

At Paris Fashion Week, Bigger Was Rarely Better

Julian Klausner's Dries Van Noten was the winner of a Paris men's season where grand statements risked overpowering the fashion, reports Angelo Flaccavento.

By Angelo Flaccavento



PARIS — Two rather grandiose spectacles bookended the men's fashion week that ended Saturday. The first was Louis Vuitton's occupation of the square in front of the Centre Pompidou, which felt like a lengthy exercise in scale that was ultimately little more than a display of colourful bags set against somber clothes; strange considering Pharrell's familiarity with live performance and Vuitton's interest in becoming a "cultural brand."

Closing the week was Jacquemus takeover of the Versailles Orangerie, complete with couture shapes in humble cottons and peasant allure aplenty. The show aimed for fashion with a capital F — but did it deliver? Simone Porte Jacquemus' intentions are no doubt sincere, but a show so grand tends to make everything — even sunny childhood memories — feel fabricated. That said, the level of execution was a step in the right direction.

Elsewhere, scale seemed to serve a clearer purpose. Rick Owens' Tatlin-esque extravaganza celebrating the beauty of sleaze featured models wearily wading through the Trocadéro Fountain in front of the Palais de Tokyo before creating a superhuman, gravity-defying formation on the scaffolding that protruded high into the sky in lieu of the runway.

The outing — particularly angular and skin-baring, but devoid of Owens' masterful fluidity — was more performance than collection, which in a way was a pity but also a joy to behold.

Modesty, at Dior? Sounds like an oxymoron, but this is exactly the impression Jonathan Anderson summoned with his eagerly anticipated debut, from the smaller tent than usual to the museum-like set furnished with two little exquisite paintings by Jean Siméon Chardin. This was to be a fashion moment that delivered the shift the system so badly needed. Did it happen? Up to a point.

Anderson is a radical auteur but he's well aware of the commercial constraints that exist at Dior. And the balance he struck felt risk-less, and yet charged with remarkable freshness. He focused more on style than design: the way things are put together rather than the way they're constructed; storytelling more than architecture. The collection basically depicted a class of handsomely healthy young aristocrats attired in a stylish mismatch of chinos and tailcoats, English countryside and couture, Polo Ralph Lauren and Angels & Bermans, capes and 18th century frocks, necks wrapped in decadent cravats. It was a clash of normality and costume, orchestrated with a precise merch plan in mind.

Anderson's abstract aesthetic and Dior's pomp are, on paper, strange bedfellows, but the gap between the two is a fertile territory. On Friday, the embryo of a vision was there, but a bit more daring would help to balance against the demands of a large corporation (all those logos). Far more promising was the dialogue with history and the Dior archive.





Fragility in its many shades — softness, tenderness, romance — was key to the season, proposing an idea of masculinity that is sharply at odds with the way world leaders currently embody manhood. At Saint Laurent, Anthony Vaccarello drew an imaginary bridge between Paris in the 1970s and Fire Island in the 1980s, and explored fluidity through a painterly palette inspired by the deceptively naive work of artist Larry Stanton. It made for a poignant and powerful, if slightly monotonous, outing. In looking at a clique of men that were wonderfully free and lighthearted, but who also belonged to the generation that almost entirely and tragically succumbed to AIDS, Vaccarello kept the spirit, but not the skin-baring looks. There were only four outfits featuring shorts, in fact. For the rest, this was an eminently covered up affair, the juxtaposition of strong shoulders and flowy lines creating a striking silhouette.

It sounds like a cliché, but in dull fashion moments, one can always count on the Japanese to provide stimulation, armed as they are with the sharpest of scissors and the most radical minds. The trio behind Issey Miyake's IM Men brand is taking strides in reviving Issey-san's more powerful side, at once fearlessly futuristic and soulfully ancestral. IM Men expands on one of the founding principles of Miyake design: the challenge of making each piece from a single piece of cloth. What may appear to the uninitiated as a mere technicality actually produces clothes with beautifully fluid lines, whose geometric forms shift and morph with every movement of the body, creating an ever-evolving dialogue with the wearer. This season, the ideal conversation with the work of ceramist Shoji Kamoda translated into a collection that was lyrical and abstract, and powerfully Miyake because of that.

At Commes des Garçons, Rei Kawakubo's tribe of mad-hatted shamans was an ode to welcoming, coiling, womanly curves and psychedelic patterns taking apart that bastion of masculinity that is the suit. At Junya Watanabe, it was tapestry, blazers and a rude boy attitude: catchy and business savvy. Meanwhile, master deconstructionist Yohji Yamamoto continued doing what he does best, preferably in black; hollowing things from the inside and fluidifying lines. This season, seditious slogans were printed on jackets and vaporous shirts, turning poetry into punk, and vice versa.

Nigo's Kenzo has finally found its stride, with the help of head of design Joshua Bullen, exploring a haphazardness that harks back to Kenzo Takada's seminal Jungle Jap days, but makes it all look fresh. Whether such an experiment makes sense at a luxury label remains questionable, but it made for a catchy image. Elsewhere, for his first outing at the helm of Kolor, Taro Horiuchi kept the acrylic colours and sense of humour, but added a dash of adventure, fashion drama and sporty multifunctionality that was a step in a bold new direction.

