

Ashish: Fall in Love and Be More Tender
1 April – 10 September 2023



William Morris Gallery is pleased to announce the first major survey of fashion designer Ashish Gupta. *Ashish: Fall in Love and Be More Tender* will provide an unprecedented overview of Ashish's subversive and playful practice, showcasing over 60 designs created by his eponymous London-based fashion label over the past 20 years. Synonymous with glamour, maximalist design and painstaking craftsmanship, Ashish is a pioneering voice in the fashion industry whose work challenges stereotypes and foregrounds equitable representation, exploring the role that clothing can play in the politics of optimism and inclusion. Known for working in bold, joyful colours and creating clothes which are hand-embroidered in sequins and beads, Ashish's designs have been worn by global icons including

Beyonce, Debbie Harry, Hunter Schafer, Rihanna, Charli XCX and Taylor Swift. The exhibition will also feature a specially commissioned film and new photography by Ashish Shah, a rising star in fashion documentation.

The exhibition will begin with an overview of key themes and influences in Ashish's work. It will examine his signature use of colour and sequins, along with his heightened sense of the fabulous. It will also introduce Ashish's long-term commitment to inclusion and equitable representation and how his designs communicate these values. A key feature of Ashish's garments is their ability to deceive the eye and disrupt the viewer's expectations of the materials from which they are made. On display will be garments that showcase Ashish's innovative use of sequins to imitate various international traditional craft techniques, such as Fair Isle knitwear, crochet, tie dye, paisley and ikat. These trompe l'oeil effects confound expectation, enabling Ashish to explore the fluidity of personal identity and the relationship between design, technique, and social context through a lens of artisanal production. Key pieces that highlight Ashish's playful approach will include a gilet embellished with fluorescent sequins to reference a high vis jacket and a sequin bag which resembles a well-known supermarket's carrier bag adorned with the words 'Disco'.

This first section will also explore spectacle, a recurring theme within Ashish's practice, inspired by mid-century Hollywood costume and Disco-era fashion. References from Ashish's childhood in Delhi prior to moving to London to study fashion at Central St Martins will also be explored, including Indian cinema, cultural icons and the exchange and interplay between Western and Indian aesthetics. A selection of bold, show-stopping red carpet and editorial looks will be presented.

Clothing as a form of self-expression and identity is an important message running throughout many of Ashish's designs. Ashish's use of fashion as a site for social and political engagement will be highlighted through examples of some of the politicised slogans for which the designer is best known. These will include designs emblazoned with 'MORE GLITTER LESS TWITTER' devised in response to the election of President Trump in 2016 and a new version of his iconic 'IMMIGRANT' t-shirt. Originally made by Ashish for himself following the Brexit referendum, the t-shirt will be reconsidered in the context of increasingly hostile national borders.

Further delving into Ashish's exploration of class, gender, sexuality and national identities, the second section of the exhibition will spotlight Ashish's Autumn Winter 2017 collection 'The Yellow Brick Road'. The collection is based on The Wizard of Oz, a film that holds an iconic place within LGBTQ+ culture. Many of the pieces that will be on display feature rainbow colours, an overt celebration and message of LGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance.

In contrast to the exuberance of the rainbow colours, further designs are underpinned with social anxiety, including references to contemporary political discourse. A sweatshirt slogan reads 'YOU ARE MUCH LOVELIER THAN YOU THINK', a reference to body dysmorphia. Also on display will be a sequin snowflake jumper, a playful reference to Generation Z, who are often described derogatorily as the 'snowflake generation' for their perceived over-sensitivity to political issues. A pink t-shirt with the slogan 'FALL IN LOVE AND BE MORE TENDER' is a nod to Susan Sontag's 1964 essay 'Notes On "Camp"'.

Like William Morris, traditional handcraft skills and techniques are at the heart of Ashish's design and the context of the William Morris Gallery allows Ashish's work to be considered within a dialogue of artisanship, adornment and thoughtful production processes. Each individual sequin is hand sewn on an embroidery frame by highly skilled artisans at Ashish's workshop in Delhi – a process which can take anywhere from a few days to over a week depending on the piece.

The third section of the exhibition will present a series of looks that showcase the intricate hand embroidery and beading for which Ashish is best known. Ashish uses a blend of both contemporary and traditional techniques and designs on display will include a dressing gown in Zardozi, a South Asian embroidery method using gold thread and a dress adorned with flowers using an intricate technique of cutwork embroidery.

The exhibition will also feature a specially commissioned film and new photography, *Be More Tender*, by Ashish Shah, an important emerging voice within international fashion. Created in both India and London, Shah's commission will explore the intricacy of global movement and post-colonial experiences and the ways in which Ashish's garments navigate the complex cultural relationships between Britain and India. The new commission will also contextualise Ashish's work from a decolonising perspective, offering a counterpoint to the Western gaze that dominates much fashion documentation. *Be More Tender*, was made possible with Art Fund support.

Ashish: Fall in Love and Be More Tender is co-curated by Roisin Inglesby at William Morris Gallery and Joe Scotland.

The exhibition is kindly supported by The Lizzie & Jonathan Tisch Foundation.

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The exhibition will be on view from Saturday 1 April 2023 – Sunday 10 September 2023. Gallery opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am – 5pm; Admission free (suggested £5 donation).

Image credit: Ashish, cerise sequined sari, Spring Summer 2023 collection © Ashish Shah.

About the William Morris Gallery

Owned and run by Waltham Forest Council, the William Morris Gallery is the only public Gallery devoted to William Morris: designer, craftsman and radical socialist. Housed in the Grade II* listed building that was Morris's family home from 1848 to 1856, it displays the world's largest collection of his work. In recent years the Gallery has developed an ambitious programme of contemporary and historical exhibitions by artists including Kehinde Wiley, Jeremy Deller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Frank Brangwyn and May Morris. Other special exhibitions have explored 20th-century political posters and African textiles. The Gallery was awarded the Art Fund Prize for Museum of the Year in 2013 and was nominated for the European Museum of the Year Award in 2014.

William Morris Gallery,
Forest Road London
E17 4PP
www.wmgallery.org.uk

About Ashish

Ashish has injected his vibrant colour and personality into the London fashion scene since being discovered by Browns Focus in 2001. Originally from Delhi, where he studied fine art before moving to London for an MA in fashion design at Central Saint Martins, Ashish's work considers politically-charged messages and social landscapes via hand embroidery and artisan traditions. He has won the prestigious NEWGEN award three times and has been included in major exhibitions and presentations at The Victoria & Albert Museum, London and The Metropolitan Museum, New York. His clothes have been worn by a wide range of musicians, actors and public figures including Madonna, Hunter Schafer, Beyoncé, Sarah Jessica Parker, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Mary J Blige and Adele.

About Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. It provides millions of pounds every year to help museums to acquire and share works of art across the UK, further the professional development of their curators, and inspire more people to visit and enjoy their public programmes. Art Fund is independently funded, supported by Art Partners, donors, trusts and foundations and the 135,000 members who buy the National Art Pass, who enjoy free or discounted entry to over 850 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions, and receive Art Quarterly magazine. Art Fund also supports museums through its annual prize, Art Fund Museum of the Year. The winner of Art Fund Museum of the Year 2022 is Horniman Museums & Gardens

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