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HIROKI NAKAMURA
AND HIS BRAND
VISVIM MAY BE CHARTING
THE FUTURE FOR
HIGH-END STREETWEAR,
BUT DON'T CALL THE
38-YEAR-OLD DESIGNER
"UNTRADITIONAL."

Speaking with me in his Tokyo store F.I.L. (Free International Laboratory), Nakamura talks of his field trip the day before to a Japanese factory that has practiced the Inden technique of painting lacquer on deerskin for 500 years. The week before that, he was in Tuscany, Italy, to study millennia-old organic "vegetable tan" leather processing. And in January, Nakamura journeyed to the Arctic Circle in Norway to learn about reindeer hides from the nomadic Sami people. He recalls his visit: "The grandmother makes the shoes for the whole family, and the Sami haven't changed the design in 5,000 years. I tried out their shoes, and even though it was minus-35 degrees, they were perfect. Better than my boots!"

With a full beard and long hair in a ponytail, Nakamura looks like a exceptionally well-dressed anthropologist, equally comfortable in Tokyo's fashion circles ➤



as in uncharted tribal regions. Although Visvim's designs often appropriate indigenous aesthetics, Nakamura's tireless hunt for local traditions bespeaks a deeper goal: the quest for perfect functionality. Folkways offer hints of century-old production wisdom, and Nakamura hopes to reintroduce these ancient secrets to our modern era. Between the globe-trotting and Nakamura's unwavering vision, Visvim may just be the world's first truly globalized, post-modern streetwear company—willing to hybridize past and future, cosmopolitanism and rusticity, local and remote in pursuit of the ideal product.

The story of Nakamura's unique production ethic begins in his quiet mountain hometown of Kofu, an hour and a half outside of Tokyo. While most Japanese brands take inspiration from Western music or U.S. and U.K. subcultures, Nakamura came to the fashion game from an entirely different angle. He spent his childhood mountain climbing and fishing in the nearby wilderness, and accompanied his parents on international excursions—camping, whale watching, and scuba diving. Although Nakamura shares the common foundational experience of traveling to Tokyo to shop in the youth district of Harajuku, he eschewed designer labels in favor of vintage Levi's and other classic outdoors brands.

Nakamura's sporting life eventually shifted towards skateboarding and snowboarding. He soon noticed, however, that his fascination with sporting gear often outpaced his attention to the actual athletic activity. At 18, he moved to Anchorage, Alaska for two years where he stood out amongst his peers due to an over-enthusiasm towards his outfits. Nakamura recalls, "In my head, I had this fantasy of U.S. culture. I dressed head-to-toe in American heritage brands: Levi's 1955 501s, the most rare Red Wing you can find, but nobody cared!"

Upon returning to Japan, Nakamura continued to snowboard and eventually became a founding member of Burton Japan. "I really liked Burton's product," explains Nakamura, "I don't know why, but I really felt something." He handled marketing, sales, and operations for the company, before taking on product

design for Japan-specific goods. The experience at Burton not only gave Nakamura the skills necessary to run a company, but greatly shaped his "product fundamentalist" philosophy: "Ever since I was young, I was interested in product performance, and Burton's performance was really good. Design is one thing, but it's the performance that gives the product its authenticity."

In 1999, Nakamura started to give serious thought to launching his own company that could be capable of possessing an equally admirable authenticity. He decided on the brand name Visvim, randomly combining two words in the V-section of an English dictionary.

One of the first Visvim products—a now-iconic moccasin slip-on—took 18 months to develop. He started selling the shoe in 2001, mostly to friends: "I would call them up and ask, 'Hey, do you want my shoe?' Actually it was even worse than that," he says. "I drew the shoe and sent the drawing to them and took orders. And then I took that order to the factory, saying 'I want to make shoes like this.'" Since then, Visvim's FBT moccasin has become a powerful symbol for the brand—the perfect balance between futuristic silhouette, functional comfort, and timeless style. "The moccasin is comfortable, and you can wear it year-round, without socks," explains Nakamura. "Native Americans wore this

The interior of Visvim's retail headquarters, F.I.L. (Free International Laboratory), in Tokyo, features a display case imported from a museum in the former East Germany.

