

A SWEET DISORDER

NON-FICTION

IN THE Dress

BY GENEVIEVE VALENTINE

A sweet disorder in the dress

Kindles in clothes a wantonness:

...A careless shoe-string, in whose tie

I see a wild civility =

Do more bewitch me than when art

Is too precise in every part.

~Robert Herrick

IN OCTOBER OF 2009, Alexander McQueen unveiled his spring 2010 collection, Plato's Atlantis, at Paris Fashion Week.

"Plato's Atlantis" sounds like the title of a long-lost *Star Trek* episode, and the results on the runway were appropriately science-fictional.

His models were made-up like creatures who had crawled out of H.R. Giger paintings, their hair braided and teased into horned ridges clawing across their heads and down again. Charging down the runway on foot-high shoes shaped like lobster claws—later to be dubbed "Armadillos," the models made wide circuits around two motorized cameras that projected their movements onto an enormous screen, presenting an illusion of an undersea alien metropolis, inhuman and magnificent.

The clothes themselves were the culmination of McQueen's previous seasons of work with detail,

print, color, and shape: cocktail dresses patterned like brightly-stained beetle autopsies; pants sculpted like coral reefs; spring jackets—the shape and translucency of a chrysalis—hovering several inches above the body.

McQueen had long been considered a designer whose clothes, and presentations, contained elements of costume ranging from subtle to overwhelming. This collection, however, far surpassed his previous work in its execution, theatricality, and celebration of the bizarre.

This was not McQueen’s first outrageous show. He once sent models down the runway wearing elaborate wedding dresses with net veils draped over antlers. In 2004, his collection was presented as a living game of human chess. He’s styled runway presentations around shipwrecks. He once closed a show by having two car-factory robots spray-paint a model wearing virginal white.

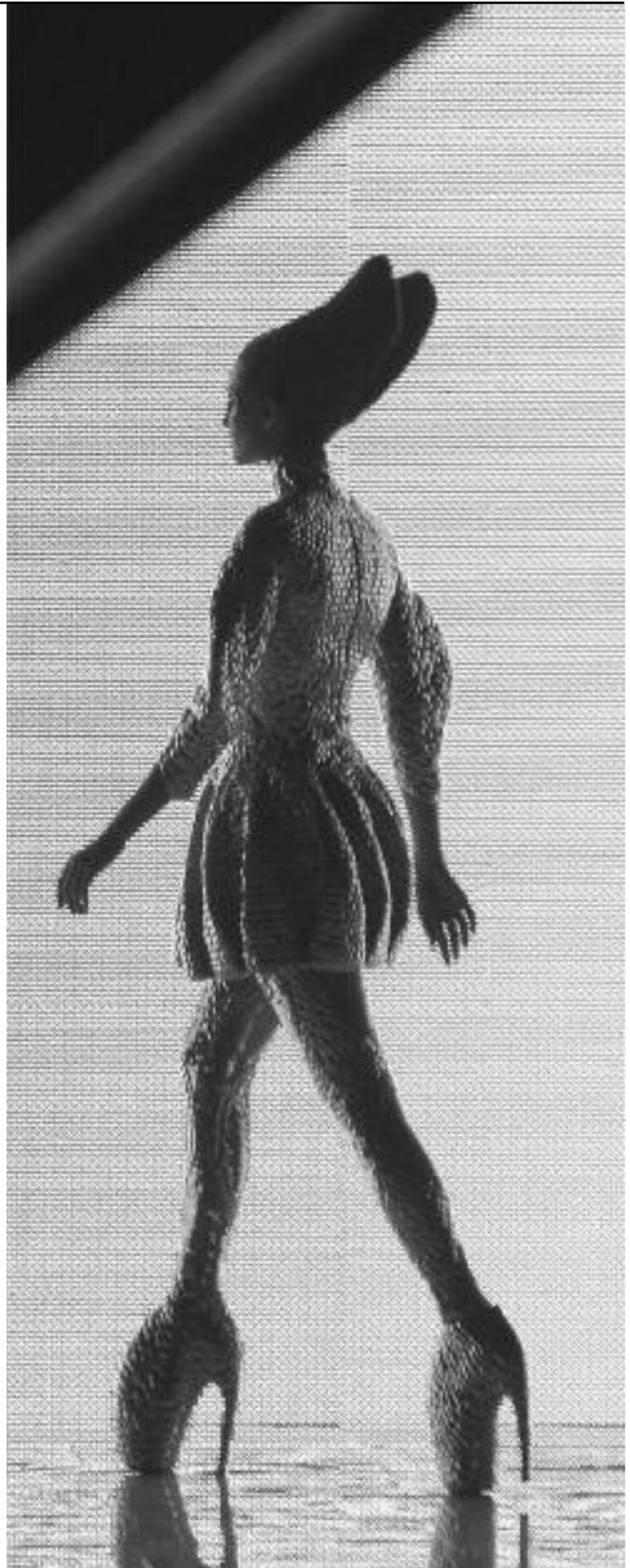
But the clothes of “Plato’s Atlantis” shown that October night went above and beyond all McQueen’s prior efforts. Although masterfully designed, the collection was aggressive, severe, off-putting. It was impractical. It was not, by conventional standards, pretty.

But then, that was the point.

McQueen had long been an advocate of the bizarrely beautiful, and this collection was the perfect synthesis of McQueen’s self-proclaimed love affair with “man and machine,” the triumph of wearable science fiction over seasonal marketing. And it was a collection that sent a compelling message amid the filmy sundresses flooding other runways: McQueen’s collection was a singular contribution to an aesthetic school positing that it’s just as worthy to be interesting as it is to be pretty.

