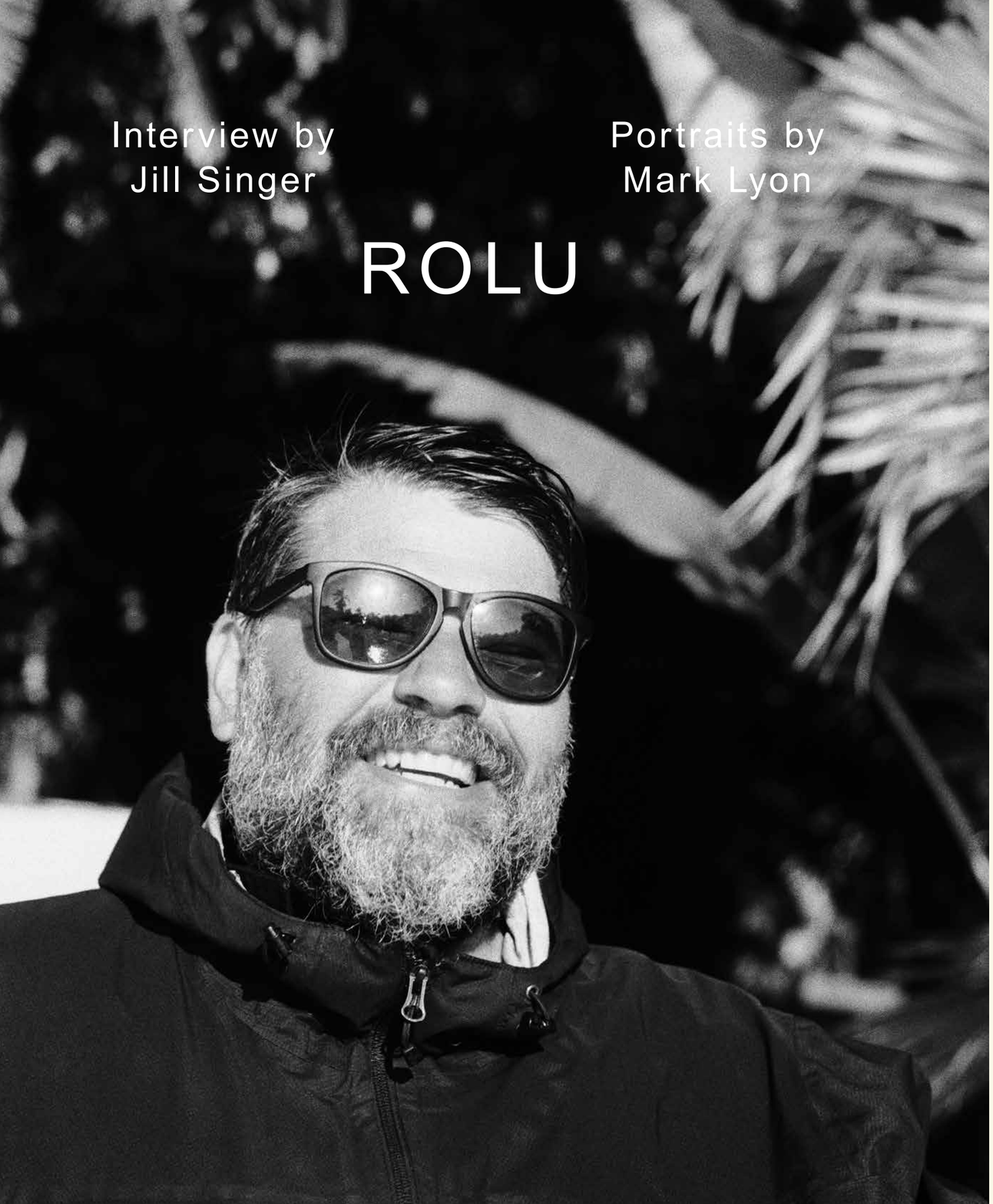

Interview by
Jill Singer

Portraits by
Mark Lyon

ROLU

What is ROLU? In its most literal sense, ROLU is co-founders Matt Olson and Mike Brady, former punk-rock musicians who met in Minneapolis in the early 1990s and began working together as landscape architects over a decade ago (the name ROLU pays tribute to their mothers' maiden names, Rosenlof and Lucas). In 2010, ROLU debuted their first furniture collection — a series of 22 pieces in plywood and oriented-strand board, inspired by sculptors and furniture greats like Scott Burton and Enzo Mari — that quickly shot them to the forefront of the American furniture-design scene. But to hear them tell it, ROLU is something much more amorphous than that. It is a concept and an ethos, both the sum of its influences and the result of a long list of collaborators, among whom are Patrick Parrish, the New York gallerist who gave them their first show and ultimately became their dealer, sound artist Alexis Georgopoulos, with whom they mounted an installation at New York's Museum of Arts and Design, and Sammie Warren, a one-time third partner who left ROLU just a few days before I met up with Olson at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens. Olson was on his way back to Minneapolis after a month-long residency on Captiva Island, the former home and studio of Robert Rauschenberg and the site of the inaugural Rauschenberg Residency. Olson is ROLU's figurehead and de facto mouthpiece — he's been running the firm's much-loved blog since 2007 — and, after spending a month on a private island with only a dozen or so residents, was ready to talk.

Jill Singer — **Let's start with the Captiva residency. Was there a specific project that you worked on there?**

Matt Olson — **We actually built these crazy aluminum chairs, new versions of our Primarily/Primary Chairs — the ones with the fur. Instead of the wood armature we used metal and acrylic. It's transparent, but really strong, too.**

JS **Did you go down there knowing what you were going to work on?**

