



Kei Ninomiya (near right) and Makoto Azuma at Azuma's shop-studio Jardins des Fleurs in Tokyo

Forces of NATURE

Artist Makoto Azuma and designer Kei Ninomiya describe their fantastical floral collaborations. By *Harriet Quick*

PORTRAIT BY YASUYUKI TAKAGI

NOIR'S
S/S '20
SHOW



PHOTOGRAPH: JASON LLOYD EVANS

Backstage, beneath the frescoed ceilings of Hôtel Potocki in Paris' 8ème, a model requires several helpers to offload a towering headpiece, sculpted from black synthetic hair and the fronds of a silvery-grey air plant. Her outfit is equally unwieldy: a cocoon of iridescent crimson furls and tutu layers, constructed from hundreds of components joined together in a press-studded matrix only visible from the inside.

Kei Ninomiya, the designer behind Japanese label Noir, and botanical artist Makoto Azuma have been up since 3am finessing these uniquely visceral works that blur the boundaries of nature, sculpture and fashion. They're showing Noir's autumn/winter collection: dresses constructed from masses of glossy plastic leaves; shimmering tartan fabric pleated into giant bunches; crinoline skirts covered with hair braids; and multiple gold fibre loops sprouting from outfits to kinetic effect. Azuma has contributed the headpieces, each one bursting with bird-of-paradise flowers, spiky aechmea leaves and frothy asparagus plumosus sprayed crimson red. On this occasion, artist Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir – aka Shoplifter, a specialist in hair sculptures who represented Iceland at the Venice Biennale in 2019 – has joined the team to make the wigs on site.

“With this collection I wanted to explore the colour red through to its deep, blackish tones,” says 36-year-old Ninomiya, who grew up in the southern Japanese city of Oita and trained at the Antwerp Academy of Fashion, before being taken on by Rei Kawakubo as a pattern cutter at Comme des Garçons. It was under the umbrella of the Tokyo label that, in 2012, he launched Noir, pairing his concept-driven twice-yearly collections with a commercial line of ruffled T-shirts, diaphanous skirts and leather jackets that sell at Dover Street Market and on Net-a-Porter. “I always look to create powerful

and beautiful collections,” he says. “The pieces are often big in size and volume. You could say there's a link with the power of nature.”

It's also a link to Azuma and his wildly imaginative floristry. The pair met 15 years ago, when Ninomiya paid a visit to Azuma's Tokyo shop-studio Jardins des Fleurs, a lab-like space located in a basement in Aoyama. Friends ever since, they struck up a creative partnership for Ninomiya's Paris runway show in 2018. “I had long admired Azuma's work, and while preparing for the show it simply crossed my mind to ask him,” says Ninomiya.

AZUMA AND HIS TEAM ARE THE TOKYO ROCK STARS OF FLORISTRY

The resulting all-black collection was offset with Azuma's biomorphic “masks”, created with floristry mesh and a lattice of leaves and flowers. In turn, Azuma was struck by Ninomiya's originality. “He knows everything about how to sculpt shapes through geometry – with webs, rivets and knotting. His aesthetics are both scientific and artisanal.” The same could be said of Azuma's creations, and the duo's aesthetic similarities are palpable. Both are fascinated with natural geometry and fractal forms. Both strike a punkish note. When we meet, both are clad in a uniform of charcoal jeans, sneakers and Noir's signature black leather biker jackets – Ninomiya with his trademark mohawk, Azuma with a bleach-blond crop. They share a passion for '70s punk, says Azuma, a one-time aspiring rock musician who discovered his métier while working in Tokyo's wholesale flower market in his early 20s.

TODAY, AZUMA AND HIS SMALL TEAM are the Tokyo rock stars of floristry. In Japan, *ikebana* is highly revered, but what Azuma brings is scale, a subversive perspective and an encyclopedic knowledge. “All my creativity originates from the natural world,” he says. “I'll take a plant or