Soft formality is making a comeback, from Wales Bonner's exquisite inquiry into inherited pieces and collected garments that is almost heartbreaking in its longing for class and more elegant times to Mike Amiri's LA swagger in peak lapels and flares, and quite some pride in self-decoration. Hed Mayner traded his signature oversized, boxy, protective volumes for something more fluid and skin baring, complete with neckerchief hems, swirling prints and shapely blazers. It was the beginning of a shift that may require some further attunement in seasons to come.

Big volumes still loom large. Everything was detached from the body at Ami, and yet Alexandre Mattiussi has the ability to turn the abstract into something possible, focused as he is in developing a wardrobe of amicable pieces that stay with his customers for a long time. Mattiussi belongs to the league of inspired Parisian realists who create nonchalant wardrobes for everyday needs. Here the originators — and the benchmark — are Christophe Lemaire and Sarah Linh Tran: their work at Lemaire is a masterclass in malleability, straightforwardness and French swagger, which keeps getting better by the season. This time the duo worked around the daily act of getting dressed as a moment of self-representation, which translated into a new sharpness, and an edgy kind of somberness.

The nonchalance over at Officine Generale was deliciously light and breezy, completely devoid of any pretense to be fashionable. At Auralee, Ryota Iway keeps subtly twisting the very idea of normality with a poetic knack. His work is as about the items as it is about the attitudes they project. Everything has an





aura that the eyes catch but that is impossible to express with words. The tied jumpers and the layers, this time, looked like a practical response to the unpredictability of the weather in modern life.

Equally difficult to put into words was the allure of Véronique Nichanian's work at Hermès. If there is a designer who does truly modern men's luxury, it is her: the proportions, fabrications and palette are always top notch; classic enough to be timeless, updated enough to feel au courant. This time around everything was graphic and light, with roomy shapes that fell wonderfully on and around the body.

Willy Chavarria began his second Paris outing with a politically-charged intro that featured 35 men kneeling in white uniforms. The contrast with the colourful cheerfulness of a very feisty collection — a homage to his hometown — was potent. But is a fashion show really the most effective setting for a statement like this? In terms of the clothes, Chavarria upped the ante on womenswear alongside his generously proportioned menswear, but both still lack sartorial refinement, despite the strength of his message.

Paris' contingent of small, independent labels is still chugging along, despite the growing dominance of corporate behemoths. Kiko Kostadinov keeps softening his Eastern Bloc kind of sci-fi in favour of a fluid take on dystopian uniform dressing. At LGN, Louis Gabriel Nouchi opted for an animated film, populated with sensual androids and replicants, to present perhaps his most accomplished collection to date, a merging of supermanism and carnality in decisively-shouldered silhouettes.

Always dreamy and equally bonkers, at Doublet's Masayuki Ino picked a neighbourhood garden on the outskirts of Paris to parade a collection that revolved around food as a human connector and a link with nature. Between mackerel ties and hats shaped like fried eggs, it was possibly the most normal outing in recent seasons for Ino. Everything felt fluid and organic, with surrealism limited to the details.

Kartik Research designer Kartik Kumra's quest into materiality and craft is captivating for its non-obvious links to India. A new arrival on the Paris calendar, Kumra questioned notions of restraint as good taste with a celebration of spontaneity and personality that felt truly fresh. Intricately woven or embroidered pieces had a stunning effortlessness about them.

Still fiercely independent, Walter Van Beirendonck's answer to hard times was the stubborn decision to continue looking at everything with starry eyes, striving to find joy and lightness even where these no longer exist. The urge translated into a vision of lysergic infantilism that felt as illuminating as it was melancholic, complete with artist smocks and terrific cartoon shoes.

But the real surprise came from Craig Green. Back on the calendar, the designer delivered an elating foray into floaty psychedelia that was a mash up of clerical attire, dog's coats repurposed on men, childish shapes, ghosts emitted from mouths in the form of neckerchiefs and sartorial abstractions collaged from well worn bedsheets, all of it keeping The Beatles in mind. As deranged as it all sounds, the outing coalesced in a vibrant vision of colour and shape.

With his first men's outing, Julian Klausner, the unlikely winner of the season, proved once again he is the ideal creative heir to Dries Van Noten. He respectfully navigates the codes of the house, but he also has his own perfectly formed sensitivity, which is harder than Dries' at times, certainly less eclectic and less prone to the soft elegance Van Noten so effortlessly owned, but cunningly more inclined towards a subtle and charming brand of ambiguity.

This season Klausner imagined a man in love, walking on the beach the day after a party, mixing tuxedo and sarong, dense embroidery and pajama stripes, underwear and battered formality. Such a charming, absent-minded character was remarkably oblivious of what is to be commonly considered masculine or feminine when it comes to items of clothing, and all the better for that. There was a kindness to the proceedings that had emotion, and that left one wanting for more in a season in which, in general, one begged for less.