MO **No. Rauschenberg's dream was to create a small version of Black Mountain College, kind of a collaborative free-for-all. So there were choreographers, photographers — everybody did something different. When they asked me, I was concerned because I'm not the maker in ROLU; Mike and Sammie make things, and I think things. So do they, but making things is not my role. But the Rauschenberg folks said, "If you want to just ride your bike and talk to people, that's fine too." It's really open. I also shot a music video when I was down there for Alexis Georgopoulos. I collaborated with a choreographer named Allie Hankins and we put a camera on her forehead to see the dance through her eyes. There was this beautiful French artist, Laura Brunellière, who helped and it was great because the choreographer would stop and then it was Laura's job to try and recreate the moves. She's not a dancer. So she would laugh and start trying to dance and you would see that through Allie's eyes. It was about the space in between them and learning in motion.**

JS **Being relatively isolated on Captiva, did you have any epiphanies or new thoughts about the way you guys practice ROLU?**

MO **I think it was almost more reinforcing. The way we work borders on recklessly plowing forward and trusting, rather than starting with a premise. A lot of friends who are designers are about narrowing; I'm more interested in expanding. While I was there, I was reading about Black Mountain College and thinking about the way Bob worked, and it was like, "Oh yeah, this does work out." Because sometimes I get scared that we should be more about precision and clarity, but now I'm pretty certain that will just come later.**

GETTING JOVIAL AND PLOWING FORWARD WITH ONE OF DESIGN'S MOST IRREVERENT THINKERS

JS **Is it possible that you feel that way because you're thinking rather than making, and you're trying to resolve all of these disparate ideas in your head?**

MO **I don't think there's a hierarchy to building versus thinking. I don't know that objects are really that different from ideas. I will remember this Noguchi sculpture and until I see it again in real life, it will just be an idea or a memory.**

A table and two chairs from the *Primarily/Primary* series. ROLU recently made an aluminum and acrylic version of the chair. *Primarily/Primary (After Carol Bove, Scott Burton, and Sol LeWitt)* (2011); Plywood, rope, wool felt. Courtesy of ROLU.

