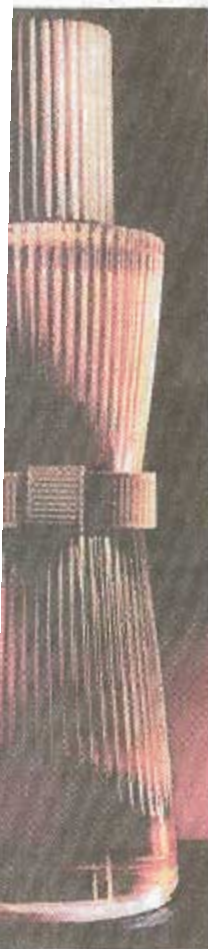


STYLE

Ford's Next Theater

Tom Ford Is Branching Out, But Will the Brand Play In Peoria? (And What About Texas?)



By JULIA DINARDO

Tom Ford has been a marquee name — and face — in the fashion industry practically since he graduated from Parsons. But now his popularity is beginning to reach past the runway to his native Texas and beyond. Mr. Ford's stint as guest editor for the March issue of *Vanity Fair*, in which he appeared on the cover with a naked Keira Knightley and Scarlett Johansson, only increased his profile. The performance of his new eyewear collection and Estée Lauder beauty line will test whether his name can sell not just magazines but products.

Mr. Ford, who was raised in New Mexico, is best known for his role as creative director at Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent. He revitalized both houses, becoming an industry darling in the process. A perfectionist and self-described workaholic, Mr. Ford boosted sales, attracted celebrity clients such as Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow, and brought a new feeling

of sensuality to everything from Gucci's boots to its ad campaigns. Mr. Ford became the creative director at Yves Saint Laurent in 2000, while continuing to design for Gucci.

After leaving the industry in 2004, Mr. Ford seemed adamant about not wanting to return to fashion too soon, indicating that he wanted to delve into film. But after founding a production company that year, he made a fashion comeback of sorts last April, announcing the creation of the Tom Ford brand. In November, he launched the Tom Ford Estée Lauder Collection, beginning with the Youth Dew Amber Nude fragrance collection and the Amber Nude makeup collection. The makeup collection sold out in half the time estimated. A body lotion arrived in stores last week and a bath gel is scheduled to be released next month. Mr. Ford also recently launched an eyewear collection consisting of 20 styles for both men and women.

Next on the agenda is a men's clothing collection to be sold in a 10,000-square-foot Madison Avenue boutique that will open in November. By industry standards, Mr. Ford has been working backward by developing ancillary products first. Usually a designer starts with the main product, or "core competency," such as an apparel line, and then later, once a brand name has been established, adds accessories, eyewear, fragrance, and cosmetics.

Will this reverse strategy work? A professor of consumer behavior at New York University's Stern School of Business, Tom Meyvis, said this technique of re-entry could be successful because Mr. Ford has been away from the industry for a while. The collections have an "air of mystery" that will keep insiders interested. They also offer consumers a cheaper piece of Tom Ford via a tube of lipstick rather than an evening gown. This will sustain sales initially, but to keep customers buying, the brand will have to avoid becoming a novelty that flames out.

The eyewear collection relies on the assumption that consumers know who Mr. Ford is. The ad campaign for the collection is highly conceptual, composed of an image of sunglasses and text that simply reads "Tom Ford Eyewear." It's up to the reader to seek out the retailers that carry the brand.

"The buzz marketing seems to be working well," Mr. Meyvis said of the campaign. "It's not a bad strategy to feel that you know something that other people don't know. Consumers are more likely to buy it if they feel they have a relative advantage over other people. So there must be a significant amount of people who know who he is, but think that most people don't. You have to somehow get the info to the people without letting everyone know, so there is an illusion of exclusivity."

Neiman Marcus is one of only a few retailers to offer both the Tom Ford Estée Lauder Collection and the eyewear collection. The company's vice president of public relations and fashion presentation, Ken Downing, said Neiman Marcus decided to go with the brand because "Tom Ford continues to be a driving force in the fashion industry. ... Our customers are always interested in what projects Tom Ford is involved with." Neiman Marcus launched Mr. Ford's \$125 eponymous coffee-table book in Dallas in the fall of 2004 with a lavish party.

The *Vanity Fair* issue brings Mr. Ford's persona closer to the masses, but the real test is yet to come: When you can find a pair of Tom Ford sunglasses in Chinatown, that's when the brand will have achieved the street status of Gucci, Prada, and Dior. And Mr. Ford is not a household name quite yet. During *Vanity Fair*'s cover test, at least one of the participants mistook him for Jeremy Piven.