



Territorial Pissings with Rick Owens

In Paris, Fashion's master of the Dark Arts presents dual challenges to orthodoxy with his new show for men and a spectacular retrospective.

By Tim Blanks



Rick Owens did a little market survey before his latest men's show. What were guys into? Whether they were straight or gay, young or old, back came the same answer: Everything began and ended with straps. Straight guys liked the Sid Viciousness of them. Gay guys liked the outdoorsy crotch-clutch of a climbing strap.

"Straps meant nothing to me," Owens brooded pre-show. "I think they're a bit clichéd, and that wouldn't have been where I wanted to go. But they're clearly a young man's game, they want to telegraph vitality in a different way than I do. So I was thinking, maybe I don't recognise what people need, but that's okay because I'll ask and I'll kind of figure out how I can help them, or give them my version. So that's kind of what I'm doing."

From tiny acorns come mighty oaks. Helping a guy out with his love of or need for straps — I'd say security as much as vitality — bred a show whose majestic scale was all but an unholy sacrament, a new religion. Watching Rick's models scaling a ziggurat, strapping themselves on securely step by step as they crawled to the summit, felt like an outré metaphor for masculinity. It also reminded me of the posters for the zombie spectacular "28 Years Later" that are all over the world right now, the child at the pinnacle of the Bone Temple. That was actually what Owens called his show: "Temple." And right across the road in the Musée Palais Galliera, a glorious Owens retrospective was opening. Its curators had dubbed it "Temple of Love."

Michele Lamy, Rick's lifelong partner in the evolution of Owenscorp, was mortified by the thought of a retrospective. Like a lifetime achievement award (he's had plenty of those too), she felt it reeked of finality and decline. Owens was delighted to lean into that idea. So much of what he has referenced in the course of a career that began over three decades ago in the sleazy glamour of Hollywood Boulevard has been whiffed with a fin-de-siecle decadence, and every step on that wayward path is captured in "Temple of Love."

Owens saw his approach as "a European aesthetic filtered through a naïve, cartoonish American bluntness." But the exhibition clarifies a subtlety, a nuance, a consistency that is anything but blunt. Owens has built a fashion democracy in which one language is spoken with a thousand seductive accents. It covers the waterfront from cerebral transport to the basest human appetites (celebrated in an adults-only room that illuminates sexual practices of an astonishing physical ingenuity). He is a world builder.

That is certainly what exhibition curator Alexandre Samson recognised when he insisted that Jorg Karl Huysmans had to be the unifying thread of the entire show, given that there's rarely been an interview





where Owens didn't namecheck the 19th century author of "Against Nature." It's the hypnotising Ur-text of literary decadence. And it's a particular kind of person who comes to Huysmans at a defining juncture in their lives. Owens was clearly one of them. "He was my excuse to completely indulge myself in aesthetic pleasures and senses. He made it plausible for a sophisticated adult to withdraw from life and only concern himself with the most sophisticated aesthetic pleasure. So we ended up using that as the theme for the whole retrospective."

Now, translate that to the collection Owens presented on Thursday. His models eased their way down the rungs of the ziggurat into the reflecting pool of the Palais de Tokyo, forged their way through the water in their weighty, wonderful garments, submerging, re-emerging like mermen, or revenants. The trailing fringes on leather jackets suddenly looked like strands of seaweed. Sodden silk taffetas and industrial nylons clung to torsos like second skins, rubberized sequins sparkled like drops of water. There has always been something elemental in Rick's shows, but this felt somehow more profound. From the water we came, to the water we will return, in a single sensual multimillennial cycle. Rebirth. Well, that was the movie in my mind, at least.

Owens insisted that, at core, his collection addressed his concerns about ageing. He's a way off 70, but it's on his mind. His soundtrack was Klaus Nomi, New York's No Wave alt-opera star, singing "Dido's Lament" from Henry Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas." "Death invades me, death is now a welcome guest." Words whose impact is only heightened by the fact that Nomi was one of the first people to die of AIDS in the New York art scene. If that is the shadow that has hung heavy over Owens's work, it's also fired up the extraordinary no-compromise fearlessness that made the show he staged on Thursday so uplifting. And the interplay between his dual presentations was especially illuminating. It was a gorgeous shock to see his models dive fully clad into the Palais de Tokyo's pool. And the special room" at "Temple of Love" was a salutary reminder of Rick's bone-deep transgressive appetites in the full-scale simulacrum of himself pissing. It originally debuted at Pitti Uomo in Florence in 2006. He said he still feels close to that person. "Even more so because online judgement is so much more strident now than it ever used to be. What's happening politically in the world, we need resistance more than ever."

Rick insists he's still finding new ways to piss. That promise is my favourite threat. The show rang out with "Ding Dong the witch is dead", screeching, electric.

A change is a-comin'.