It’s an aesthetic that had begun to resonate within a culture saturated by ever-narrowing beauty standards and an increasingly secretive/punitive dichotomy about women’s sexuality. McQueen’s rising mainstream appeal seemed to be an indicator of a growing counterculture interest in the beauty of the weird that is being celebrated in its cinema, its reading, and its music.

A ready example is Lady Gaga, a pop singer whose public image is less sexy starlet than Cubist painting come to life. Lady Gaga has consistently





chosen the bizarre over the sexy, to great effect. She attends awards shows in gowns made of meat, headpieces big enough to have their own gravitational pull, and eggs, and strives to make the statement that she is bold rather than sexy. Her videos are surrealist playgrounds devoid of the teasing-nymphet or brokenhearted-violet tropes (she poisons and torches the men who done her wrong). It's no surprise someone with a combative sense of style would champion the same aesthetic McQueen puts forth. She was the first person off the runway to wear the famed Armadillo heels in her "Bad Romance" music video, and she collaborated with McQueen to design costumes for her Fame Monster tour.

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McQueen's slightly sideways approach to beauty has sometimes received mixed reviews, with critical emphasis on the theatricality of the runway shows often overshadowing his undeniable craftsmanship (he's a Savile-Row trained tailor). Usually runway spectacles like those in which McQueen reveled are reserved for couture spinoffs from fashion houses such as Givenchy (where McQueen worked before

beginning his own label) and Dior, whose designers show off their haute couture offerings alongside their more market-friendly lines each season. McQueen, however, labeled each of his collections ready-to-wear.

This is not merely semantics. Ready-to-wear fashion feeds into a cycle of dictating to its market while creating an exclusive, aspirational brand image. McQueen presented well-cut suits and red-carpet standards cheek-by-jowl with golden bodices of anatomically-correct armor plate and cocktail dresses that looked like death's-head moths; amid an industry that generally prefers to think, *You Wish*, Alexander McQueen's body of work suggested, *Why Not?*

McQueen was one of a rising number of designers (including stalwarts like Isabel Toledo and newcomers like Rodarte) who treat fashion as performance art for women rather than as a costume one wears to attract the sexual attention of men. It's beauty of a Tim Burton type, where it's more than all right to be a little askew, and beauty relies less on societal standards than on being individually striking.

In this respect, Isabel Toledo is a more direct precursor of Alexander McQueen than any of fashion's flashy John Galianos. Toledo is, like McQueen, a master of tailoring, whose trademark is her manipulation of fabric and seaming to create dramatic shapes on the body, whether jellyfish blouses or origami jackets that fold perfectly flat. Her work generally skirts the spotlight, not least because she ignores fashion's seasonal cycle and creates capsule collections on her own schedule with minimal marketing. Toledo's clothes are not designed to make the wearer look either expensively dressed or sexually attractive (something a society trained to objectify and classify women generally expects from clothing). They're experi-

ments in shape, cut, and texture, designs meant to be worn by someone beyond the norm.

It is this individuality and attention to the singular over the industrial that dovetailed so neatly with McQueen's own vision, and Toledo's decades of small-scale, critical success were no doubt influential when McQueen was initially establishing his brand. (Many of his early collections showed the same attention to drape and seaming for which Toledo is known, themes he carried to a sublime level with Plato's Atlantis.)

Alexander McQueen's Spring 2010 show was that rare animal that appeals as much to fashion insiders as to Hollywood, that captivates both Anna Wintour and the casual blogger. The dialogue about what makes clothing beautiful, and what makes fashion art, has bled into far more places than a single fashion show can hope to reach. It was a watershed moment for fashion.

With the emergence of this niche aesthetic into the collective culture, the future of fashion was suddenly uncertain, exciting, and bound to be beautiful.

IN FEBRUARY 11, 2010, Alexander McQueen took his own life.

His final collection was shown at Paris Fashion Week in March 2010. The silhouettes were subdued in comparison to Plato's Atlantis; the theme of this collection was intricate handwork as a canvas for motifs from Byzantine, medieval, and Renaissance art.

The garments boasted gold-stamped lions, bullion beading, embroidered filigree, silk-screened portraits from medieval paintings, and, repeatedly, angel wings. The collection was reportedly unfinished at the time of his death, and was presented with minimal fanfare.

It was a mature and ethereal collection, a meditation on the divine, which of-

fered a quietly melancholy coda to McQueen's body of work. (The fashion house itself continues under new creative director Sarah Burton.)

However, for the public and for fashion historians, Plato's Atlantis will likely stand as the most memorable of McQueen's collections; it was the magnum opus of a designer with strong vision and limitless promise.

IN MAY 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art will honor Alexander McQueen with a special exhibition to be premiered during the exclusive Costume Institute Gala. The exhibit's curator, Andrew Bolton, has expressed a desire to keep the collection from feeling like a retrospective; instead, "Andrew McQueen: Savage Beauty" will highlight the designer's tendency towards high romance. A screening room will be included where visitors can view his most memorable runway shows, and an aptly named "Cabinet of Curiosities to" display his millinery.

It's rare that a single designer is the center of this fashion-world event; seminal figures have been represented (such as early twentieth-century master Poiret), but more often it is theme, rather than an individual, that serves as the subject. Past exhibitions have included "Dangerous Liaisons," "Anglomania," "Superheroes," "The Model as Muse," and "American Woman."

For such an exhibition to be dedicated to McQueen is further proof that the aesthetic he developed throughout his career is considered outstanding and influential, both in the current state of fashion and in a more historical context. He was an artist who left his mark as a master of the uncanny. 🌀

