

## When Mulberry decided it needed to create a new flagship store in London's Bond Street, it eschewed conventional wisdom and instead opted for a mix of art and design to emphasise subtlety as *Gian Luca Amadei* reports

*Below: Jonathan Ellery's installation of 25 brass studs is an elegant and humorous introduction to a new flagship store*

A sequence of 25 brass studs set in a polished concrete floor – metal casts of lipsticks, fake eyelashes and even a credit card seem arbitrary at first but they tell a tale of decadent luxury.

Worldly Cares and Love Affairs is the brainchild of British conceptual artist Jonathan Ellery and directly inspired by David Bowie's *Maid of Bond Street*, a song released in 1967 about the materialistic life of a rich and spoiled London girl.

Although small in size (each stud measures 100 mm in diameter), Ellery's installation is one of the key features of Mulberry's new flagship store in Bond Street.

Beside Ellery's critical take on luxury, one wonders if his inspiration is Christina Ong. The Singaporean entrepreneur and major shareholder of Mulberry is nicknamed the Queen of Bond Street for her creative flair in Bond Street's fashion franchises. The latest store by Mulberry challenges the status quo of the luxury market, by commissioning controversial artist Ellery and by getting Universal Design Studio (UDS) on board to design the interior space.

'What Mulberry wanted was a space that expresses what a progressive company it has become,' explains Hannah Carter-Owens, associate director at UDS. 'For this

reason the design evolved into a mix of contrasting interior elements.'

The design studio envisaged an unconventional layout and a palette of materials to complement Ellery's brass studs, beginning at the striking entrance doors, which feature geometrical brass details. A curved stone dry wall wraps the retail space at street level. This clever feature also reshapes the otherwise rectilinear space and helps to regulate the temperature of the interior.

To counterbalance the solidity of the wall, the rest of the space has been kept deliberately flexible and is visually permeable from the entrance. Here the polished concrete floor is dotted with delicate mobile structures constructed from unfinished oak wood.

These scaled-down architectural pieces resemble follies – referencing the picturesque landscape of rural Somerset where Mulberry originally started. By contrast, the deeper part of the store features geometrical brass plates – also echoing Ellery's studs – that form the cladding to a

more secluded space dedicated to the clothing division of Mulberry.

'More than following a set brief, we started a very long conversation with Mulberry and worked together all the way, developing ideas through model-making and prototyping individual components and details,' says Carter-Owens.

One could question how raw materials such as stone and concrete, unfinished woodwork and brass are expected to convey the finesse of luxury.

However this unexpected combination of materials has more to say about the way Mulberry combined two worlds in one: the rural and the urban. Despite major changes at the top of the company in recent years, the new flagship store combines the contrasting elements at the heart of the company.

'The idea was to create something that would allow for a degree of flexibility, a simple shell yet very flexible – a store that won't tire, a place that will stand the test of time' says Carter-Owens.

Founded in 1971 by Roger Saul



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and his mother, the company grafted a quintessentially rural British care for materials and details to an urban aesthetic.

This new store restates these values even though Mulberry was taken over by Chalice Group (a corporate company headed by Ong) in 2004 and has since been incorporated into another of her business ventures. That is the multi-brand umbrella company Club 21 UK, which includes such fashion brands as Armani, Donna Karan and Dolce & Gabbana.

In a time when corporate homogeneity appears to have affected even luxury brands – let alone the rest of the market – it is refreshing to see Mulberry wittily question their own values with the thought-provoking work that was commissioned from Ellery.

Similarly, the design work by UDS offers an opportunity to reflect on the nature of luxury. Luxury is not about cluttering a space with redundant displays of expensive materials. Instead it is deliberately selecting a few pieces that resonate with core aesthetic values – and Mulberry does that well.