JS **Memory seems to play a big part in ROLU's work. You often create a piece in the spirit of another artist, but it's never a 1:1 reproduction, it's more like a half-remembered interpretation. I recently read a quote by you where you explained it like this: "We seek to recreate an image in a way that is vaguely related to appropriation, but since we generally re-contextualize the objects we reproduce by making them in simple hardware store materials, we think it has more in common with sampling in music." What do you mean by that?**

MO **My grandfather was a modern architect and, when I was little boy, he had this coffee-table book about Modern architecture. There were these pictures of the Mies van der Rohe Farnsworth House, four images on two pages and they were iconic. I'm sure you've seen them. They're still burned into my mind and I feel like, if I were able to draw, I could make them perfectly. When I started blogging, I started noticing that the way pictures surround us now is different and I was thinking about the way samples work in music. A lot of times you know the source, but it**

is becoming something else. That first line of furniture we did, which we called "Field Recordings Made of Wood," was trying to allude to that.

JS How so?

MO If you're standing in a public square, recording sound, things are unfolding at a fairly quick rate. That work happened like that. It was based on some Scott Burton stuff, some Schindler, some Rietveld, but it came together as a group. We came to New York and built 22 pieces in about two weeks. It was this fast-paced explosion that seemed more like a field recording, a set of sounds, than a strategic group of pieces. Most of the time we think about totality and what pieces mean to each other. But the only thing those pieces have in common is their material.

"WE'RE IN A MOMENT WHERE, IF YOU WANTED TO, YOU COULD WRITE YOUR OWN HISTORY."

JS I think when you look at them together they actually do seem very similar. They all share a certain visual blockiness, and many of them have a similar geometric base.

MO Yeah, but I think that's something outside of us. I believe there's some kind of order that we're a part of and it reveals itself. As a studio we create situations where work is produced but part of the outcome seems to be happening based on decisions that we never made. That's true of all the work we do. We're usually surprised by the outcome. There are definitely connections, but it's not necessarily by plan.

JS Going back to the overabundance of Internet imagery, I wanted to ask you if you were on Pinterest?

MO I'm not, no.

JS That's surprising.

MO I know, it is. I had to stop Tumblr, too, because it was too easy.

JS You like the thrill of the chase?

MO Yeah, and I like to learn. If it's too easy to just hit a button and it's on your wall then it's harder for me to care.

Matt Olson, Sammie Warren (a former ROLU member), and Mike Brady (left to right), posing for a 2012 group portrait by photographer Cameron Wittig. The formation is reminiscent of both the work by choreographer Trisha Brown and the artist Franz Erhard Walter.

JS I find Tumblr frustrating because so much isn't attributed. You find something, and you're like, "Oh my god! What is this amazing thing?", and you'll never know.

MO See, I like that. I've had a long debate with R. Gerald Nelson who wrote a book about Tumblr. He can't stand it that these images are out there and it doesn't say who it is. But I feel that it's leading to a breakdown of the academic, institutional hierarchy around art history. That excites me. We're in a moment where, if you wanted to, you could write your own history. An art historian would say this Noguchi sculpture doesn't have anything to do with Donald Judd. But it does to me — it's exciting to me that you can put Judd and Noguchi together and it makes a perfect image, visually.

JS Do you have any formal training in design or art?

MO No. I went to school for one year for psychology. My first semester I got a 0.0 grade point average — I flunked all my classes.

JS What were you doing?

MO Just drugs. The second year, I was asked to move along and I went to treatment. Then through my 20s I was in a band and toured.

JS But you were around design growing up?

MO My great-grandfather was a Herman Miller dealer in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and a few other small towns around the Midwest. And as I already said, my grandfather was an architect. My dad's dad was a violinist. To me, it all kind of makes sense.

JS You mean it's in your blood?

MO It is, in a way. But I do feel like I study. There's an architect named David Salmela who is based in Duluth, Minnesota, but works internationally. He's great, and is self-educated. Richard Nonas — he didn't study art. I'm always attracted to people like that. I know so many people who have, like, a Master of Fine Arts from Yale, so I'm a little self-conscious about it. But you know, when I did music for a living, I didn't know how to read the chords. People would urge me to study music, but then they'd say something like, "When you're writing and you need to be creative, you just forget everything you've been taught." And that never made sense to me! The upside is that, again, I don't have much sense of an institutional framework. To me, it makes perfect sense that the magazines of Archizoom connect to the zines of punk rock's past, and that punk rock's ethos connects to Enzo Mari's ***Autoprogettazione***, and that Sottsass connects to Angelo Plessas, and Kaprow makes me think of Abraham Cruzvillegas who connects back to punk rock. It doesn't seem like a linear set of events — it all seems like water, mixing together like the ocean. And the non-Internet exposure I've had to art history presents things in an impossibly boring and linear matter-of-fact fashion.

