A fashion designer with an intense personal identity, Ann Demeulemeester keeps trends at arm’s length and works almost exclusively with black and white. The results are visionary.
Ann Demeulemeester's decision to remain slightly aloof from the money-go-round of fashion and popular culture makes her rather more contemplative than the average fashion designer. Living in Antwerp with her husband and creative partner Róbyn in the only Le Corbusier house in Belgium, a grey cubic structure of concrete that has seemingly been jammed into the end of a row of traditional Dutch houses just outside the city centre, there's not a trace of the hi-camp posturing so typical of the profession. Instead, she is touchingly earnest, struggling to express herself in a language that is not her own and displaying an enthusiasm for her work which borders on the evangelical. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it also transpires that she is not one to suffer fools gladly.

"Fashion is silly," she states matter-of-factly, before going on to qualify the remark as if to downplay its abrasiveness. "Perhaps I should say fashion in general is silly. But then everything is, in general. If you talk about music in general, it's silly, about magazines, in general, they're silly. Things aren't interesting if you lose them. It's the voice that's interesting. I don't look at other people's work because I don't want to be disturbed by their ideas. On the other hand, I'm interested in every designer whose soul can be found in their work. If they have an idea about what they are and can express that in their work, then I can appreciate it. It doesn't matter if it's not my style or to my personal taste, because if it is real and done in an original way then it is interesting."

Given Demeulemeester's reputation as a rather dour, intransigent figure on the international fashion circuit, the fact that she is gentle, and indeed very pretty in person, comes as something of a surprise. She is small, with a boyish frame, huge watery blue eyes and long, ash-blonde curly hair that frames her face and hovers halfway down her back. She speaks in a lilting whisper. She is dressed today from head to toe in black. She wears a black minidress (more androgynous in cut than Barbie-doll sexy), black opaque tights and black leather biker boots. She designs everything she wears, only admitting to wearing a pair of Levi's 501's "for gardening". There is more than a little of the flower child about her, from her pre-Raphaelite looks right down to the constant references to her inner-self. "What I like to wear, I do myself," she says. "I don't know how that sounds, but it's the truth. My life is so mixed with my profession that I don't know where I begin or my work ends."

Born in the heart of the Flemish countryside, hardly fashion central, a life in fashion was never the most obvious of paths for Ann Demeulemeester. She went to art school for three years, where she discovered that she was more interested in people and portraiture than anything less figurative. "And drawing people, I naturally thought 'what are they wearing?' and then thought maybe I should go to school and be a fashion designer. But then, I was not interested in fashion, I never was. I didn't buy lots of magazines, I didn't know anything about fashion, I was just struck by what people were wearing and why."

In 1978, she found herself at the by now famous Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, studying fashion along with seven other students: Martin Margiela, Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Bikkembergs, Dirk Van Saene and Marine Vee (now working in theatre design). Punk was at its peak, and Demeulemeester says today that the movement gave the students the strength to rebel against a teaching system that was more Coco Chanel-traditional than Sex Pistols-anarchic.

In 1986, the designers (sans Yee) pooled their resources, rented a van and took their modest autumn collections to the London shows. "London was a huge culture shock," says Demeulemeester. "Seeing the Sex Pistols on the television for the first time." In the same way, London fashion week did not know quite how to take the young Belgian contingent; in retrospect the city should have felt honoured to have them there. For all their efforts, however, they were all lumped together by the British press and dubbed the "Antwerp Six". Displaying a rare flash of acerbic wit, Demeulemeester has since said that that was simply because they couldn't pronounce their names. But while their individual aesthetics had little in common, the school they attended had engendered in them a similar rigour and attention to detail. Looking back, Demeulemeester concedes that while being seen as part of a northern European collective is an irritating over-simplification, even a name that makes no sense is better than no name at all. "You know, we are very different people," she says now. "We don't like the same things.
We were always fighting, having arguments, but there was this alchemy, I suppose. We were all people who took our studies and our jobs very seriously. It was not like playing, it was serious right from the beginning."

Given the gravity of her work ethic, which shows no sign of mellowing with age, one might expect Demuelemester's clothes to be difficult or complex. This is not the case; she continues to work almost exclusively in black and white. "If you look at a black and white picture, everything you need to explain is a silhouette, a contrast, a mood, is there. It's the essence."

Her clothes are deceptively simple at first glance, but their apparent simplicity does belie an underlying complexity. The perfect pair of trousers - Demuelemester famously cuts the finest trousers in the industry - a slouchy black jacket, a loose-knit sweater that slips off the shoulder when the wearer moves, a dress that slides across the female form like liquid. Overall, there's more than a little attitude to the style (quoted sources of inspiration include Patti Smith and the whipsaw commentary at her shows is often backed by the likes of Sonic Youth and Nick Cave. But even as Demuelmeester's work comes across as nonchalant and deshabille on the surface, such apparently effortless allure is deceptive. The devil is in the detail, in the way the clothes are cut and hang from the body. It is testimony to Demuelemester's ultimate pragmatism as a designer that she fits her women'swear collections on herself and two friends, each representing a different body type. "You need to do this," she says, "or you are making haute couture, which will be perfect, of course, but only for one woman. My clothes are worn by many different women, each with a different body. It's my job to find a solution that will fit them all."

The same applies to the male form. Ann Demuelemester is one of a handful of designers who show their men's and women's-wear collections at the same time - during the women's prêt-à-porter collections in Paris. To her, they are both part of the same oeuvre. "It's wonderful if you can work on this very fine line and study what you can do for both sexes, to take them away from the roles that history makes them play. Obviously there are masculine and feminine elements with both. Also, it has so much more life if you show on both men and women. To me, it's not about clothes but about people. It's much more real, more normal, if they can work together."

Demuelmeester's are not the type of clothes to be cast aside at the end of each season; there is no reworking of the '70s one minute, the '80s the next. Neither is she likely to fall in line regarding the silhouettes, colours, must-have shoes and accessories of the season. She takes little notice of trends, preferring instead to evolve a look which will work on a more long-term basis, and withstand the test of time and passing fads. All of which is not to say that she is completely impervious to the passing mood. This season, for example, in line with fashion's love affair with romanticism, Demuelmeester's work is accordingly softer. There are fluttering silks and the most unusual inclusion of pale

colours and embellishment (in the form of large crystals hung from the clothes). Nevertheless, put anyone who knew the slightest thing about fashion in front of a video of her show, or one still of one garment, and there would be no question as to the designer's identity, in an increasingly money-grabbing and capricious industry, Demuelemester has conviction and integrity, and a belief in her work and personal style. In the end, Ann Demuelmeester is that rarest of things, a designer with a vision.