

Genre-bending artist and designer Virgil Abloh. The exhibit, *Virgil Abloh: "Figures of Speech,"* launches at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago on June 10.

# LIMITED-EDITION AMBITION

*Virgil Abloh: "Figures of Speech,"* summer's hottest exhibit at the MCA, details the insanely popular designer's career—and the social commentary embedded in his art.

By Marissa Conrad

In the summer of 2016, the designer Virgil Abloh arrived at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art for a meeting. At the time, Abloh—who grew up 90 miles northwest of the museum in Rockford, Illinois, where his parents settled when they moved to the U.S. from Ghana in the 1970s—was already an established name. He had collaborated with Kanye West on multiple projects, and his streetwear label, Off-White, had been spotted on the likes of Solange Knowles and Joan Smalls. Still, it would be another year before Nike tapped him for The Ten, a redesign of 10 of the brand's iconic shoes, and another two years before Louis Vuitton named him creative director of menswear. Abloh was a rising star, and MCA Chief Curator Michael Darling had invited him in for a low-key chat, to feel out if his work could carry a solo exhibition.

By Darling's memory, the artist arrived in "just a black T-shirt and jeans," without his often-worn Supreme x The North Face puffy jacket, given the time of year. "From the beginning he has been completely unpretentious," Darling says. "I think he was surprised that a curator at a museum, especially at a contemporary art museum, had noticed him."

At that meeting, Darling realized "the clarity of Virgil's vision, and his ambition," he says. "I came away thinking that this really was a good idea; that his work would sustain a whole exhibition."

He prepared a PowerPoint detailing Abloh's accomplishments in fashion, furniture design, graphic design, architecture and music, arguing that the designer's multidisciplinary career would lend itself to an exhibition of a similar model to the MCA's 2014 David Bowie retrospective or the 2017 Takashi Murakami show (both also conceived and curated by Darling), and presented it to colleagues at the MCA. They loved it.

Now, after nearly three years of monthly meetings between Abloh and Darling, the idea has transformed into reality. *Virgil Abloh: "Figures of Speech,"* a deep dive into the trajectory of the 38-year-old designer's career and the social commentary embedded in his work, opens at the museum June 10.

Darling anticipates the exhibition will feature roughly 70 articles of clothing from Off-White, plus designs from Abloh's first year with Louis Vuitton and his collaborations with Nike, including the black tennis dress Serena Williams wore at the 2018 U.S. Open, with the word "Logo" cheekily placed above the signature Nike swoosh (final works for the exhibition were still being made at the time of this interview). To curate the collection, Darling flew to Milan, where Off-White is based, and Abloh's team brought out hundreds of articles of clothing, saved from runway shows throughout the last six years.



Ladder, 2019, by Virgil Abloh



A look from the Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh Summer/ Spring 2014 collection



A look from the Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh Spring/ Summer 2018 collection



Off-White first season "Framing Grey Area" grid armchair, 2016, by Virgil Abloh

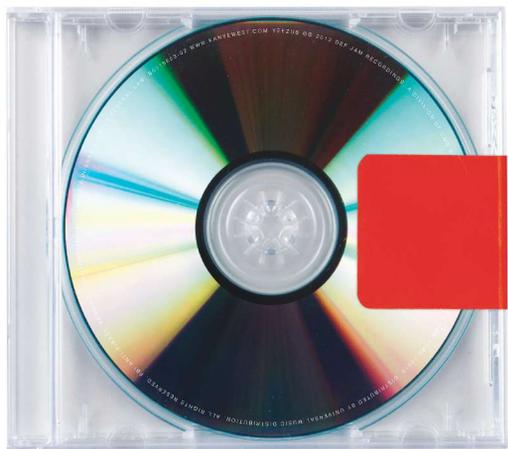




*You're Obviously in the Wrong Place, 2015/19, by Virgil Abloh*



A look from Louis Vuitton's Spring/Summer 2019 men's collection by Virgil Abloh entitled "Dark Side of the Rainbow"



"Yeezus" album art by Virgil Abloh, 2013/19, released by Def Jam Recordings



Virgil Abloh and Arthur Jafa, Jacket for Arthur Jafa (back), 2018



IKEA x Virgil Abloh collection, 2018



Been Trill group DJing, including Virgil Abloh, Matthew Williams, Florencia Galarza, Heron Preston and Justin Saunders, 2013. Photo by Matthieu Genre



"dollar a gallon," 2018, part of the "PAY PER VIEW" installation by Virgil Abloh at the Kaikai Kiki Gallery, Tokyo.

Abloh's work is unique, Darling says, because he approaches fashion "almost like a conceptual art project," choosing themes that make a statement about culture and society, and designing clothes to illustrate those themes. Off-White's spring/summer 2016 menswear collection, Blue Collar, incorporated logos of the blue-collar businesses that the high-fashion world has become dependent on, such as DHL and the Royal Mail. "That way of working feels more intentional and topical than the way that most fashion designers work, where they may be trying to intimate what the cool colors are for that season, or the patterns," Darling says. "Virgil's work comes out of the language and culture of contemporary art. You have to decode what each of his items is trying to say, the same way we look at a piece of contemporary art, scratching our heads trying to figure out what the artist is trying to say."

Abloh's path to fashion notoriety has been unconventional: The designer, before he was a designer, graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in engineering, and went on to get a master's degree in architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology. But he was designing T-shirts on the side, and, in 2003, he strategically left a few at a Chicago shop that was printing concert merchandise for Kanye West, whose career was taking off. West, or at least someone on his team, noticed. By 2010, Abloh was the creative director of West's creative agency; by 2012, he had a business of his own, Pyrex Vision, screen-printing his

designs on Ralph Lauren Rugby flannels and selling them for \$550 a pop. He launched Off-White, the Nike collaboration happened, then Louis Vuitton. In 2018, *Time* magazine honored Abloh as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Beyoncé wore Off-White, an asymmetrical white-to-chartreuse ombré ballgown, on the final night of her *On the Run II* tour.

At the museum, Abloh's clothes will be displayed on racks, "closer to what you'd experience in a store," Darling says. "It feels fresh and new. Places like the Costume Institute at the Met have mannequins, but Virgil is too young and too influenced by streetwear for us to take such a classical approach." There also will be examples of Abloh's furniture design and graphic design work, including a sculptural re-creation of a CD case he did for West, and a section of the exhibition highlighting the designer's work as a DJ, with ambient music. "We've created a journey that unfolds as you're going through it," Darling says.

At the end, visitors will find a store with merchandise Abloh designed exclusively for the MCA, including shirts, coats, handbags and, potentially, a new Virgil Abloh x Nike sneaker collaboration. "We're planning all sorts of limited-edition product drops that will happen throughout the exhibition's run," Darling says. "It's been exciting, developing new products with him." **sl**

Virgil Abloh: "Figures of Speech" runs at the MCA June 10 through Sept. 22. Find tickets and information at [mchicago.org](http://mchicago.org).