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Allen, Emma. "Magic Lantern," *The New Yorker*. May 6, 2013.

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ONE WORLD DEPT.  
MAGIC LANTERN



Last week, Reed Krakoff announced that he would be leaving his longtime job, as the creative head of Coach, to focus on his own fashion line, the Reed Krakoff collection—minimalist luxury sportswear that is favored by, among others, Michelle Obama. But, before he could turn his attention to the transition, he had a project to complete in Chelsea.

In a back room of the Friedman Benda gallery one recent morning, Evans Wadongo, a twenty-seven-year-old engineer from Kenya, waited nervously for Krakoff. Wadongo was wearing jeans and a charcoal-gray sweater vest buttoned over a checked shirt. He is the inventor of a safe, easy-to-fabricate alternative to kerosene lanterns, a solar lamp called MwangaBora—Swahili for “good light”—which he distributes to villagers in Kenya and Malawi, through a nonprofit he founded. He was hoping that Krakoff could apply his Midas touch to the lamp project.

Krakoff, who is forty-nine and mostly bald, strolled in. He had on jeans, a navy polo shirt, and glasses with thick black frames. The two men were meeting for the first time, to oversee the installation of a so-called “charitable selling exhibition” of a thousand lamps, which cost twenty-five dollars each to produce, and would be offered for two hundred and fifty dollars, to benefit the nonprofit. The lamps are the same ones that Wadongo supplies to rural communities—they are made from scrap metal, with glass globes, and are shaped like camping lanterns. But, at the gallerist Marc Benda’s request, these had been editioned, stamped with the numbers one through one thousand. Krakoff had also designed small felt sheaths, in a variety of bright colors, to cover the lanterns’ handles—the flourish, perhaps, that would make the lamps as desirable as this season’s must-have handbag.

“I didn’t want to do anything that was in any way decorative, or that would obscure the seriousness of what it is, because it is a serious thing,” Krakoff said. “In terms of color, literally we just saw what excess felt we had in the warehouse.”

“Yes, it’s a bit of something that makes it look more

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attractive,” Wadongo said. “It looks like something that someone would want to keep for a long time.” (Of Krakoff’s fashion designs, he added, “In Chicago, I just met a lady with one of your bags and she *really* loves that bag.”)

Wadongo had flown in from Wisconsin, which he deemed “kind of rural,” and where he’d been speaking with students about social change. Before that, he’d been in Chicago, and in St. Louis, at the Clinton Global Initiative. He was Kenya’s torchbearer at the London Olympics. “But my favorite city is New York,” he said. “I don’t like L.A.—L.A. has a lot of wannabes. Everyone wants to be a big star.”

“I haven’t spent any time in Africa,” Krakoff confessed.

“I’m inviting you to come!” Wadongo said.

Benda, the gallerist, piped up: “It’s very easy to give some money to a charity, or go on a safari, but this is a project where you’re not just giving money to someone who goes to China to buy some lamps.”

“There’s a genuineness to it,” Krakoff said. A gallery assistant brought him a cup of black coffee on a silver tray.

Wadongo designed his lamp when he was nineteen, and a freshman at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, in Nairobi. So what was Krakoff up to when he was nineteen?

“I think I was getting kicked out of boarding school,” Krakoff said. Wadongo, who walked more than ten kilometres each day to get to school, laughed.

Krakoff is from Weston, Connecticut, and he now lives in an eighteen-thousand-square-foot town house on the Upper East Side. Wadongo grew up in Malava, a village in western Kenya, with no electricity, where he witnessed the adverse effects of kerosene-lantern use. (He still experiences eye problems from the smoke; many of his friends dropped out because they could not afford to study by lamplight at night.) Wadongo provides his solar lamps, which are manufactured by local teen-agers, to groups of women, who pool the money they save by not buying kerosene and start small businesses.

In the gallery, art installers hung the lanterns, which would be illuminated for display in a grid along three walls.

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“We talked about a Rothko Chapel kind of meditative space that just gave people a place to feel something that they don’t usually,” Krakoff said.

At the opening, later that week, Wadongo sipped prosecco and watched Brendan Fallis—the official d.j. of *Vogue*—spin records. Guests plucked lanterns off the walls and carried them around, like spelunkers in stilettos. One young woman, dressed all in black, bought a lamp with a gray handle (No. 713).

“Oh, my God, it’s so cute. My cats are going to love it. I want, like, four more,” she said, and then posed for a photograph with her new acquisition. As the party wound down, the lanterns began to dim. They needed to be put back out in the sun.

—*Emma Allen*