



Before Fashion Week, a glimpse of the future

A graduate showcase puts student designers' ideas out on the red carpet

BY YOLA MZIZI

The September shows of New York Fashion Week are often likened to back-to-school for adults in the industry — a season defined by reunions with familiar seatmates, old friends and fresh introductions. The week is the start of the calendar that will carry editors, buyers and designers from New York to fashion weeks in London, Milan and, finally, Paris.

This year, the unofficial opening bell rang at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which this past week held its showcase for its Master of Fine Arts in Fashion Design students in Manhattan.

Attendees, who showed up in a mix of the latest trends along with vintage and

thrifted pieces, lined up outside the school's Art and Design Gallery, many carrying bouquets to congratulate the graduates.

The scene played out against the start of rush hour on Seventh Avenue, where parents pushed strollers, residents walked their dogs and onlookers paused to ask what was happening.

Inside, the atmosphere had the jitters and energy of a first day back in class.

"It can be exciting, exhilarating and nervous at the same time," said Terri Mann, a retired production designer and F.I.T. alumna who once showed a collection in a similar format. "It's all fun, you know, and it's all about being engaged, enjoying what you do."

The showcase, named Act 5, was marked as "the closing of a chapter" for a cohort that graduated earlier this year. Their two years at F.I.T. culminated in thesis projects, brand business plans and the creation of eight-look collections, though only five looks from

each of the 18 designers went down the runway.

Alumni, media, faculty members, friends and family members filled the room, eager to scrutinize the details. For the first time, the public will also weigh in: The video broadcast of the show is scheduled to be screened during fashion week, which runs through Sept. 16, through its partnership with the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

Attendees seemed keen to get a look at what the students had come up with.

If this showcase offered a glimpse of what is coming in the fashion pipeline, it was a balance of technical rigor and conceptual risk-taking.

Jinling Li's collection married rigid architectural shapes with traditional suiting, leaning more commercial than avant-garde. Matilda Tongying Liang, inspired by the gestational stages of pregnancy and motherhood, delivered garments that balanced polish with experimentation. Luna Eunsol Kang offered bold, ambitious silhouettes that explored innocence through exaggeration, layered pearls, beadwork and braided hair reminiscent of Simone Rocha.

Other designers turned to material culture as a source of inspiration. Genevieve Zhuoran Li questioned office dress codes and traditionally masculine silhouettes, disrupting them with tulle. Ethan Horing presented a men's wear collection in tweed and corduroy, enlivened by bold color, pattern and texture. Evelina Epp chronicled the process of meeting and parting through braided and twisted textiles.

For others, heritage was central. Mai Nou Her offered Hmong-inspired looks; Amrutha Ramkumar reimaged traditional Indian dress. Lawson Park, who cited Ulla Johnson as an influence, melded her Southern quilting heritage with the inspiration of Portuguese tiles.

"I would love to continue bringing out my Southern heritage," Ms. Park said. "I feel like there's a really big market for it."

Asked to sum up the graduating class in one word, Cathleen Sheehan, chair of the M.F.A. program, didn't hesitate.

"Determined," she declared.



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The showcase was intended as "the closing of a chapter" for students in the Master of Fine Arts in Fashion Design program at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.