

## France's wintry mix

Robin Givhan

*In Paris, fall collections tap into a mood both sad and hopeful.*

The fall 2009 fashion shows closed here with a disappointing debut, an admirable sophomore effort, a noxious fake snowstorm, models in bunny ears and photographers in fistfights. There could not be a more deliciously dysfunctional industry.



*Rick Owens's designs, at top, created a wistful mood with models in layers of white and silver tunics and jackets, boots and billowing fur hats. (Maria Valentino - For The Washington Post)*

Shall we begin with the brawl? Just outside of the John Galliano show Wednesday night, one could find all the volatile ingredients necessary for an explosion. A large group of cold, tired and aggrieved photographers had been kept waiting outside of the empty show venue for almost two hours with little explanation. Instead, they were faced with blasé security guards and a group of young fashion publicists wearing oblivious expressions. When the clock ticked past the hour the show was to begin and the doors still had not opened, the photographers stormed the gates. The rent-a-cops rushed in; the publicists shrieked; cameramen brandished monopods; and a full-on fight ensued. Folks, fashion is dangerous business.

And what, pray tell, was waiting inside Galliano's drafty warehouse? The collection he finally unveiled was filled with heavy folkloric skirts in hues of gray with lively embroidery and fur trim. There were head wraps of jangling silver coins, and shoes with wooden platforms. A cerulean blue coat was edged in Tyrolean embroidery. Miniskirts stood away from the body thanks to hidden panniers, and other skirts were trimmed with fringed tassels.

The models walked out to the guttural sounds of "El Tango de Roxanne" -- the dirge of a song from "Moulin Rouge." They plodded down a long runway that had been turned into the scene of a swirling blizzard -- an effect created with wind, lights and some sort of foul fake snow that had the audience breathing through scarves and swatting the air in a vain attempt to keep the flakes from landing near the nostrils. Despite the hacking and flailing, Galliano kept the attention on the runway with a finale of sheer white and silver embroidered gowns that transformed his models into ethereal snow princesses. The audience might have been bruised and nearly asphyxiated by the time Galliano strutted out for his bows, but it was a beautiful, wistful show.

It also called to mind one of the first presentations during fashion week here -- way back when photographers still had patience and editors thought wearing five-inch platform shoes on cobblestone was a good idea. The collection from Rick Owens shifted out of his usual somber tones of black and gray and dressed his models in layers of white and silver asymmetrical tunics and jackets, over-the-knee boots and billowing fur hats. He, too, created a mood of wistful romance in an environment that was cold and unforgiving.

Both of those collections captured the mood of this season -- not just on the runway, but in the audience as well. The fashion shows mostly ended with a melancholy sigh and a hesitant hopefulness.



*Valentino's looks were lovely but uninspired. (Maria Valentino - For The Washington Post)*

At times, though, it felt as if the season were about to just fizzle out. But then the runways would get a little jolt, like some stubborn soul lighting a single sparkler. Miuccia Prada did that with her Miu Miu collection.

This grown-up and bedazzled collection, presented Thursday in a mansion on the Avenue Foch, served as an informal finale for the shows here. It had the kind of sophistication that one typically associates with the designer's signature collection, and with its rich fabrics, it looked equally as expensive.

The models, dusted with iridescent glitter, sparkled under the lights. They wore weighty dresses that wrapped across the body with low-slung belts but revealed their backs, naked except for the thin strap of a bra. A long-sleeve dress with a print reminiscent of a totem pole fit close to the body. And there were filmy skirts in ruby red that reached below the knee, and tops in turquoise with necklines that plunged to the waist and revealed bras the color of sand. As the skirts increased in bulk, they were embellished, not with tiny paillettes but with gumball-size jewels and brooches the size of a demitasse saucer.

The collection managed to be both dazzling and calming. And it showed off Prada's skill at capturing a woman's sex appeal in a way that is provocative without being unseemly. Somehow, Prada manages to make the revelation of a bra both ladylike and daring. Perhaps it is because she speaks so clearly and firmly and without the slightest hint of second-guessing.