JS Even if you have an MFA from Yale, though, you have to keep it up. And you seem like you immerse yourself in this stuff everyday.

MO I do. This is my life. I have a wife and a dog and my interests and that's about it.

JS Your shows often have elliptical titles like "When Does Something Stop Becoming Something Else" and "Everything is Always Changing All the Time," which was a quotation from John Cage. Do you ever worry that, because you reference obscure texts, it will come across as overly intellectual or pretentious?

MO I can't control what anybody else thinks. But I am sometimes bummed out because I feel like I'm the most gregarious and jovial person and totally not intellectual at all. Sometimes people say, "Man, I don't know what the hell you're talking about," and I can tell that they're inferring that it's somehow convoluted in an intellectual way. But it doesn't feel that way to me. I think you just have to do what you want to do in life. You can't worry about what other people think.

JS Actually I've had one of those "I don't know what the hell you're talking about" moments! I didn't know who Scott Burton was before I knew your work. I was looking him up and I saw he has this seat that's kind of similar to the stools from Max Lamb's China Granite series. Have you ever talked about collaborating with Max?

The 2011 land art installation *Here There, There Here* in Joshua Tree National Park was a collaboration between ROLU and Laurel Broughton (pictured) of the Los Angeles-based architecture firm WELCOME PROJECTS.

MO We have talked about it. You know, somebody told me that Max Lamb didn't know Scott Burton's work, and I believe it because we had a crazy thing happen: we did a project at Sit and Read Gallery in Brooklyn last year where we poured a concrete Burton, and a week before that, Oscar Tuazon, one of my favorite working artists right now, poured a concrete Scott Burton in Rome! When I saw it, I got really anxious, but we really didn't know of each other's projects.

JS Did you contact Tuazon after the fact?

MO I did. And it was way more interesting than it was weird. I guess I believe there is some sort of order outside of us that makes that kind of thing probable.

JS I think part of it is the Internet, where all of those images are out there so much more than they would've been before.

MO I think we are all becoming each other, and the Internet is speeding it up. We're all seeing the same things and sharing the same ideas. It only makes sense that people would come to the same conclusions. How many blogs look just like ***Haw-Lin***? But nobody's like, "This is bullshit!" One of the things I'm interested in is, if you say something to me that's profound and it enters me and I carry it around, when does that become me? Or does it always stay you? And where did it come from before you? I think there's something really productive in seeing the ways in which we're connected. I also think a lot of artists or designers feel nervous about saying, "Yeah, this is based on a Noguchi," they hope nobody knows. That doesn't seem productive to me. We've always been excited to share what we're doing and where it's coming from. Almost every piece we do says "after" at least one person — after Carol Bove, after Scott Burton, after Sol LeWitt. We want to point to the past and its presence in our now.

JS At Design Miami last year, you released a geometric shelving system with Mondo Cane, but it wasn't named after another artist — it was called "Seven Stacked Benches (After Shelves)." Was that meant to be tongue-in-cheek?

MO We always want to point to a place where something's come from. In the same way a chair informed by Burton is "after Burton," these are shelves, but they aren't shelves in the way most people would think of them. They're seven benches that stack and happen to form shelves. In our minds, books don't sit in rows, and objects are not ordered. They lean against and support and become each other by mistake and by chance. So we tried to create shelves that put forth an opportunity to create an environment that looks like the mind looks to us.

JS Even though ROLU is primarily known now for furniture, your scope is much wider, in part because you're often collaborating with those outside the design world. What are some other recent projects?

