

## Designs overshadowed by adolescent taunts

*Vanessa Friedman*

In the middle of Paris at the Place de la Concorde entrance to the Jardins des Tuileries, where iron gates open on to a wide courtyard that leads to a fountain, an enormous Richard Serra sculpture resides: two gigantic rusted steel arcs set side by side, curving away from each other like querulous lovers.

Centered in the space, they create an alley that telescopes the vista from the Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe almost perfectly - "almost" because, like Serra's famous Tilted Arc, the segments of this work (called Clara Clara, after the artist's wife) list ever-so-slightly to the side, skewing the view so it doesn't feel quite right.

Which is pretty much the perfect metaphor for the second half of Paris fashion week. For designers and audience alike the angles seem just off, the appropriate perspective hard to find.

At Valentino a respectable if uninsistent sophomore effort of simple shapes in luxe fabrics from designer Alessandra Facchinetti, who has been nudging the house forward since Valentino Garavani's retirement last January, was over-shadowed by: first, rumours she was going to be fired (the day after the show she was, replaced by the team of long-time accessories designers Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pier Paolo Piccioli); and second, a series of extraordinary public "statements" that resembled an adolescent game of taunts and epithets.

"Valentino SpA ends its collaboration with Ms Alessandra Facchinetti following a misaligned vision with the company. Her creative contribution and refined artistic talent were greatly appreciated," came the first press release.

Then Valentino the man - who is no longer officially associated with the house - weighed in with an email describing the new designers as "two serious capable professionals that I had alongside me for many years ... There is an existing archive with thousands of dresses where they can draw and take inspiration from to create a Valentino product that is relevant today. It is a shame that their predecessor didn't feel this need."

Giancarlo Giammetti, the man who founded the house along with the eponymous designer, added: "It is a wise decision. To pretend to transform and revolutionise the Valentino style is a Utopia which is lost from the start."

Then Ms Facchinetti released the following: "It was with deep regret that I learnt from the press that I would no longer be working with Valentino. The news came as a great surprise since the company's top management has not yet seen fit to inform me of the above... I would like to thank all my co-workers and all those people who have shown me both loyalty and affection."

In a week where most brands are supposed to be trying to make the most coherent and convincing fashion statements they can, this series was decidedly hard to parse.

Valentino wasn't the only brand where the buzz - bad or good - overshadowed the product. At Celine an announcement was issued a few weeks ago stating designer Ivana Omazic was leaving and would be replaced by fashion darling Phoebe Philo (who left Chloé a few seasons ago after sending its sales through the stratosphere to be with her new baby). Watching Ms Omazic's last hurrah parade of floaty ballerina dresses and daffodil-tinted snakeskin trenches felt almost redundant, since in a few months the label will presumably have a whole new look - kind of like Ms Philo's old stomping ground Chloé, where this season marked the debut of new designer Hannah MacGibbon, who happens to have been Ms Philo's ex-number two. Between Ms Philo and Ms MacGibbon (are you following this game of musical chairs?) Paolo Melim Andersson designed Chloé for three seasons, but his style was generally viewed as too off-Chloé-message, so he was sent on his way and Ms MacGibbon was brought back to, well, bring Chloé back.

Which she did, almost exactly, picking up where Ms Philo's old team left off in 2006 with clunky 1980s-inspired shapes such as blouses where the shoulder volume was created by generous cutting and iguana-like scallops along the seams, paper-bag-waist leather skirts and shorts, often paired with cropped tops, and pinafore sundresses involving an over-size ruffle around the neck and an exposed triangle of skin over the belt. Bronze lame shirts added shine under tailored suiting, and metallics gleamed in big bow belts.

The collection was less frilly and more knowing than it had been, with an ironic embrace of awkwardness that a generation who didn't actually live through these silhouettes may also embrace, but for the rest of the consumer population it will probably be a harder sell.

At Chanel, Karl Lagerfeld was content to reimagine yet again the trademark bourgeois boucle suit, now with jackets long or bolero-short, shot through with lurex or chopped off Star Trek-like at the sleeve. Ditto the frothy evening wear of house legend, reworked as a black bodysuit topped by lacy blouse, or in gypsy tiers of iridescent florals.

Perhaps it is why at Hermes, Jean-Paul Gaultier found safety in a theme as has become his wont, and channelled Santa Fe in the fringed suede jackets, sarongs, and halter dresses, crocodile jackets over rolled up jeans, and blanket striped silk shirtdresses of cliché.

At Yves Saint Laurent, Stefano Pilati seemed to be going in many directions, mixing the potent sexiness of classic YSL in sheer burgundy or emerald sequins over black or tone-on-tone lingerie with the power woman daywear of last season (a little black dress that turned to show three oversize bows closing its open back), with some more conceptual than convenient silhouettes (skirts cum harem-pant-like droopy stitched bottoms).

The opposite tact - producing signature collections while using context to suggest change - was no more elucidating. Alexander McQueen chose stuffed elephants, giraffes and polar bears and a video of the revolving earth to show his familiar silhouettes. There were corsetmoulded mini-dresses, bodysuits and frock coats, this season done in Darwinian prints and embroideries of wood, flowers and animal skeletons or covered in crystals. They were beautiful with or without (or in spite of) the psychological backdrop.

John Galliano dragged everyone out to an empty warehouse on the outskirts of the city long past dinner time to see very pretty floral chiffon and jersey flapper dresses. Ruffled and worked (but never over-wrought), pastel chiffon smocks that slouched off a shoulder and long tulle goddess gowns delicately covered in silver embroidery. On their own, no matter where they appeared, the clothes would have been enough. They did not need the window dressing. Although I suppose, as Serra shows, any such judgements all depend on where you are standing.

**Fonte: Financial Times, London, October 6 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 18.**