

Paris Day Three: Dior Debut! The Headline That Mattered Most

But that ain't all... Haider Ackermann cut loose at Tom Ford, writes Tim Blanks.

By Tim Blanks



DO YOU DARE TO ENTER THE HOUSE OF DIOR? blared the titles on the short that filmmaker Adam Curtis collaged from a thousand telling titbits as an introduction to Jonathan Anderson's first collection of womenswear for Dior. It skimmed the history of the house with an audacious blend of beauty and horror, depicting women enchanted by fashion and, at the same time, trapped by it.

The film was deliberately sensational. As much as it acknowledged the designers who have contributed to Dior's illustrious history, it also suggested a schism with the past as graphic as the shattered mirror that was a leitmotif. It was projected on an inverted pyramid, a *bouleversé* version of the Louvre's focal point, which has become a symbol of Paris. The film climaxed in a pell-mell backwards rush of footage which collapsed into a Dior shoebox at the pyramid's upside down apex. The lid was supposed to close but a technical glitch said no at the last moment. Still, the idea of Pandora's Box was irresistibly telegraphed.

If you re-opened that box, would you get the collection Anderson showed? That was the tantalising hint at the heart of this show. He offered 74 looks, 74 characters as far as he was concerned, though there were repetitions within the repertoire (it's true there could have been an edit). "I don't want an army of people, I want different women," he insisted, "because if I create a clone zone, that's exactly what's happening in politics, in the world." What stood out was an instinct his shownotes smartly referred to as "rewiring the everyday." It's a skill Anderson perfected in his previous incarnation at Loewe, and in his own collection: the knack of taking the familiar and giving it a surreal kick. A silk jersey top and leggings with a tuxedo bib and a crocodile purse, say. Or the house icon bar jacket cropped and paired with a flaring, pleated mini, almost a gym skirt. Or the Stephen Jones-designed tricorne hats that topped a number of looks (Anderson wanted them based on the shape of stealth bombers!).

One thing that immediately stood out: The collection skewed young. A feast of denim, abbreviated and otherwise, anchored often elaborately tailored jackets and capes. There was a freshness which will surely be gratifying for the bean counters who want Anderson to light a fire under Dior. But there was also the hint of provocative newness that they should also hope for. Anderson's proportions aren't always easy, but, when the world adjusts to them, they have tended to be influential. Expect to see his flying buttress skirt volumes showing up in other places.



But if I had to choose the pieces that I thought validated the decision to hand all of Dior to Anderson on a plate, they'd be other, flightier fancies. Anderson told me about Dior's obsession with hydrangeas. (I'm obsessed as well, because they won't bloody grow for me.) Julia Nobis wore classical silk tiers that were balanced on silk hydrangeas. Odd but winning. And there was a look that Anderson had uncovered from Yves Saint Laurent's brief but glorious tenure at the brand. He reinterpreted it as massive culottes, pleated smock top and a face swathed in black lace that trailed into a tail at the back. Plus an imploded tricorne on top. Again, so odd, but so allusive, suggestive of past, present *and* future.

That is surely what any fashion CEO wants when they hire a new designer, especially for a brand as high profile as Dior, or Tom Ford for that matter. Someone who can simultaneously honour a legacy (or at least acknowledge it in some way) and maintain, or refresh, its relevance. Haider Ackermann had Tom Ford's blessing with his debut. With his new collection, he cut loose from the maestro. It was dark — so very dark — in the show space, all the better to spotlight the serpentine movements of his female models who were glossed with a reptilian sheen. The male models, by comparison, were in Gatsby-esque whites. The juxtaposition made for a ridiculously cinematic start to the show. It continued with sandal-shod men in louche suits and women in floor sweeping second skin sheaths.

Slip dresses, pyjama suits, bra tops with everything amplified the languor that has always been an Ackermann signature. Sheer silk microshorts over a black leather thong, on the other hand, seemed like the kind of flourish that would have buzzed Ford. The fact that the look felt so discordant here was significant. This was Haider's show. And these were Haider's people: Susie Cave slinking through the shadows in a white robe plucked from Jean Harlow's closet; Scott Barnhill and Erin O'Connor duelling cheekbones in blue silk suits; Saskia de Brauw in a gorgeous, slouchy double-breasted.

Ackermann's colours were luscious. Flat-fronted pants in granny smith green were paired with a black turtleneck and a cinching cummerbund (a consummate Haider touch). There was a moment when the catwalk was all about suits in mint and pink and more of that apple green. The impressive drama of the presentation — darkness and dry ice — was seductive but it left me wondering. Who? Where? Why? These are surely the questions every fashion house is biting its nails over.