MO Absolutely! Heck, we're doing all kinds of stuff. I was just commissioned by a group of museum directors who had a symposium at the Aspen Institute called "Propositions for the Future of the Art Museum." It was a really impressive group of people, if a bit intimidating, and I did a project to kick off the symposium. It was a film and a book and a set of activities, and it was set up like an A.A. meeting. I felt they were addicts and that their institutions had become addicted to a way of thinking about patrons and art and money and parties and publicity. We made Hélio Oiticica-shaped cookies and sent bad little Styrofoam cups and Folger's coffee for them to drink. And then the book, it's funny, it was really about love. I was encouraging them to take a daily accounting with the staff of the love that happens inside the buildings they run. People fall in love in museums; people fall in love with objects, ideas, they get hope. There's so much love, but I don't feel like institutions ever really think about it that much, so I think it's a great moment for them to ask themselves what they could do. Although I don't really know anything about institutions. [Laughs.]

In 2012 ROLU collaborated with Athens-based architect Andreas Angelidakis, who designed the collective's first solo show Objects For Constructing One's Own Interior, at Volume Gallery, Chicago. The pictured MDF shelving system was also part of the exhibition.

JS And yet lately you've been working with so many of them. This summer you were in residence at the Walker Art Center for two weeks. Did you run into any problems because you weren't used to working with that kind of monolithic organization?

MO When the chief curator of the Walker heard we were going to be remaking work from their collection during our residency, she was rightfully very concerned. [Laughs.]

JS What did you make?

MO We remade about 22 pieces: a Richard Nonas piece, an Ellsworth Kelly, a Sherrie Levine, a Félix González-Torres. We made 350 On Kawara "Date Paintings." We did Yoko Ono's ***War is Over***. She actually wrote to me, which was cool.

JS Whoa, that's a future collaborator right there!

MO She was very brief: just thank you for doing this project. It was absolutely beautiful.

JS How does the landscape design aspect of your work fit into all of this? Do you still even do that?

MO Oh yes, totally. We're working on cool stuff right now. That part of the practice is different because the stuff we make and show at the gallery is really expensive. The idea behind the landscape part was always that we could also afford it ourselves.

JS Has your landscape design practice changed at all since the ROLU name has become so much better known?

MO Yes, a lot of times people will say stuff like, "Oh we just assumed you didn't do this anymore." I think people are confused, and it probably hurts the business side of things. [Laughs.]

"THERE'S SO MUCH LOVE, BUT INSTITUTIONS DON'T EVER REALLY THINK ABOUT IT THAT MUCH."

JS How did you and Mike originally meet?

MO Mike studied art, and he had a day job doing construction and building. I knew Mike from music and I had been working in advertising as an account planner. I had spent my 20s doing music and I thought, "I've got to do something real," so I thought I could go into advertising. It was not my thing at all, actually. So I wasn't working and Mike was doing this big landscape project for the director of the Walker Art Museum at the time. He said, "You want to come and work on this project with me?" I was like, "Yes," and he was like, "Really?", and that's how it started. Something just clicked. But when it comes to being a business, the only way we knew how to do it was like a band.

The Burgess residence in Saint Paul, Minnesota, (2011) is but one example for the continuing success of ROLU's thriving landscape architecture practice.

JS What do you mean?

MO Like using fliers and the Internet. Sending a signal into the world. We didn't go to the bank and say, "We need a loan for 400,000 dollars to get an office." We used my old Volvo and we were driving around like "Sanford and Son" piled up the back. I think it was about three years in that we got too busy, so then I went to the office side and Mike took over the building stuff. But we always wanted to sprawl. We were like, "We want to do furniture. We want to do big art projects with the public." I think we must have sounded really naïve.

JS To what do you attribute the fact that you've actually been able to do all that, and be successful at it, too?

MO Trust. And just doing what you care about. It sounds like a cheesy corporate poster, but I think if you're doing what you love, it will guide you where you should be. It's been the case for us. We feel really lucky and grateful. A lot of it has to do with the people we've met. They've been really supportive and generous and friendly and kind.

JS So we've been through furniture, set design, landscape architecture, film, music videos... Anything else?

