

Walk on the Wild Side

Upon being appointed Creative Director of Yves Saint Laurent in March 2012, Hedi Slimane brought in sweeping changes. He created a new logo, moved the design studio from Paris to LA and initiated an overhaul of its stores. And having witnessed his latest runway show firsthand, we think it's time to appreciate how well he has been able to reposition and rejuvenate the brand.

These days, one can expect a Saint Laurent fashion show to be unlike any other show across the tightly packed, eight-day Paris Fashion Week marathon. Take the Autumn-Winter 2015-2016 women's ready-to-wear show, in which the invitation is not a place-date-and-time on pretty paper sort of affair but rather, a taste of indie art publishing in a comic book-like collection of sketches and appropriated media by American artist Jim Shaw.

And, what appears to be a normal runway, rises to become more like a concert stage, revealing dramatically lit metal scaffolding underneath. Even the seasoned editor-in-chief of American Vogue, Anna Wintour, expresses an uncharacteristic sense of child-like delight at being compelled to look at the models as if she were a concert spectator.

Also, nothing can be said about Saint Laurent without the music — given that there are nearly as many young musicians present at a Saint Laurent fashion show, as there are VIPs. Instead of a standard runway soundtrack of samples and modern breaks blended into perfect transitions, this show has only one song playing, a track that was recorded earlier in the month, in Paris, by the all-female >





garage punk trio from Denmark, The Felines. And as sixty looks come down the runway, 'Pretty Boy', repeats like a mantra, playing over and over in variable intensity, moving from irritating, to intense, to soothing, to meaningful.

In fact, the music helped make sense of the collection, an assembly of deeply urban, ready-to-party looks in crinoline baby doll dresses with classic blazers, ultra mini-skirts worn with ripped fishnet stockings, and cigarette pants angled with razor-thin suspenders and ties.

With this sartorial backdrop, listening to the soundtrack, I imagined both the desire of a young woman for a pretty boy, and also the boyishness of these pretty girls walking down the runway. Yves Saint Laurent arguably spearheaded androgynous fashion in 1966, with the famous 'Le Smoking' tuxedo attire for women. This seems to be Slimane's aesthetic pursuit as well: a general and highly seductive sense of ambiguity. He perfectly captures that open space of youth – a space that is one of innocence and the end of innocence at the same time. His interpretation works equally well in ripped tights and leather as it does in finely beaded caftans and bohemian denim – looks that characterised the launching of the Psych Rock collection in late 2014. It evokes a 1970s sense of decadence in a back-to-nature-rebellion, beautifully photographed by Hedi Slimane to the backdrop of open lakes and countryside.

For, at the same time that Slimane captures this sense of youthful openness in his clothes, he perhaps captures it most poignantly in his photography, which for him is a creative endeavour that lives independently of his fashion career - he has an impressive list of exhibitions under his name - as well as in perfect co-habitation with it, as he assumes the role of photographer for his collection campaigns.

It is now over three years since Hedi Slimane took over as Creative Director of Yves Saint Laurent, under the parent company ▶

Previous and left: Featuring an assortment of street-cast models with a pastoral setting as the backdrop, the black and white campaign images by Hedi Slimane highlight the 1970s-inspired garments for the fittingly titled Psych Rock SS2015 collection. **Above:** Runway shots from the AW2015-16 show.



Kering (formerly PPR). After a wildly successful tenure at (LVMH-owned) Dior Homme, then taking a few years to focus on his photography work, Hedi Slimane replaced Stefano Pilati in 2012. What came with Slimane was the Reform Project. He relocated the design studio to Los Angeles though the brand's headquarters are in Paris. He overhauled the brand communications and contentiously dropped 'Yves' from the brand name to become Saint Laurent. This move in particular, was not an act of re-branding though, it was more an act of retro-branding. When Yves Saint Laurent, in partnership with Pierre Bergé (who is notably a staunch supporter of Slimane today, and always front row) decided to start a ready-to-wear element to the brand in the 1960s, they opened a left bank boutique under the banner Saint Laurent Rive Gauche. Vintage pieces, floating around Paris auction houses and consignment shops, can be found with this label inside.

From the invitation, to the fashion show staging (also designed by Slimane) to the music and – one must not forget – the clothes, it seems that Slimane believes that the entire infrastructure of a fashion brand can potentially be an artistic medium. He uses every element as a platform for communication, and not for the purposes of a brand's mono-marketing objectives but as an aesthetic expression of l'air de temps, the Zeitgeist, the now.

It is tempting to directly compare fashion designers Hedi Slimane and Yves Saint Laurent but the audacity with which Hedi Slimane has assumed the brand as his own, both pushes away the obvious comparisons and underlines the most important ones. How did a quintessentially Parisian brand known for dressing the likes of Catherine Deneuve arrive in Los Angeles with ripped tights, leather bomber jackets and messy hair? Firstly, Slimane has always made these seemingly forlorn looks with the utmost craftsmanship that ready-to-wear permits. Most importantly, however, it isn't the form but the feeling, the energy, the free-spirited temple to youth that Slimane never fails to touch at its core. There will never be another Yves Saint Laurent, but there will always be the edge that Yves Saint Laurent thrived on when alive and that Slimane manifests today, for his own time. **B**

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