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shoe everyday, and it's amazing that we can still wear it in Tokyo—as a fashion item.”

The success of the moccasin shoe quickly established Nakamura as an emerging talent, and by 2003, Visvim was producing five styles of footwear. That year, the brand also made its first move into the world of apparel with a plain white pocket T-shirt. This was no ordinary white shirt, however. Made from a custom yarn of Egyptian cotton, the shirt also took 18 months to develop: “I wanted to make something timeless, in the same approach to the shoes—something comfortable that you can wear all the time,” Nakamura says.

This patient obsession with comfort and function has recently led to a full apparel line that out-nerds the spec-obsessions of most streetwear fanatics: pigment-free elk-skin boots with cork insoles, vintage-inspired “slubby” jeans produced in world-famous Okayama denim factories, and ironically preppie recreations of Vietnam-era tropical combat jackets made from custom Egyptian seersucker cotton. Visvim's space-age backpacks offer laptop-sleeves and fleece-lined pockets especially sized for cell phones and iPods. The brand has worked closely with GoreTex to make beautiful parkas in heirloom-quilt-style madras check and classic border jackets that double as wind-proof motorcycle gear.

The current offerings prove that Nakamura will go to any length to source the world's best materials. He had to wait four years to join an exclusive organization in Japan that allows the use of top-class West Indian Sea Island Cotton grown in Jamaica and Barbados. He traveled to Tibet to find the perfect patterned indigenous color textiles, but when Tibetans could not be organized to produce the material within industry-friendly time schedules, Visvim instead hired an entire Guatemalan village to make the Mayan-inspired ethnic color taping now gracing its “Kiefer” update on the classic canvas hi-top.

Although patently modernist in theme, the interior of Visvim's minimalist Tokyo retail headquarters F.I.L. also brings together amazing specimens from all around the world. Visvim's shoes are displayed in a museum case imported from former East Germany, and customers can inspect themselves in giant mirrors rescued from the old Plaza Hotel in New York.

Within Japan, Visvim has quickly attained membership to the pantheon of elite brands. Just last season, the company was invited to collaborate with perennial avant-garde masters Comme des Garçons—working together to create a special shoe



Nomad Folk Jacket



Kiefer-Hi Mayan Canvas



FBT Lhamo - FOLK

and a few shirts for that brand's select shop Dover Street Market. Nakamura has also become something of a protégé of Japanese street-fashion godfather Hiroshi Fujiwara, whom Nakamura met back at Burton thanks to a mutual love of snowboarding. With the torch passed to Nakamura as the new standard-bearer for top-notch Japanese streetwear, Visvim is primed to reach the same heights as its predecessors. The Japanese market, however, is a bit less buoyant than in the heyday of the Ura-Harajuku street fashion boom in the 1990s. Nakamura admits, “The Japanese market is getting more mature. People don't need so much product. They want to have something that has meaning and lasts a long time. So that's what we want to do. We try to produce less. We try to sell less.”

In this spirit, Visvim is the perfect brand for the serious post-materialist global consumer. No gimmicks, no trinkets, no over-branding—only a steady stream of world-class products that transcend seasonal trends and work within every personal style. Visvim has already made a splash in the more established streetwear markets, but Nakamura seems ready to give back to the world that provides him with so much inspiration: “I don't see any differences between countries. Since we focus on function, our products should be comfortable for everyone. That is part of my original concept: I don't want to just create and sell my own worldview. I want to focus on the product. I want my grandmother and my daughter to be able to wear what we make.” Visvim's growth will continue to be cautious and steady, but with such superior products, Nakamura may just get his wish of providing for multiple generations, all across the world.