

At Milan Fashion Week, Highs and Lows

Milan's menswear showcase felt particularly frail this season, though there were a few standouts, reports Angelo Flaccavento.

By Angelo Flaccavento



MILAN — The menswear season in Milan opened with a *cauchemar*: an official communication saying Mr Armani was “recovering” at home after a brief hospital stay, and would not be present at either his Giorgio or Emporio shows, something that has never happened in the fifty years since Italy's fashion king launched his business.

The news made Milan men's fashion week feel even frailer. With Zegna having already shown in Dubai, and Fendi and Gucci opting for co-ed shows on the women's calendar, the proceedings this time around were a mere three days. But could the receding of the old guard create space for new names? Maybe. Milan has yet to prove itself as an incubator for fresh talent like Paris.

But Fondazione Sozzani, for one, is pushing things forward under the leadership of Sara Sozzani Maino. And, slowly, a Milanese vanguard is taking shape. It was 2023 LVMH Prize winner Satoshi Kuwata of Setchu, after all, who staged the first runway show of the week.

Kuwata excels at creating deceptively simple, impeccably sartorial garments that can be worn in a number of ways by unzipping or unbuttoning, wrapping or unwrapping them. But his latest collection — inspired by a dialogue with Africa and full of captivating things such as transparent tailoring, rainbow madras, garment bag dresses and bright primary colours — was somewhat diminished by the format of the presentation, which with its straw hats, woven sculpture-skirts and sense of abstract tribalism felt a little forced. Kuwata has a point of view. What he now needs is stronger editing of ideas and a presentation language that's all his own.

Pronounce's Yushan Li and Jun Zhou are part of the new wave of Chinese designers who were schooled in Europe but have established a new dialogue with their culture of origin as adults. Their interpretation aims at abstraction: a laudable intent that after a few stylistically disordered seasons finally found plausible form — give or take the old Prada homage — in the lightness and sensuality of items inspired by kites.

Fiorucci's new direction under designer Francesca Murri continued to disappoint. Whereas Elio Fiorucci had the rare gift of channeling popular culture into clothes that spoke to generations of customers, Murri's attempts to make the label fashionable feel flat.





At PDF, Domenico Formichetti seemed to be entangled once more in a fantasy of suburban roughness that came across as fabricated and more than a little passé.

Luca Magliano's Magliano opted for a film by director Thomas Hardiman in lieu of a show this season. This decision, Magliano explained in showroom appointments the day after the screening, was decided at the beginning of the design process and informed a particularly product-driven collection of deconstructed tailoring and hybrid garments — camping and running gear in cotton voile or crepe de Chine, anyone? — in a muddy palette of earthy tones.

Elsewhere, Simon Cracker, the bricolage project by Simone Botte and Filippo Biraghi, keeps cementing its status as Milan's epicenter of unruliness, randomness and juvenile rebellion with a punk stance. The collections are based on upcycling, and are presented at energetic shows cast with the crème de la crème of the city's beautiful freaks. If past seasons felt a bit messy, this latest outing, all muted tones, outsized pins and uniform dressing, had a deranged strictness to it that felt mature but did not sell out rebellion for convention.

The roots of Ludovico Bruno's work for Mordecai are clear, and captivating: a merging of technical sportswear, martial arts gear and Eastern shapes, from the Middle East to Japan. The maneuvering room he gives himself is purposefully narrow, which benefits his work. If in the past Bruno has relied on heavy layering that went a bit much in a Hed Mayner direction, this time around he cleaned up his act, much to his advantage. Meanwhile, Luca Larenza's petite and tiny guerrilla-style presentation took the form of a street stall showcasing his beautiful knits and ceramics: a smart way to be light and connect with fashionistas and passers-by alike.

As for Milan's heavyweights, they aimed at renewal by trading pomp and circumstance for lightness. Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons certainly opted for a change of attitude at Prada. A feeling of reduction, stripping back to the bare minimum pervaded the proceedings. The show venue was completely empty, save for the flower shaped rugs that read as halfway between "kindergarten" and "bathroom." To the sounds of chirping birds and passing trains, the clothes came in essential lines or archetypal shapes like the acetate tracksuit and the overcoat, leaning towards the infantile, with shirts lengthening into aprons, trousers shortening like rompers and gender distinctions erased in a sort of prepubescent limbo. All told, this remained a collection of quintessentially Prada pieces. It would have been interesting to witness a real breaking of the formula: a shift away from soft, youthful masculinity to something more varied.

Dolce & Gabbana was an ode to pajama dressing, by now a classic bordering on the cliché. What made the proposal captivating, however, was the fact that Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana stressed the grungier, edgier side of the striped cotton pajama, the epitome of lounge dressing, as an everyday uniform, making it plausible beyond the eccentric gentlemen and artists typically associated with such attire. The study of roomy proportions was particularly keen, and that translated into striking silhouettes that had volume and a sense of reality.

The Brit contingent was well represented in town this season. Skipping Paris for Milan, Paul Smith was feeling light: I guess he always does, in that *classic with a twist* kind of way. Explanation of the looks came in the voice of Mr Smith on the soundtrack. This was another foray into tropical prints, light tailoring and nods to cycling, in a show that was swift and easy — and just as immemorable.

For the first Vivienne Westwood men show in Milan since 2016, Andreas Kronthaler opted for a café under the porches of the posh San Babila area, where he delivered a classic mix of tailoring and gender-bending provocation that was as enjoyable as it felt codified and stale.

Meanwhile, at Dunhill, Simon Holloway continues delving into a world of high class and sartorial privilege that is exquisite to savour. No temptation for grittiness here. Rather, a celebration of all the details, the makings and the fabrications only the wealthy can afford. One either likes it or not — that it





all looks from another time period is perhaps inevitable — but the level of the execution is captivating in its faultless refinement.

Armani without Mr Armani closed the week. The designer is turning 91 in July and continuity may be key to the company's succession plan: it's clear that lieutenant Leo Dell'Orco and his team are doing very well in menswear, and although he wasn't there in person, Mr Armani's presence was felt with both the Emporio and Giorgio collections echoing the designer's 1990s aesthetic. With the next generation eager to own a chunk of that seminal moment, it was a wise move: one that reaffirms the relevance of a house based on softness and timelessness.

