

Demna and Balenciaga: A Beautiful Thing Is Over

He's not quitting, he's just moving on. But Wednesday's show was a moment to celebrate one of fashion's most indelible image makers, writes Tim Blanks.

By Tim Blanks



PARIS — On July 1, 1968, Cristobal Balenciaga locked the doors on his couture house on Avenue Georges V and turned his back on fashion. Not even those closest to him — staff or clients — had an inkling of his decision. Too bad Demna couldn't engineer his departure from Balenciaga for the same date, rather than a week later. That would have been too perfect. But if his decade at the house that Cristobal built has taught him anything, it was that perfection is an impossible dream. As he said after the show, once he let his quest for perfection go, under the guidance of the therapist who transformed his life, everything became effortless.

Besides, the whole world has known for months that Demna isn't quitting fashion, he's just moving on. The handwritten note on each seat at Wednesday's show declared that "fashion lives on the edge of tomorrow, driven not by what we know but the thrill of discovering what comes next." Hello, Gucci. But that's tomorrow.

Today celebrated a transformative decade which scaled heights and plumbed depths. Like the revered Cristobal, Demna is a superb technician, so it was only right that he saw himself out with a handful of ballgowns that were masterpieces of construction. The exaggerated hourglass effect was achieved without boning. The corsetry was more shapewear. Eva Herzigova's draped duchesse satin gown had one seam. Eliza Douglas's sculpted Guipure lace gown didn't even have that. Minimalism at its most exquisite.

The airy froth of a pink princess dress was cut from a technical organza that is The World's Lightest Fabric™. Demna indulged his lifelong obsession with Old Hollywood with Naomi's black sequinned "Diva" dress, inspired by Marilyn Monroe, and Kim Kardashian's splendid simulacrum of Elizabeth Taylor: silk slip dress from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, "mink" coat of embroidered feathers from *Butterfield 8*. That's the kind of high concept childhood-dream-coming-true fetishism that makes a moment of fashion magic.

The high concept was less engaging with the men's tailoring. Last year, Demna fell for a documentary about Neapolitan tailoring. He was fascinated by its subtle codes, distinctions and intricacies. When he sees rules, he wants to break them. So he sent a bodybuilder for four fittings with a classic Neapolitan tailor and used the result as a "one-size-fits-all" proposal for the male body types in his show. It's not the garment that defines the body, it's the body that defines the garment, he said. It's a solid humanist point, and it gelled with the innate generosity of Neapolitan tailoring — deconstructed, no shoulder





pads — but even so, his models looked like boys wearing their dads' suits. Same with the boys in their technically exquisite bomber jackets and blousons. Maybe it was the quintessence of Demna's oversize revolution but his men couldn't help but look callow beside his powerhouse women.

But maybe it's always been that way for his Balenciaga. Isabelle Huppert was on his catwalk again on Wednesday. Who could ask for anyone better to embody the Balenciaga woman? Well, maybe artist Eliza Douglas, who opened his first show at the house and closed his last, which means she was also the last image in the lookbook he had photographed all over "his" Paris. She embodies the transformative confrontational beauty Demna chased at Balenciaga. Maybe he never achieved perfection, but he definitely found that. Which bodes exceptionally well for his faith that fashion dresses the future before it has a name.