Until the Miu Miu show, though, several designers were meandering -- some even stumbling -- across the finish line. At Valentino, the debut collection for the accessories designers catapulted into the ready-to-wear seat was a bore. Not bad. Not especially good. Designers Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pier Paolo Piccioli seemed overwhelmed by their task and lacked enough ideas to fill the runway. So the audience saw multiple versions of a lovely -- but uninspired -- day dress with draping at the neckline, evening gowns that would be stars in the special-occasion dress section of a mid-priced department store but would not pass muster against the competition on the designer racks, and an overcoat with a fur-trimmed hem that came out in more gussied up variations than a Dunkin' Donut.

The Valentino collection was a reminder of how difficult it is to conjure creativity on command. But it may be they will find their footing in their second season, as did Hannah McGibbon at Chloé. Her second collection for the house focused on outerwear with bravura capes, as well as sportswear that enticed with fuller-than-usual cuts, surprising translucence or an enthusiastic embrace of comfort.



*Hannah McGibbon's designs for Chloé succeeded with enticing capes and sportswear. (Maria Valentino - For The Washington Post)*

Jean Paul Gaultier offered a classy and unabashedly luxurious collection for Hermès, a house that does not believe in throwing the masses a bone with an accessibly priced little bauble. Want a Hermès something-something for new business cards, the ones that say you're consulting now? Got \$500?

In the fall runway collection, with its "Casablanca"-era flight jackets and leather trench coats, every garment oozed money. Not rudely. But unapologetically.

Vanessa Seward showed a charming collection of cocktail dresses for Azzaro. She didn't put on a show but instead had little presentations in the studio above the company's Right Bank offices. A model would walk out in a black gown with a lace back and sparkly little brooches just about the curve of the derriere. And then a couple of salesladies would dash forward with more accessories or the dress in a different color, just like one might have imagined things happening in the 1950s with Kay Thompson and Fred Astaire.

Jun Takahashi of Undercover had a similarly intimate presentation. Except instead of seating tuffets and bustling salesladies, there were video monitors, digital photographs and explanations of the technology embedded in his clothes to absorb and store warmth from the wearer's body and then disperse it when the temperature drops -- like one's own portable solar panel. Takahashi hid this all in ombre knit sweaters, printed knit coats, featherweight down jackets and leopard-print rabbit furs.

Those collections were compelling. They didn't strut, but then, they weren't meant to. Designers Giambattista Valli and Viktor & Rolf set out to dazzle, but ultimately stumbled. Valli championed a hemline that fell to mid-calf, which is fine if the wearer is 6 feet tall and mostly legs. And the Dutch design team known for its emphasis on silhouette was inspired by classic statuary. Its coats with "carved" details were elegant and sophisticated. Its use of draping was so excessive that the models began looking like emaciated Shar-Peis.

And now, on to the subject of bunny ears. Marc Jacobs's collection for Louis Vuitton was a pop-culture collision of '80s artifacts and more: Playboy bunnies, Christian Lacroix pouf skirts, Las

Vegas cocktail waitresses and the enduring profession of the "escort." Jacobs put it all through a blender, strained it for smut and came up with a collection of ivory lace suits, fitted black skirts and jackets trimmed with shocking pink ruffles, ruched leather suits, lace-covered shoes and pearl-studded gold-link necklaces that looked like fancy dice.

The collection was a reflection of Jacobs as a pop-culture omnivore. No reference is too kitschy or tawdry to consider for the mega-brand that he transformed into a repository for our sexual fantasies, social climbing, artistic aspirations, rebellious outbursts and more. Jacobs found a place for it all in this house.

Louis Vuitton epitomizes fashion as a corporate, logo-dependent business driven by smoke-and-mirrors wizardry. Vuitton's is a handbag business, after all. The rest is an illusion. But Jacobs exploited that deception by creating fashion that taps into our wildest fantasies, telling us that they should be taken seriously because, after all, here they are being championed by a house so big and respected that it can pitch its own show tent in the middle of a courtyard at the Louvre.

These clothes will never be produced in any significant number -- a fact that remains bothersome considering the hype and expense related to these shows. But if one can put that aside, there still is something worth applauding. Creativity, popular culture and fashion have value as tools for personal reinvention. And if corporations can sponsor golf tournaments, auto shows and executive boondoggles, then surely Louis Vuitton can legitimately finance a little magic.

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