MO You know, there was a documentary on PBS a year or so ago about the Eameses. And I was struck by how the people who worked with them for years were astounded by the breadth of stuff Charles and Ray worked on. They'd be like, "One day we'd come to the office and they'd be like, 'We're going to make a film today! We have to move all the desks.' And we'd come back the next day and they'd say, 'Let's put it all back together, we're going to work on a park.'" I got kind of mad; I was like, "That's not weird, you're weird. Look out into the world! How can you just do only architecture?!" When we were starting ROLU, maybe we were naïve to think we could work on so many things, but I'm glad we were naïve in that way.

ROLU's classic 2010 plywood *Shape Chair Zag* got a colorful makeover in 2011 in collaboration with the artist Timothy Carlson. The chair was sold in a limited edition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Image courtesy ROLU.

JS Speaking of the Eameses, is there a historical figure you consider to be the patron saint of ROLU?

MO I would say Rauschenberg. I would also say John Cage. I would say Yves Klein. I would say Noguchi. I would say the Eameses. It's kind of like, what would anything be without everything else?

PLATES — pages 78–79, 82–83

1 *A Set for Making Love (After Guy de Cointet + Hermès Throw)* (2012); Shelves: Walnut, blue laminate; Chairs: pink laminate, walnut, orange felt; Size variable; Courtesy of Mondo Cane, New York.

2 *Seven Stacked Benches (After Shelves)* (2012); Plywood; 18 x 72 x 18 inches; Courtesy of Mondo Cane, New York.

3 *Cube Chairs and Table* (2010); Plywood; Size variable; Courtesy of Mondo Cane, New York.

4 *After U.R. (A Magnetic Superbox)* (2011); Stained OSB; 24 x 28 x 61 inches; Courtesy of Volume Gallery, Chicago.

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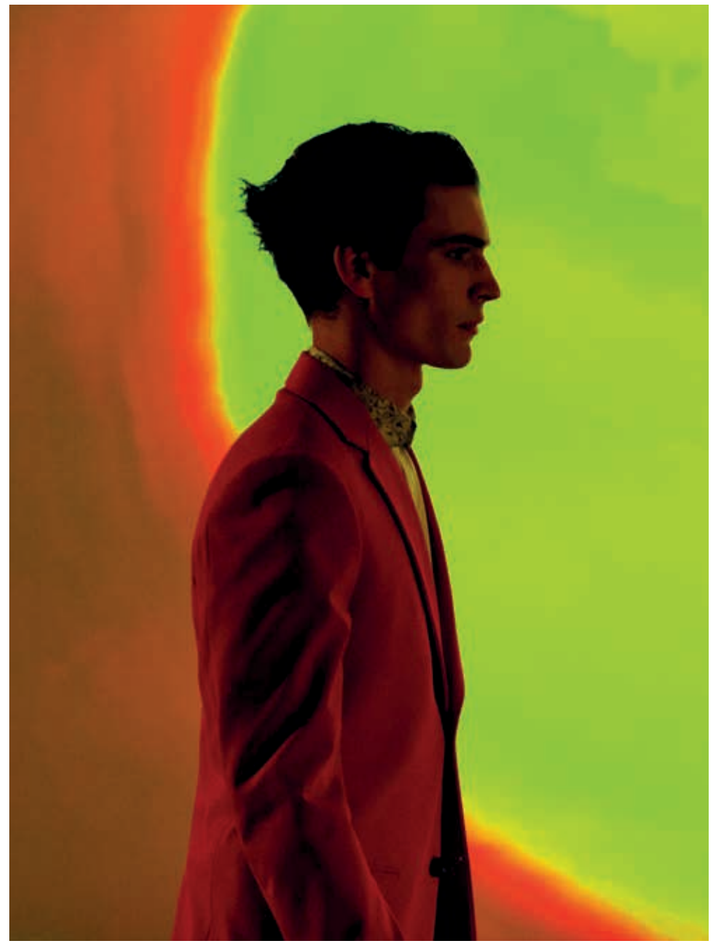

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