal surrounding the photographer's controversial work. The sensationalism of the scandal catapulted Mapplethorpe's work onto the world's stage. Amidst this kerfuffle and hoopla combined with Basquiat also asking him to pose, Desmond was set to ascend as well.

In a curious twist of fate, the Pyramid Club held a go-go boy contest; Desmond entered and won. The prize? The cover of a literary magazine, a "zine" actually, called *Straight to Hell*, recounting illicit, raunchy gay liaisons. It was photographed by Christopher Makos, legendary *Interview* magazine lensman. With this coup, Desmond saw his life shift into higher gear; his presence moved further and further into the crosshairs of the culture shifters.

An injury in ballet class did little to deter Desmond. Following a Pilates session, a chance encounter with Jean Paul Gaultier led to his first booking in a major show, Gaultier's first and only show in the US. As a result, he was invited to Europe where many major shows followed – Yves Saint Laurent, Issey Miyake, Comme des Garçons, Thierry Mugler, and many more storied houses. There was no waiting in the wings for our Desmond.

On his return from Paris, Mr. Bridgewater now had a restaurant called *Eveline's* at which Desmond worked as a coat check person. Enter Rainer Fetting. They began to see one another and soon thereafter came the paintings of Desmond... and more paintings of Desmond. Thus an inspired chapter in Mr. Fetting's oeuvre blossomed: sculptures, huge bronzes – larger in fact than the man himself. Many paintings featuring Desmond appeared in catalogues of prestigious galleries and major museum exhibits around the world. Intermittently, he jetted back and forth to Paris for shows: Westwood, Mugler and more.

Throughout all of this – alcohol, crack, heroin, and cocaine were rampant in the art world, clubs, and the fashion world – not to mention the death toll that AIDS was taking. We witnessed too many lives shattered. We were not unscathed by these trials and many other of life's tragedies and melodramas that cast long shadows over our entire community. The specters of Mortality joined that of Irony for a gloomy pas de deux, the dangerous dance.

After years of nightlife gigs from AREA (where Andy Warhol urged him to journal the wonderment that orbited about him) to Beige to Life to Twilo days, a more meaningful path emerged for Desmond. He enrolled in a school to become a licensed massage therapist. As a curious absorber of new thinking about

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RAINER FETTING AND DESMOND, 1986

homeopathy and anatomy, this was a natural segue that surprised no one. But Desmond's concept of wellness went well beyond the individual and into the realm of community organizing.

While PETA was speaking out against animal cruelty in the service of bio, cosmetic, and scientific testing, ACT UP provided a much needed response to government's abnegation of its duty to step in during the AIDS crisis. Remember all that resentment put away? Now coalescing into resolve... Desmond was ever the empathic warrior, standing tall, always at the ready with a commitment that can only be described as steely.

He took to rallying the gay community and their allies in response to the murder of Mark Carson – a victim of a homophobic hate crime. This tragedy was elevated to horror story proportions due to the closing of the West Village's only emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital – sold to a developer for the construction of yet more overpriced condos for hedge funders. The travel time from the attack to the nearest trauma center was therefore nearly an hour and may have made the difference between Mark Carson surviving or dying from this assault.

The complexity of the politics, the confluence of causes, may have gone over the heads of many – but not Desmond. He called out

Christine Quinn, the openly lesbian City Council Speaker who rubber-stamped the real estate developer's proposal to close the hospital. When Desmond marched in the candlelight vigil for Mark Carson, he decided he was not going to silently stand by while Quinn used the hospital sale as a feather in her cap to position herself as a mayoral candidate.

Instead, he campaigned for Bill de Blasio's progressive agenda, most notably the candidate's promise to ban horse-drawn carriages from Central Park. Desmond solicited several high profile celebrities to endorse de Blasio's bid for mayor. At his urging, I and so many others distributed fliers and hit the phone banks.

Fags Fight Back was a group that he and I worked on that called on queens to learn self-defense. Our message: "We weren't going to be fucked with anymore." We marched as a group at a Gay Pride parade to hammer home this clarion call. Desmond wasn't afraid of correcting those within the community who ignored the uptick in assaults on our trans sisters, forgetting that the gay community is, or should be, all of us – trans, people of color, seniors, lesbian, and non-binary. Some wig snatching was needed to do that, and Desmond was up for the task.

