“You need to give time some time,” explains Roland Herlory, the CEO of Vilebrequin, as he reveals a fresh collab of three prominent artists with the famed brand, which he has quietly built into the market leader in luxury swimwear.
The launch – with a boldface-name trio of Sylvie Fleury, Kenny Scharf and John M. Armleder - is just one of multiple projects overseen by Herlory. He was also recently named CEO of Sonia Rykiel, following its acquisition by New York-based G-III, which acquired Vilebrequin in late 2021. Happily, Herlory predicts the same strategic approach to building the latest authentic luxury marque to enter the American group.

That careful approach is evident in Vilebrequin’s latest collab. Vilebrequin had originally planned a quartet, but when African-American artist Mickalene Thomas's ideas proved too complex to complete on time, the brand pushed her launch back.

“Our fourth artist even wasn’t ready. Mickalene Thomas is all about pushing boundaries, and that takes time. We have to respect that, and her dreams,” insists Herlory over coffee in Paris rooftop restaurant La Plume.

An unusually cerebral executive, Herlory got the idea of the art collab from his desire to work with publisher JRP Editions, and its founder Lionel Bovier, a noted curator and director of MAMCO, the key modern museum of Geneva, where Vilebrequin is based.

“A priori, we wanted to work with artists expressing themselves in textiles as natural engagement in their art. I was hesitant to mix art and fashion. But Lionel knew whose work could fit logically into our universe,” muses Roland.

Fleury is often termed an “appropriation artist,” since she borrows and blends the artifacts and imagery of popular American culture and European luxury with absurdist irony. Her flaming exhaust take on Vilebrequin bathing costumes echoes Fleury’s obsessions with American convertibles.

Scharf, whose style could be the haute couture of street art, previously partnered with Dior for a Saint-Laurent-in-Miami-themed collection. Scharf’s shorts are a remix of his friendly grinning graffiti monsters, or a series of crabs, a Vilebrequin fetish crustacean. While Armleder’s links to Neo-Geometric Conceptualism led unexpectedly to gestural abstraction.
Each artist’s ideas are fleshed out with towels, beach hats, bikinis and linen shirts. Starting in spring, Vilebrequin will retail them in just 20 boutiques, and online via the websites of the marque. Though probably not in e-tailers, even if Vilebrequin works with all the majors – Net-A-Porter, Mytheresa, Zalando and Farfetch.

“I don’t want them to be sold like any other maillots. They are not a work of art, but art extensions of an artist's work. So, they need to be sold with the right explanation," he sniffs.

In effect, the link-up is as much about image as coin. Since Vilebrequin could earn 10 times as much from a partnership with a major league designer.

“But we need to dream to make our clients dream. So, this raises the level of our brand and generates energy. Secondly, this pushes forward our usual technical frontlines. We all learn something in the process. And thirdly, there’s the feeling that when you work with beauty and rarity that makes you proud,” concludes Herlory, whose weakness for broad corduroy pants and tweedy jackets make him look far more like an intellectual than an executive.

Vilebrequin’s earliest artist collab was with Massimo Vitali, the Italian photographer famed for his large-format photos of beach scenes.

“Massimo is the artist of the beach, which is where Vilebrequin began. He loved the brand, and to create the right image asked people to wear white shorts on beaches in places like the Presqu’île de Giens or Porquerolles. Imposing image on image on image. To respect the work of the artist was technically very difficult just to make sure the image continues correctly into the pocket. But we did it,” he beams. The results were a slew of legendary swimming togs, beachwear icons.

Subsequently, he added Alex Israel, Derrick Adams, Donald Sultan, the Rolling Stones and Karl Lagerfeld to the mix. More recently Palm Angels and Space Jam, the movie, and in 10 years Roland hopes to stage a real exhibition of all the collaborations.
Last year Vilebrequin celebrated the 50th anniversary of the brand's founding back in 1971, when color-blind sports photographer and racecar fan Fred Prysquel dreamed up the idea of really cool new swimmers. After sewing the first pair himself and winning admirers, he named his brand Vilebrequin after the French word for 'crankshaft'.

Subsequently, Pierre Blum of Ebel watches ended up buying Vilebrequin and moved it to Geneva over 20 years ago. One decade ago, G-III, licensee of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, bought Vilebrequin from the Dutch Fashion Fund One for 85.5 million euros, almost double the brand’s 2011 sales, which amounted to 45 million euros.

G-III, which is quoted on the Nasdaq, does not break out Vilebrequin’s annual sales, though Herlory claims its “around €100 million, or €200 million at retail.” On Thursday, G-III reported profits of $200 million of annual turnover of $2.77 billion; compared to $23.5 million and $2.06 billion a year earlier.

Herlory is full of praise for G-III CEO Morris Goldfarb.

“Morris loves to construct brands. He has a not-so-big group of brands. And he loves the carefully strict way we are building Vilebrequin. Americans can be very aggressive about growth. But Morris support and accepts a longer rhythm at Vilebrequin. Yes, we grow each year but at a natural rhythm for the brand, adding territories but with care. And that is the way we will proceed at Rykiel,” says Herlory, who speaks good English, but did the interview in French.

Herlory became CEO at G-III’s takeover, after spending 23 years at Hermès where he held titles such as commercial director of group; director for Latin America, and was in charge of special projects for Jean-Louis Dumas, that brand’s most brilliant CEO.

“I was attracted to Vilebrequin because it was a true reference on its demesne. It had real integrity by inventing something – the first true swimming shorts, built to enjoy la page. And we wanted to push this exercise in excellence further and be an inventive brand,” explains Herlory, who celebrated his own half-century recently, an event that made him swear he would only tell the truth in future.
For the first two years everything was focused on “upgrading, upgrading and upgrading.” Making sure they used only the best-quality lining, tips, elastic materials and netting, a key element as Vilebrequin shorts are noted for being mega comfortable and drying quickly. Aided by netting made of polyester thread, surrounded with cotton. Trunks are made of 100% stretch polyamide spun in France, while printing is part French and Italian. Using high density yarn, the fabrics are brushed with glass paper to create a sort of micro-velvet moleskin.

“Touch is what gives you a sense of comfort. It’s a natural human feeling,” smiles Herlory, a provincial lad brought up in the eastern Metz, who came to Paris to study at the Sorbonne.

What, one wondered, did he learn at Hermès that he applies at Vilebrequin?

“Quality and durability. For me, true eco-sustainability is durability. Something that last years. So, we can always repair our shorts, change elastic or netting. That I got from Hermès. Today, all our thread is recyclable. We take the polyamide from fish nets and even from carpets. Even thinner stuff is taken from bottles. We also work with 1,500 fishermen in Spain,” he affirms.

Currently, Vilebrequin has some 200 self-standing stores, including in 10 airports, some as small as 20 square meters. Plus, the brand retails in around 150 sales points via top-level department stores like KVD, Harrods, Selfridges, Galeries Lafayette, Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus, Saks and Bloomingdales.

“I know many department stores have had major problems, but some American department stores have been doing very well with their dotcoms. But in my view, the Internet is really a racket. If you pay more for the click, you get a higher position on Google. It’s practically like gang warfare. We pay 85 cents for a click when people search for luxury swimming trunks, and more when it’s in high season!” he harrumphs.

By Godfrey Deeny

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