Happy Un-birthday!

Steven Tai speaks to Beki Elmer about celebrating the everyday in his latest collection

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As a self-confessed geek, Steven Tai's Spring/Summer collection reflects his talent of embracing the awkward and quirky girl.

The Central Saint Martins graduate uses childlike graphics such as 'worst day ever' and a simple yet striking geometric theme to create a nostalgic collection which harks back to your days at school. From the oversized thin rimmed glasses, to the cute blister plasters on the socks, every detail in the collection is endearing and lovably unique. Overall, school has never looked so chic.

Hidden in the labyrinths of London's cultured West End, the Painting Room's warehouse had been warped into a scene which combined two disparate themes – a birthday party within a classroom. Models' melancholic expressions were juxtaposed with vivid pastel colour palettes and a backdrop of classroom equipment, balloons and sweets. As I sit down to talk with Steven, this peculiar coalescence is the first thing that springs to mind.

What made you decide to combine the idea of the classroom and a party? What makes classrooms so fun?
The collection started because of us all being nerds first of all, that's going back to our roots. I celebrate the geeks, because I'm a big geek.The collection itself was inspired by Alice in Wonderland and a celebration of un-birthdays – so the idea of celebrating 364 days a year. It's about celebrating the everyday and every moment. I think that it was the birthday theme which inspired a lot of the prints and textiles.But when we came to the presentation, I think it was a lot about combining this quirky, nerdy girl

and putting her in this environment. I wanted it to be about something disconnected that could maybe take people to a nostalgic past, because I'm very nostalgic about things. Plus I never had a birthday party like that either!

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You say you're a nostalgic person. What would you say is your favourite era and how has that influenced this collection?
I think my favourite era is probably the 20s. I think every era means different things. 20s, 60s and 90s were all very important to me. 90s for very obvious reasons because I'm a 90s child but the 20s silhouette just has this fun free energy, and the 60s is a lot about the geometric and we are very geometrically focused. I think it's still quite clean, which is what we also like to do.

Image: James Hostford

What was the most enjoyable part, and most challenging part, about making the collection?
Let's do the most challenging as that comes to mind more easily! It was all the woven pieces. The grids were woven to create these new checks and the thing about those is that they had an initial idea about them and the techniques were not working for the material and it was about finding some solutions. That was challenging because it was part of the actualisation process but it's also the fun part. So I guess they end up being the same thing – so it's the same answer to your question!

What are your favourite materials to work with?
We use a lot of natural materials but we're also very experimental, so it's more about a natural base, for example silk, cottons and wool. Then it's about how we apply different techniques on them such as vinyl or silk screen , depending on different types of embroidery and things like that. But the base is always something quite natural and I think good to touch.

Image: James Hostford

What made you decide on such a vivid colour palette?
I think it was a focus on what colours were important to us and communicating that in hues that were hormonal. So we knew that the yellows and the blues were our theme colours and we just kind of wanted to work with these colours in relation to a birthday.

Where do you see yourself in five years time?
I think I really like the communication side of things, for example I really like digital presentation and how to communicate this identity. It's kind of expanding what the brand is about and having more opportunities to nail communication methods whether it be pop-ups or video campaigns, so various things. It's about being experimental and building upon things.

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