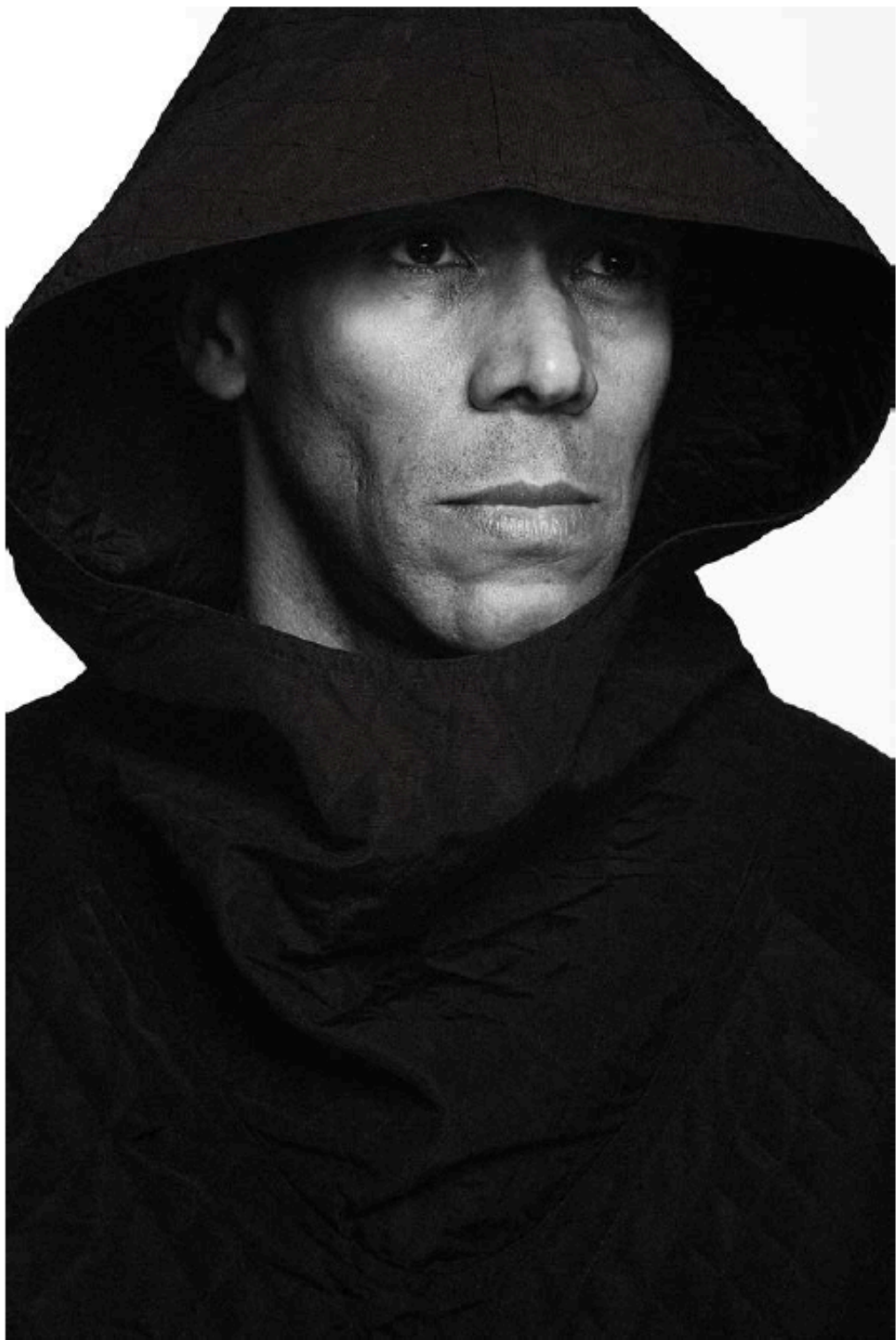
Desmond's continued activism also included Obama's campaigns through outreach

and fund raising; protests for women's reproductive rights; animal rights; opposition to Stop & Frisk, police violence, and the mass incarceration of Black and Brown people. And then came Bernie. These campaigns took Desmond to Ohio, New Hampshire, and Philadelphia for voter registration drives and door-to-door outreach. He organized fundraisers and called upon Tim Robbins, Rosario Dawson, and other celebs to lend their support. When the DNC ambushed Sanders with their vote suppressing shenanigans, Desmond stayed true to his beliefs and did not vote for HRC – because the greater good is always his moral compass. For Desmond, selling out is not an option. And now, with the Orange Menace in the Oval Office, the battle ramps up.

So now you know how a young Black boy from Canada catapults out of Ottawa – propelling himself through New York, Paris, Berlin, London, all of Switzerland... across runways, resorts, nightclubs – and finds himself called into service to promote his community and a more just society. Desmond now in his fifth decade on this spinning blue-green ball is just getting started, and he's an inspiration to us all.

Wishing you glamour, harmony, and grace...

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DESMOND WEARS HOODED TOP BY  
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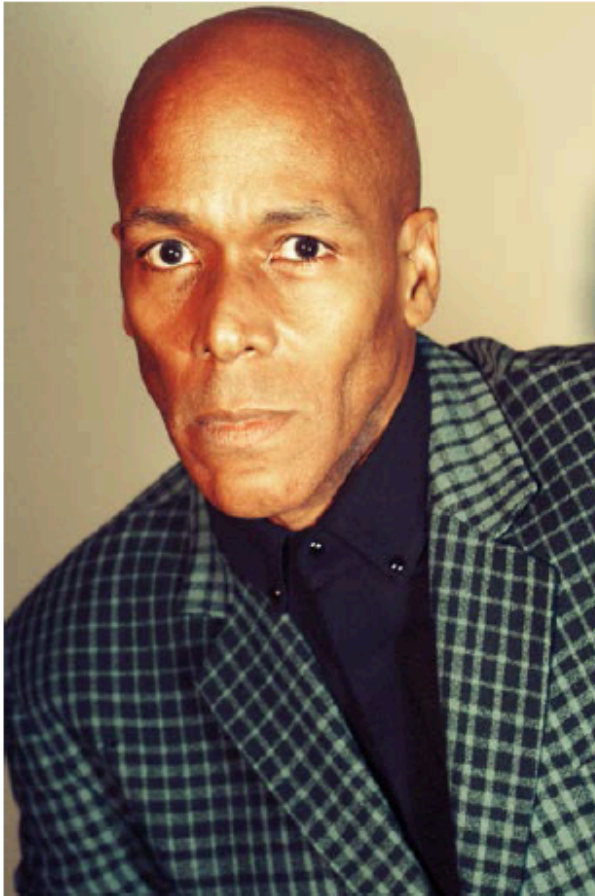
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DESMOND WEARS CUSTOM MADE JACKET AND SHIRT  
BY THIERRY MUGLER - ARCHIVE



PHOTOGRAPHS : CHRISTIAN KILRAIN CARTER COLEMAN  
STYLING : GIANNIE COUJI  
MODEL : DESMOND CADOGAN  
STUDIO : WANE STUDIO BUSHWICK

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