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Oscar de la Renta's Next Big Act



Portrait by Christopher Sturman

STANDING TALL | Oscar de la Renta in his apartment on Park Avenue.

On an almost balmy January day in Manhattan, Oscar de la Renta is lunching in his Seventh Avenue office, the same space he's occupied since 1965, the year he launched his first collection under his own name. Seated around the mahogany table that he designs for Century Furniture—modeled after the original Jupe dining table in his Park Avenue apartment—are his stepdaughter, Eliza Bolen, the creative director for licensing at Oscar de la Renta, Ltd., and her husband, Alex Bolen, the company's CEO. Lunch consists, as it often does, of delicious takeout Indian from the designer's favorite neighborhood spot; the conversation runs from de la Renta's dislike of Queen Isabella ("All the troubles in the world started when she expelled the Jews and the Arabs") to the "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" (he preferred the Swedish version). Finally, talk shifts to how de la Renta hit upon the name of his latest fragrance, *Live in Love*. "I didn't want it to be about a person," he says. "It's loving the life you live, what you give, what you have received."

If anyone defines the ethos of the scent, it is de la Renta himself. He loves his wife of 22 years, the extremely private and wickedly funny Annette, and their menagerie of eight rescue dogs, who, he says, "rule our lives." He loves their house in Kent, Connecticut, where he's created gardens that supply "the most spiritual and purest of joys," and the house in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, where he has built an orphanage and day care center that serves more than 1,200 children. He works side-by-side with his stepdaughter, he dotes on his adopted son Moises, and he has an enormously wide range of close friends, all of whom say pretty much the same thing that Nancy Kissinger did years ago: "Oscar and Annette are the two most thoughtful people I've ever known."

Photos: You Rest, You Rust



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OSCAR DE LA RENTA ARCHIVES

Relaxing in the living room of his Casa de Campo home for a 1988 'House & Garden' story

That thoughtfulness is in evidence not just through their patronage of the arts (he is chairman of the Queen Sofia Spanish Institute and serves on the board at the Metropolitan Opera and at Carnegie Hall, and she is a trustee at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), but also in their generosity with their friends. Over Christmas the Kissingers were among the close group who gathered in Punta Cana, including Barbara Walters, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Charlie

Rose. "We have two house rules," says Oscar, laughing. "There can be no conversation of any substance and nothing nice about anyone."

As de la Renta edges up to the eureka moment of the perfume's name, it's easy to imagine the designer experiencing a heartwarming epiphany while dancing a merengue after a typically raucous dinner on the wide balcony of his coral stone house, say, or maybe during a weekend in Connecticut, while pruning roses with his latest dog, Albert ("He's supposed to be a Golden Retriever," he says), by his side. Instead, Bolen excuses himself and returns with a man he introduces as Raffaele Ilardo. Ilardo worked for a decade at Chanel in Paris and then at Dior; since 2009 he's headed up de la Renta's pattern room. One day last year, just as the designer was despairing over ever finding something to call the new scent—"Every single name we came up with was already taken," he says—Ilardo rolled up his sleeve during a fitting, and there it was on his forearm: a tattoo that read "Live in Love."

Despite all of de la Renta's gentlemanly, old-world fabulousness, he's also very much a modern man of the world, who would just as soon take a title from a tattoo as an engraved bracelet—which is where Ilardo first saw the line. One of his own most repeated lines is "You rest, you rust," a mantra that goes a long way toward explaining not only the remarkable relevance—and extraordinary popularity—of his label almost a half century into his career, but also the fact that at 79 he is embarking on yet another chapter. Currently, the brand is pursuing an ambitious expansion plan, venturing into new categories, including cosmetics and childrenswear, and dusting off older ones, such as fragrance, all of which will be produced in-house. It's a push that is less about himself and more about his name and all that it has come to represent. In Bolen he has found his successor.

In 2008 the company entered into a complex legal dispute against L'Oréal, the biggest cosmetics company in the world, to regain control of the brand's beauty trademark. De la Renta launched his signature fragrance in 1977, becoming one of the first American designers to do so. Other de la Renta scents, including Pour Lui and Volupté, followed, and at its peak in 1990, the entire franchise did an estimated \$300 million in global retail sales. But over the years, the fragrance license was sold and resold (from Avon to El Sanofi to YSL Beauté to L'Oréal), so that by the time Bolen began his crusade to terminate the license, the original Oscar fragrance could best be found, in drastically dumbed-down packaging, at Walmart, Target and Kohl's. As one department-store buyer put it to Bolen, "Why should I stock a scent that's in every drugstore in Texas?"

