

Paris Couture's Life and Lifelessness

In a week of couture shows that often felt formulaic, Glenn Martens' debut at Maison Margiela supplied bold new energy, writes Angelo Flaccavento.

By Angelo Flaccavento



PARIS — When fashion reverts to black, the most unforgiving of shades, demanding perfection in cut and execution, it's not necessarily for a sense of drama or a need to mourn. Black can signal the need for a pause, a will to concentrate on things that matter, a quest for reassurance. And yes, choosing black, these days, is also playing it safe, commercially.

There was a lot of black in the latest cycle of haute couture shows, which played it so safe they risked looking old and dusty. At least, the strictness made for a stark contrast with the audience, which, nowadays, is composed of serial attention seekers as much as old money doyennes.

The clash of high and low, trash and *salon*, together with heavy use of black, and associations with characters as diverse as Isabelle Huppert and Kim Kardashian, has been a signature of Demna's tenure at Balenciaga. Ending is an art that is rarely openly practiced in fashion. Many of the final collections are labeled as such only in hindsight, after the announcement of a separation, whether mutual or not.

That the collection presented by Demna on Wednesday morning in Balenciaga's couture salons on Avenue George V would be his last for the house, which the designer led to pop culture fame and multi-billion-dollar revenues with a unique blend of talent and cynicism, was known since last March, when he was appointed creative director of Gucci. This brought a very different spirit to the outing: both lyrical and recapitulative, highlighting Demna's genius and how necessary his exit is.

Demna's journey into the language of stylish severity and formal perfectionism à la Cristóbal had come to an end a few seasons ago, hardening into a powerful formula that, alas like all formulas, became formulaic. Demna himself said it between the lines, looking emotional at the end of the show, as he handed over an uneasy legacy to Pierpaolo Piccioli, his successor: "One of my turmoils here has been navigating a code that was too narrow for what the business has become; that's why I had to put so much of myself into it."

The farewell was a bold yet underwhelming display of Fashion with a capital F that added nothing to what has already been done but closed the chapter for the history books. All of Demna was there: the extreme constructions, the relentless tailoring, the distortion of the everyday, the struggle between dress





and body, trash and glamour. All his characters were there, too, now burdened by mannerisms. That's all folks, and now on to the next.

Daniel Roseberry has been cleaning up his Schiaparelli act for quite a while now. This outing, predominantly black and very couture in that sculpted, hourglass and solemn kind of way, was practically devoid of surrealism, save for a terrifying, very "Death Becomes Her" red dress that featured a realistic bosom turned backwards — boobs on the back — complete with beating heart diamante necklace. Ghoulish faux pas aside, this was Roseberry at his most strict and unadorned, but also at his most nostalgic, though this season's dialogue with the archives was meant to propel the house into the future. The outing was drenched with an early 1940s spirit, which read as retrofuturism. Thankfully Roseberry is planning a creative "restructuring" at Schiaparelli, as the formula is getting tired.

Speaking of formulas, here's to hoping Matthieu Blazy will shake Chanel out of its creative formula, despite its enduring appeal with clients. This week's last studio-signed show before Blazy's official debut was exquisitely staged and decidedly cozy. As much as it felt headless, it also had something slightly fresh about it, like a prelude to better things to come. The jolie madame frivolities and giddiness were replaced by something a little more sleek, at once pastoral and mannish, with stompy boots worn throughout, setting the tone. Little of it gelled together, and at times a certain dullness persisted, but as a palate cleanser, it made sense.

On the advice of his doctors, Mr **Armani** was not in Paris for the **Armani Privé** show, but his stamp was all over it, from the faultless long silhouettes to the Orientalist glamour that gave these predominantly black proceedings a sparkly art deco coating. This was Mr Armani at his most linear and graphic, but also at his most detached from the present moment. The Armani-isms, in any case, were there: a code at this point as strong as **Chanel's**, which means it is both an asset and a burden. One can only behold in awe and admiration creations so pure and so elegant. What was missing was a clear sense of relevance.

Giambattista Valli's purpose is celebrating beauty: as simple and as soulful as that. Just as simple and heartfelt is Valli's belief in an archetypal brand of femininity, as embodied by Valli girls that have both "legs and brains." This season Mr Valli skipped the runaway for a presentation, which was held in the whitewashed salons of the Maison Valli and introduced by a ceremony during which the French Minister of Culture, Rachida Dati, awarded the designer the medal of Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters for his achievements. It was an emotional moment, which a particularly flowery collection with French rococo flavours made even more elating.

At Viktor & Rolf, black was so pervasive that even the venue was plunged into darkness. And yet there was a strange kind of humor to the endeavour: chilly and nordic, but still humour. The idea was simple and effective: identical dresses come out in pairs, one puffed up to an nth degree and stuffed with colourful feathers, the other limp and deflated. Was it a reflection on the ubiquity of the down jacket? Or perhaps a mumbling on the pre- and post-Ozempic body? The designers mentioned feathers as a couture trope in the show notes, but there was so much more to decode. For Viktor & Rolf, couture is a brand-building exercise more than a business, but their level of execution is always admirable.

If the week was largely unimpressive, it closed with an impressive new beginning as Glenn Martens took the reins of Maison Margiela by reconnecting to the work of Martin, the iconic and irreplaceable founder, as well as that of his anonymous successors — including Matthieu Blazy — without forgetting John Galliano's transformative decade at the house. This is to say that while getting back to the founding codes, Martens nevertheless inherited a maison with a changed and complex identity, a bit like those horror movies in which genetic experiments increasingly alter the DNA, and there's no way back to the beginning.





In this imaginary atelier filled with test tubes and hybrids, Martens moved boldly and confidently, allowing different fragments of identity to align into a new design, made of disheveled historical shapes, imaginative accumulations, crumbling surfaces and incongruous materials, but also of naked pureness. The veils Martin himself used to hide the models' faces were turned into masks, if not helmets, at times retaining a *fashion school* feel to them, or at least that sense of ingenuity. It all came across as utterly theatrical, when Martin was instead a supremely inspired realist, and architectural, which is a Martens trait, the collection being an homage to gothic buildings. However, the pursuit of hybridity as a code in both aesthetic and materiality was at once intoxicating and fascinating, and an interesting puddle in which to let life linger and contaminate once again these rather lifeless fashion shores.

