



Blurred Vision

This season, designers are disrupting the gender code with clothing that defies definition

BY MALWINA GUDOWSKA

IN HIS 1958 BOOK, *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote that “it is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.” He also said, “When the image is new, the world is new.” Bachelard was talking about architecture, but his words could just as easily be applied to the state of fashion today. The “image” is a man in a pussy-bow blouse. The “new world”: one that exists in the ever-expanding fluidity between masculine and feminine.

This season more than ever, the blurring of gender lines dominated front-row conversation at fashion weeks around the globe. Men and women not only shared the runway, but they also shared (and swapped) fabrics, silhouettes and everything in between. At his debut presentation for Gucci, new creative director Alessandro Michele dressed his boys in lace, chiffon and the aforementioned pussy-bow blouses; his girls wore boxy suits, oversized trousers and loafers. At Givenchy, Riccardo Tisci’s guys wore knitted skirts and high-shine shirts; girls, meanwhile, wore tailcoats. On Saint Laurent’s fall runways,

everyone wore three-inch heels. Hood By Air’s Shayne Oliver cut up men’s shirts, sweaters and coats, and reassembled them in unexpected ways for both sexes, wiping clean perceived notions of who is who and what is what. But rather than being divisive—butch clothes for women and girlish ones for men—designers have created a harmonious in-between where traditional definitions are called into question.

“There has always been cross-pollination between womenswear and menswear, but the fall ’15 shows felt like a real tipping point into something meaningful and permanent,” says Linda Hewson, creative director at Selfridges. “Gender neutral fashion is part of a bigger movement and cultural shift that affects us all.” Earlier this year, the U.K. department store chain launched a pop-up concept called Agender that merged its men’s and women’s sections over three floors. The project lasted for six weeks and featured unisex capsules from BodyMap and Nicola Formichetti, as well as ready-to-wear pieces from Ann Demeulemeester, Comme des Garçons, Rad Hourani and Gareth Pugh. “We’ve >

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always been confined to traditional parameters that separate the sexes,” says Hewson. “This new approach was a huge step forward for us and our customers.”

Rather than “genderless” or “gender-neutral”—two common terms used to describe the current mood—Ben Barry, assistant professor of equity, diversity and inclusion at Ryerson University’s School of Fashion, prefers “gender-more.” “Instead of trying to get rid of gender, we are looking at it in creative ways,” he says. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of his students. They are, after all, growing up in a world that embraces diversity across ethnicity, race and sexuality more than ever before. “They do not feel like they are designing for men or women,” says Barry. “They are mixing and matching and challenging us to look at fashion in new ways.”

“I don’t want to feel sexless, but I want to wear whatever I want to wear”

Shaun Cole, a program director at the London College of Fashion, has also seen a rise in the number of applications from students who are interested in addressing these questions. That said, Cole, whose own research centres on these complex issues, is not convinced fashion has truly broken free of gender-based design yet—save for sportswear, perhaps, and the work of a handful of more directional designers. “We live in a world of binaries, and I think people are scared when we try to break those binaries,” he says. But, as we move to a society that is more accepting of sexual differences and orientation, it is beginning to happen. Forward-thinking labels like New York-based Baja East, which launched in 2013 as an “ambisexual” line, are part of the shift away from these stark contrasts. For instance, at its first runway show, designers John Targon and Scott Studenberg had male and female models switch clothing mid-presentation to illustrate their fluid philosophy. The label’s latest lookbook for resort ’16 shows two sexually ambiguous models side by side, wearing the same trousers, tunic and crop top. “‘Genderless’ is another label,” says Targon. “Our whole idea was to get away

Right: A look from Baja East’s resort ’16 lookbook. Below: A campaign image from Selfridges’ Agender pop-up concept



from labels.” And although the designers admit that not all men will feel comfortable in a backless jumpsuit, it comes down to letting the customer choose without creating any restrictions or preconceptions. “For us, it’s about how a person interacts with the clothing, and the attitude a garment takes on when someone, anyone, wears it,” says Studenberg. “‘Androgynous’ is more of a sexless word—I don’t want to feel sexless, but I want to wear whatever I want to wear.”

Ultimately, fashion is a gateway to creating whatever identity you desire for yourself. Perhaps, then, it’s not about eradicating the binaries, nor redefining or transcending them, nor even creating a new box to tick. It’s simply about the right to do all of those things, or none of them. Both Michele and Tisci referenced freedom as their inspiration—freedom from rigid definitions and stark contrasts, and most important, freedom to interpret fashion and gender however one chooses. ●

GENDER-FREE HITS THE STREETS

This fashion movement isn’t limited to the runway. Streetstyle stars are breaking the rules IRL, too.



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