

Designs tailored for disorderly times

Vanessa Friedman

Smart, glamorous garments are the order of the day for people with more on their minds than the aesthetics of style

Here is a story (see if it sounds familiar): it's Wednesday night. A bunch of people are stuck, moving around and around in circles, as outside forces attempt to change the speed at which they act. The scene gets more and more confused. There is a lot of sound and fury. There is a lot of hot air. And then it all ends with a crash.

This is not, as it happens, a short summary of the events in the US Congress during the first three days of last week, but rather a recap of the Hussein Chalayan show, which ended just before the Senate finally approved the Bush administration's bail-out plan. The Chalayan collection, entitled "Inertia", was focused on speed (sometimes fashion-speak is as confusing as political-speak) and involved various blurry shots of car parts - doors, fenders and the like - silk-screened onto moulded halter ultra-mini dresses, occasionally complete with plastic corsets that looked eerily like engine parts, occasionally sprouting Formula One silk and chiffon flags from seams that waved in the breeze.

In case anyone mistook this sartorial commentary about the pace of modern life for a mere sexy corset dress with a cool pop art pattern, however, Chalayan underscored his point with one of the dramatic set pieces he is known for: a group of models stood absolutely still, each in a literal sculpture of a mini-dress, the back frozen in stiff points as though blown by the same wind machine that was forcing their hair in a horizontal stream from their heads. And then -boom! - champagne glasses filled with different levels of water that had been providing a soundtrack of sorts were swept to the floor and shattered, giving car-crash couture a new meaning.

So really, it had nothing to do with Washington. That's not what Chalayan was thinking at all (and indeed, could not have been, since when he was designing this collection even a few weeks ago, no one could have foreseen the state we are in today). And yet the show seemed extraordinarily prescient - not least in producing the one perfect hostess gown of the season: an ankle-length simple silk T-shirt dress in that car print with a slit up one leg and a deep V-neck. If we're all going to stop going out to eat and start entertaining at home as the pundits say, this is the ideal dress for the occasion. Sometimes fashion and fact coincide simply out of dumb luck, which is no bad thing for any of us.

Indeed, Chalayan wasn't the only one benefiting from a fluke of timing. Last summer Dutch design duo Viktor & Rolf sold a majority stake in their company to Diesel's Renzo Rosso, and in an effort to draw a line between their past with investor Gibo and their future with Rosso, they decided to eschew a catwalk show this season in favour of a virtual internet event - the kind of low-cost mass-access screening that may become an attractive option for many designers depending on how the consumer year plays out. In other words, though they chose their alternative technological route for purely personal reasons, it's possible to see Viktor & Rolf as the pioneers of a brave new online fashion season.

The mechanics, however, reportedly quite advanced for the industry, could use some work. The collection, entitled "Funny Face", featured one model - Shalom Harlow - filmed numerous times at numerous angles, so she appeared to be walking behind and in front of herself, like models in a normal show, and the short black cocktail dresses, rainbow hued crystal-bedecked minis, and skinny tangerine trousers under a generous tangerine and orange striped blouse could be viewed as if in the round. Still, it was almost impossible to get a sense of the materials - viewed up close they just got fuzzy - or how the clothes really move on the body; every time the camera pulled away it zoomed right back, so the different views never gelled into a coherent impression. There was no sense of build to keep you in your seat, and after a while the overwhelming temptation was to TiVo the show and go find some coffee.

Indeed, you could even say it felt a bit inertia-inducing, as did Stella McCartney's just-slightly tweaked take on her usual play-suits, all-in-ones, cute cocktail dresses and knits. For spring/summer the lapels on the jackets had been lengthened to draw the V of the neckline deeper, many jackets turned out not to be actually jackets at all but part of a garment attached with a faux hemline to jumpsuits, and a tropical black-and-white print got splashed atop versions of it all (tropics are a big theme for next season, the idea being apparently, if no one can afford to take the trip, at least they can wear the dream). It was perfectly nice if deeply familiar, though the bandage cocktail dresses and Perspex disc frocks were a little too deeply familiar for fans of Azzedine Alaïa and Paco Rabanne.

McCartney cuts a terrific version of a man's trouser suit -possibly the best in the business - but she's got to get some new ideas if her clothes are to have any sense of urgency. Right now she's just spinning her wheels.

In any case, physics teaches us not only that a body in motion tends to stay in motion but that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and just as some designers seem right on target with the times, some seem about as removed as possible. Such was the case with Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci, and his fetishistic cowboy junkie parade of breast-binding leather straps, denim-and-leather leggings, and blinding crystal adornment.

Though the occasional sharpshouldered black tux and white shirt popped up, the general dominatrix overtones of the straps -cut-away on vest tops, crisscrossing the open back of what looked like, from the front, a priest's cowl, and layered over nude chiffon that was itself layered over neon yellow bodysuits - was simply, well, suffocating. It made the excess of Christian Lacroix's lace-meets-florals-meets-bustles-meets-bustlers-meets-metallic gold collection look almost like comfort dressing (at least for all nostalgic for a little 1980s fun and frivolity). Even Esteban Cortezar's odd Ungaro mix of house trademarks, such as the ruched up-to-here and frilled-out-to-there cocktail dress, with roll-up-your-sleeves staples like parachute pants, was more appropriate.

Still, only at Dries van Noten was an actual change of energy apparent. There, instead of the usual riot of colour, flowers, and free-flowing form associated with the designer, a cool sophistication and intelligence reigned, from the beautiful black and white checkerboard trapeze jacket worn over neat trousers to the trompe l'oeil silk dresses where what appeared to be a blouson top tucked into a pencil skirt was revealed to be a single piece draped artfully on the hip. In a world where there is, as Chalayan pointed out, so much going on and so much out of control, these were clothes to simplify your life, all the way down to the eveningwear, such as a gold sequin and beaded pencil skirt with an elastic waist, or a long gold stretch knit version of the same, both worn with simple crisp white shirts. They were smart, glamorous garments for people who have other things to think about. And really, at this point, doesn't that pretty much describe us all?

Fonte: Financial Times, London, October 3 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 14.