"When Alex first came to me, I was hesitant," de la Renta says. "When you take on the biggest cosmetics company in the world, you have to think twice. But they put us in a position where we couldn't not do it." Bolen was eager to capitalize on the fragrances' potential, but he also felt that their increasingly tawdry image was beginning to have a negative impact on the fashion business. (Between 2005 and 2010, de la Renta fragrance sales fell 39 percent, to \$15 million, while at the same time, the fashion house saw a 17.7 percent growth in sales.) It took 18 months in the courts and what Bolen can describe because of confidentiality agreements only as "a big pile of money." Entertaining snippets from the arbitration include the designer quoting, in French, the Baudelaire poem that gave his Volupté fragrance its name. But there was nothing funny about their intent. In the end, de la Renta secured the rights. "It's indicative of what we are doing in the company across the board," Bolen says. The settlement was quickly followed by a cash infusion from GF Capital Management and Advisors, who in 2010 quietly bought an approximately 20 percent stake in the company for an undisclosed sum.

Since the fragrance arm has been brought in-house, the plan is to shrink the brand's exposure, canceling lower-end outlets, followed by a revitalization of existing products. The original Oscar and its attendant bath products have received updated and far finer packaging, and last spring, just in time for Mother's Day, a fresher, less powdery spin-off called Esprit d'Oscar was introduced. Industry sources estimate that the latter has already reached more than \$7 million in sales, while Live in Love has a first-year target of \$15 million in retail sales worldwide.

De la Renta's timing is all the more impressive given that last year, the designer had a cancer scare that prompted those who clearly didn't know him well to assume he would slow down. Now cancer-free, he says, "The most abused word in the world is 'retirement.' Every single day for me is a learning process. Why should I stop doing something that brings me so much pleasure?" Having watched the brand of his late friend Bill Blass languish due to a revolving door of designers, de la Renta wants to make sure his company lives on long after he does. "My silent worry was always, What will happen to my business when I am gone? And now I don't have to worry about that," he says.

In 2004 he convinced Bolen, who was an investment banker at Bear Stearns, to take the reins at the company where Eliza, who signed on in 1995, was already well ensconced. The threesome takes inspiration from multigenerational family firms like Hermès and Salvatore Ferragamo, who have so far held on to their independence despite encroachment from corporate conglomerates. In the past year and a half, a number of key players have joined the mix. Jean Zimmerman, a longtime Chanel executive, now consults at de la Renta as executive at large in the fragrance division, and Manolo Blahnik veteran Annelie Hofstrom oversees footwear, which Bolen hopes to turn into a \$50 million entity within the next three years. In addition, Catherine Monteiro de Barros, founder and designer of the now defunct Papo D'Anjo, will helm the children's line (which will include clothing for boys and girls, infants to age 14), and Miles Redd, a well-known interior decorator who is already the creative director for Oscar de la Renta Home, will be in charge of the extensive new home-accessories line that is set to launch in late spring.

Bolen estimates last year's sales at the company—including everything from "the stuff we shipped to fragrance distributors to customers in our retail stores," at about \$130 million, an estimated \$600 million in global retail sales. He thinks that "with the human and capital resources we have today," the company can double or triple its business in the next three to five years.

In order to meet the goal, Bolen says, "We have to keep renewing the franchise Oscar has created. What motivates all of us is wanting to make Oscar proud." Bolen is clearly enjoying his current role as brand builder, but when he accepted the CEO position in 2004, it was with some reluctance. "Can you imagine the hornet's nest, coming to work with my wife, and with my wife's family?" But he sensed enormous potential in the brand and decided to come on board. "I was asking questions like, 'Why don't you have freestanding retail stores?' and Oscar would say something along the lines that he was under the impression that it was difficult. So I'd say, 'Why don't we try?'"

De la Renta is gratified and amused by how much Bolen took to the creative aspects of the job. "It's hard to find someone on the business side that has an eye," he says seriously, before joking that "Alex is head designer, by the way. I tell him that Parsons [the New School for Design] is across the street and they have night classes."

Later this month, the family love-in will move to new quarters overlooking Bryant Park, in a 35,000-square-foot space that is twice the size of their former offices. After Bolen found the spot, he and Eliza were terrified to approach the designer about relocating. After all, de la Renta had worked at the same address for almost his entire career. He was delighted. "If you don't move, you get stale," he says. There is the added bonus of the narrow terrace running across the front of the building, where Bolen plans to keep beehives on one end and tomato plants on the other. "Before I came to America, in every Hollywood film I saw there was a cocktail party on a terrace," says de la Renta. "And then I arrived in New York and there were no terraces."

One of the bigger sections of the new space will be occupied by the new beauty team, whose job has been made easier thanks to de la Renta's hard-won personal connections at beauty counters the world over. When Volupté was launched in 1990, the designer gave a cocktail party or a breakfast for the "counter ladies" at each of the 22 cities where he made appearances. "They are so important to selling the fragrance," he said at the time. "The girl must feel she has a relationship, that she is working for someone she knows."

On recent promotional forays for Live in Love, de la Renta and the Bolens were happily surprised to meet a lot of the same, slightly older "girls." "In a world where there's a fragrance launch every day, that kind of goodwill goes a long way," says Bolen.

