



Tony Buckenham

The designer as shop assistant: Alexander McQueen and his revolving mannequins

IT'S a strange sight. Alexander McQueen, hovering behind the counter of a swank Conduit Street boutique, encouraging folk to spend, spend, spend. We've seen him play the role of bad-boy designer, dropping his pants at the end of the runway, mouthing off about the woeful lack of support given to British design talent and posing it up at A-list parties with Kate Moss and David Bowie. But we've never seen him play the shop assistant. The shop is, of course, his own: the first McQueen boutique — and he's pretty proud of it.

It's a microcosm of what the designer is all about. McQueen and his architects Azman Owens have transformed the Grade II listed building into a futuristic space, slicing through the original 18th century structure in a long, thin corridor. It's a far cry from the vast, designer emporiums around the corner in Bond Street. "I didn't want a boring beige shop with everything placed around the walls. I wanted it to be more interactive," says McQueen. And he's got it.

True to form, the store is not short on theatrics. The mannequins, made from hand-blown glass, are lit from within and revolve (a feature at McQueen shows).

Then there are the changing rooms: they line the length of one wall, are lit from the floor and made from clear glass. Step inside, however, and the glass mists up to become opaque — almost.

"My favourite thing is the

McQueen goes shopping

Britain's most notorious fashion designer Alexander McQueen has just opened his first boutique. CLAUDIA CROFT reports

box," says McQueen gesturing towards an enormous glass display case that dominates the shop front. It looks like a giant snowstorm. The scene is lifted from his autumn/winter '99 show, where models posed in a simulated blizzard.

The box will change every season to reflect the theme of McQueen's shows and the shop interior with its movable fixtures and fittings will follow — though quite how he plans to recreate the water-sodden catwalk studded with nails for his spring/summer 2000 collection is anyone's guess.

McQueen is clearly excited about his new venture, running around the store like a kid in a sweet shop. He points to a chunky jumper, price £1,700 —

"someone bought one the other day" — and a bracelet watch stamped with his name: "We've already sold a few of them ... Seven hundred quid each," he whispers as if even he can't believe anyone would buy it.

More than just a showcase, the shop represents McQueen as a global fashion brand in its own right. The boutique is the first of many, says McQueen. The Japanese company Onward Kashiya, McQueen's business partner, plans to open in Japan and New York within two years. So with his sleek new store and expanding range of products, is the bad boy of British fashion selling out? McQueen dismisses the suggestion that he has ambitions to become the Paul Smith of the

millennium with a blunt "f*** that". "I've never been business-minded. When I started out, it was just about doing collections," he says, but apart from the liberally-dropped expletives, as much a McQueen signature as bumster trousers, he appears to be comfortable with his role at the helm of a company which notches up more than £1 million of wholesale business a year.

Far from being allergic to the business side of fashion industry, McQueen seems to revel in it. "I've got people to support," he explains, referring to his team of assistants. "Now it's about putting that pencil skirt on the rail. Of course, it doesn't have to be a boring pencil skirt. I've been corporate since LVMH." McQueen signed up to LVMH-owned Givenchy in late 1996. "I do all my own contracts," he says. "I even surprise the lawyers with how sly I can be."

The designer plans to spend time on the shop floor. "I'll be down here a lot. It'll help when I design. I can get feedback on what's selling," he says. McQueen has an opportunity to demonstrate his sales technique when Fran Cutler, best mate of Meg Mathews, and a super-shopper in her own right, pops in for a snoop at the rails. "Come on Fran, spend some money," he sneers, before proudly showing off his range of futuristic silver sunglasses. Now how could she resist McQueen's hard sell?

● Alexander McQueen, 47 Conduit Street, W1.