



FASHION

Demna Narrates His Balenciaga Retrospective – All at Once

- The display features some of the Georgian designer's own clothes, and voiceovers simultaneously explaining 50 of the 101 designs on display.

BY MILES SOCHA

The new “Balenciaga by Demna” exhibition in Paris features some of the Georgian designer's own clothes, his voice – and the irreverence and design innovation that defined his decade at the Paris house.

It opens with a retrospective of his fashion show invitations – a microcosm of his wry commentaries on luxury, and boundary-stretching antics – and a rejection letter dated 2007, when he was a student at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts and had applied for a menswear internship at Balenciaga.

“We've carefully reviewed your application and, after consideration, we will not be moving forward with your candidacy at this time,” it reads.

Demna's voiceover – which competes with 49 others, creating a cacophony of voices in a vast showroom space at Kering headquarters – expresses relief, for his professional journey might have turned out differently had he received a yes.

After graduating with a master's degree in fashion design in 2006, Demna went on to work for Walter van Beirendonck, Maison Margiela and Louis Vuitton before cofounding Vetements in 2014, and assuming the helm of Balenciaga the following year.

He is to wrap up his tenure on July 9 with a swan-song Balenciaga couture show before officially taking the design helm of Gucci – which he foreshadows by including an ensemble from his 2021 Hacking Project, which hinged on “conceptual interpretations of Gucci's recognizable signatures as Balenciaga products.”

There is humor in the content – an open laptop broadcasts the 10-minute episode of “The Simpsons | Balenciaga” screened at his raucous “Red Carpet” show – and the methods of display, some garments shown on hangars plucked straight from the archive racks, single shoes rotating like an A&W sign of yore.

An eerily lifelike mannequin of artist Eliza Douglas, one of Demna's fetish models, recurs twice, modeling the opening look from his

debut show for spring 2016, and a semi-fitted gown in scuba satin from spring 2025.

A red “swing” puffer worn off the shoulder like an evening gown, also from his debut collection, shows how Demna reinterpreted silhouettes from founder Cristóbal Balenciaga.

His penchant for trompe-l'œil recurs in several looks, while “ready-made” designs include a clutch purse shaped like a stolen side-view mirror, and a bangle cast in resin to resemble a roll of packing tape.

In his narration, Demna explains that he once repurposed a real potato chip bag to hold his phone and other essentials while attending an event. Paparazzi photos aroused curiosity in the Lay's and Doritos of the world – and Balenciaga's merchandising team. To wit: A long-running accessories franchise was born, the pouches crafted in leather with a metallic interior.

The designer includes a few of his most controversial designs, including a blue leather duffel that resembles an Ikea Frakta carryall, and his \$925 towel skirt, an example of how “spontaneous gestures” can spark design ideas.

“I love that it makes you question whether this is a joke or not,” Demna says in his narration. “It's great to question things. Bye bye!”

The tongue-in-cheek, thumb-in-the-eye attitude extends through to the exhibition catalogue, printed to resemble a mid-market glossy with too many cover lines, and a fake ad for a Balenciaga watch, bearing a caseback instead of the time.

In total, there are 101 exhibits spanning 30 collections and loads of experimentation in volumes, silhouettes and attitude, including his “fake layering coat” from winter 2018 and perhaps too many “pantashoes.”

“After this, I promise it's the last one in this exhibition,” he implores toward the end of the cross-shaped display.

The exhibition is open to the public from Thursday through July 9 via online registration.



The cover of the exhibition catalogue, in the format of a glossy magazine.





A Balenciaga look from the "Hacking Project" with Gucci.



A "swing" puffer and black pumps from Balenciaga's fall 2016 show.