Next up on the fragrance front is a bridal scent called Something Blue, which came about after Aerin Lauder, a close friend of the Bolens', called to borrow a wedding gown to use in an ad campaign for Estée Lauder's Beautiful. (Lauder was the senior vice president and creative director of her grandmother's beauty company until last year, when she left to launch her own lifestyle brand.) "A lightbulb went off," Bolen says, and the result, to be released in June, is a scent with top notes of stephanotis, a bridal-bouquet staple that also infuses the breakfast area at Punta Cana, beautifully packaged in a white silk "ring box" lined in pale-blue suede.

The fact that so many aspects of de la Renta's business are being moved in-house facilitates such lightbulb moments. Bolen realizes they have lots of fabric left over from collections and a children's line is born. He overhears de la Renta telling the makeup artist for a recent runway show that he wants a "real Picasso red" for the nail polish, and a color cosmetics collection follows. Limited to a single bronzer, nails and lips, the first collection, which will debut this fall, will feature six nail and lip colors, with two new shades added each season.

For now the makeup will be sold only in de la Renta's 12 freestanding boutiques. In addition to new stores opening this spring in Saudi Arabia and on London's Mount Street, the New York City flagship on Madison Avenue will double in size after expanding into the building next door. Bolen is also currently negotiating a lease on a townhouse off of Fifth Avenue that will become the luxurious home to all things bridal, from gowns and accessories and party dresses to the new tabletop items that will constitute a registry. He envisions it as a "jewel box of environment with no distractions" where brides can spend the day in comfort. "And if the property I'm working on this week doesn't work out, then I'll go on to the next one," he says.

Bolen identifies the let's-put-on-a-show approach, in which the Oscar team seems willing to try pretty much anything, as the company's strength. "We don't have the advantages that a Gucci Group or an LVMH has; we don't have the public stock or the muscle to apply to some mall owner," he says. "But we can move quickly. If things we identify as market opportunities work, we can put more resources into them. If they don't, we can cut our losses and move on."

Another strength is, of course, de la Renta himself. In many ways the current expansion is a well-thought-out plan to showcase and profit from almost every aspect of the designer's life. Redd says that the home line that launches this spring will be divided into categories called City, Island and Country, "the places where Oscar has his houses," and everything will be done with "an ODLR sensibility." De la Renta, who never misses the staff domino game in his Punta Cana kitchen, has insisted on a set of dominoes, for example.

The new home line will be available in Oscar boutiques and select department stores, as well as at a more laid-back shop at Tortuga Bay in the Punta Cana Resort & Club that de la Renta developed with friend Julio Iglesias and three other partners. (De la Renta is the chairman of Grupo Punta Cana.) Part of yet another "test," the shop, which opened in November, features island-y clothes and accessories and might well become a prototype for similar, more casual resort-based stores around the globe.

"I do worry sometimes that we're getting into too much stuff," Bolen says, but he adds that the whole point of the current shift—which he likes to refer to as "an evolution, not a revolution"—is the lack of disconnect between "what we're doing and where we make our money." Beginning around the early '70s, designers began licensing their names to producers of everything from fragrance and sheets to jeans and menswear. At one point, there was even a Bill Blass Mercury sedan. The collections—usually the only "product" made by the designer himself—were increasingly used to drive the sales of the more lucrative licensed products. But it's a road fraught with peril. At worst a designer can end up losing control of his own name. At best there can be a creeping gap between the sensibility of the designer and the sunglasses—or whatever else—that might earn him a check.

"The thing about Oscar is that we know about his life," Bolen says. "He's as well known for his dresses as for the way he conducts himself every day." Yet every day, at the office at least, it is the dresses that remain de la Renta's focus. He still personally fits every single piece of clothing that goes down the runway and is engaged in every aspect of their development. Most mornings begin with iPad consultations with his factory in Italy. Recent missives in response to emailed photos of his upcoming fall collection include: "The dresses look okay but they are not edgy enough...The pink on top of that dress has no relation to the bottom...We need some long sleeves. Keep me posted." In the showroom, which is where he spends all his time—"I am never in my office," he says. "All I need is a chair"—de la Renta multitasks, one minute okaying a gorgeous tie-dyed crepe de chine with over-embroidery and sequins that will end up as a dress and a suit, choosing the pelts for a sable poncho the next. An old sweater of Annette's has been reworked and approved; he rejects a piece of fabric, over Bolen's objection, as not being blue enough.

Indeed, if his business is on a roll, so is de la Renta's relevance as a designer. His most recent collection, for spring 2012, was met with rave reviews. Critics praised his "exuberance" and cited the "insouciant luxe" that he does "like no one else," as well as a new "edginess" that reinvigorated his typical "glamour and elegance." At the show, Justin Timberlake and Ashley Olsen took front-row seats with such longtime clients as Barbara Walters. The mix of age and sensibility reflects his clientele. (Walters might go for the embroidered day dresses, and Olsen could easily carry off the crush pleated silk tulle strapless gown.) His multigenerational appeal may well lie in the fact that the designer himself is forever looking forward. He says—in an "Oscar-ism" inscribed on resin bangles sold only on the brand's Facebook page: "I have the memory of a mosquito." Astonishingly, he has never kept a single archive. "Why should I?" he asks. "I love now and tomorrow. What I did in the past doesn't interest me."