

Rein Man: A Review of *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear, 1715–2015*

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Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear, 1715–2015 is the largest menswear exhibition ever assembled featuring historical works from the last 300 years as well as garments by contemporary designers such as Alexander McQueen, Burberry, Calvin Klein, Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Jean Paul Gaultier, Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent, Vivienne Westwood, and Walter Van Beirendonck. It was organised by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) with most works coming from their internationally renowned collection of men's clothing. It was first shown at LACMA in the USA in 2016, subsequently toured to the St Louis Art Museum in 2017, and most recently presented at the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney, Australia in 2018.

The exhibition works at various levels, from the actual garments themselves, the exhibition format, the style of mannequins, the lighting of each ensemble, the catalogue essays, through to the relationships constructed between chronology, clothing and masculinity. One of the major propositions of the exhibition is that extravagance is not confined to the domain of women's attire. In fact in the history of men's fashion 'the peacock' has always won out over 'the man in the grey flannel suit'¹. Think of Casanova's powdered wigs and beauty spots, Beau Brummel, the Fop, the Dandy, the Zoot Suiter, the Hippy, the Gangster Rapper and the Hipster as variations on this theme.

Yet we live in a time where unadorned black has come to dominate men's everyday apparel, prompting co-curator Peter McNeil to write that men seemed to have "descended into mourning."² Many other men have opted out altogether, becoming actively unfashionable by neglect, or dressing so as not to be noticed, such that contemporary manliness has come to be "defined in direct opposition to fashion."³ This withdrawal from the scene is a form of fashion capitulation, probably prompted by the fact we live in an age of acute sensitivity to what it means to be a man. Men are being asked if the very word 'man' is an act of oppression that blocks difference, subjugates the non-binary other, and confines women to partner up with toxic hegemonic masculinity? The very title of the exhibition with its tongue in cheek references to popular culture notions of power and desire⁴ poses the question, can clothing make a difference to this situation? Ultimately the power of fashion to drive change comes from a dynamic relation to the entire discipline of design with its influence on economics, politics, ethics and aesthetics, all of it parsed through the body, and the stark environmental truths of contemporary synthetic textiles and materials.

The catalogue for the exhibition includes two major essays by fashion historians Peter McNeil and Tim Blanks. McNeil's essay covers the broad historical sweep from the 18th to the 20th Century while Blanks focuses on the importance of the military uniform over the last 100 years. The uniform, mass produced and ready to wear, matched the intensified industrial demands of World War 1, dictating attire in the trenches and the parade ground, then flowing through to the boardroom, the lounge room, and the street. As Blanks puts it, "mass produced uniforms for 18th Century armies ... anticipated the factory made suits of the 19th Century."⁵

¹ Is the title of a novel and film of the 1950s that deals with the tension between collectivism and individualism in post war capitalism.

² *Reigning Men, Fashion in Menswear, 1715-2015*, LACMA and Prestel Books, Munich, 2016, 236

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⁴ The disco hit from the 1983, 'Its Raining Men' by the Weather Girls, is considered a gay anthem and is listed in the top 25 of Rolling Stone magazine's Essential LGBTQ Pride Songs.

⁵ Tim Blanks, *Reigning Men*, op cit, 244.

At the beginning of the 20th Century industrial mass production peaked as mechanised slaughter in the trenches, and ready to wear fashion, at virtually the same time. Both involved a total mobilisation of men's bodies and the kind of garments they should wear for optimum effect, from the battlefield to the boardroom, and then all aspects of modern life. This resulted in an irresistible cross fertilisation between military uniforms and daily uniforms, such that mass produced garments of war, uniforms for ceremony, fighting and allegiance, influenced ready to wear garments of everyday life, street wear, formal wear and business wear. Total mobilisation⁶ involves the reduction of all things, objects, devices and human bodies for a single goal, whether it be war, politics, business or sociality. Just as World War I had seen a shift in military tactics from honourable 19th Century face to face confrontations, towards mathematical strategies of faceless numerical obliterations, so men's fashion moved from a gentleman's sensibility of enduring refinement to a warriors sense of "speed, mobility (and) survival."⁷

Even before the 20th Century era of mechanisation, the idea and look of the military uniform had produced the Saville Row suit, which was basically Beau Brummell's "mutation of his own captains uniform" in the Tenth Royal Hussars.⁸ The suit as we know it today, with its matching trousers and jacket, is the global uniform of power dressing in the corporate age, dating roughly from the mid 20th Century to the present. The term 'power dressing' is usually associated with a late 20th Century drive by women to attain democracy in the workplace by de-emphasising feminine sexuality into a shape redefining suit-jacket and skirt. It was meant to project authority in any environment supposedly dominated by men. Power dressing now describes any attempt by men or women to use fashion as a set of sartorial signals that deliver power and respect in a glance. The first power dressers were soldiers who used attire from horned helmets to padded khaki shoulders to intimidate the enemy. This was sublimated by the 'man in the grey flannel suit', whose cookie cutter appearance spelt reliability and endurance for the individual and community, for the overall "professional advancement of Corporate Man."⁹

Today we imagine we have achieved some kind of personal liberation from the language of violent standardisation, yet elements of military jargon and mechanised efficiency endure in the clothes we wear on a daily basis. Consequently when we reach into the wardrobe we might find bomber jackets, trench coats, t-shirts, messenger bags, jodhpurs, army boots, epaulets, bellows pockets and zippers. Even at the level of textile pattern, military camouflage now joins herringbone, hounds tooth and plaid as a visual shorthand for masculinity.¹⁰

Yet the dominance of the uniform as a form of fashion fundamentalism has not remained unchallenged. During a recent 'peacock revolution'¹¹ in the 1960s, a new fashion dialectic was created that pitched the functionality of 'suits'¹² against the psychedelic counter culture of a new youth generation unwilling to toe the line of capitalist standardisation. Since that time the idea of functional masculinity has become an optional extra that can be replaced by

⁶ Ernst Junger, *The Worker : dominion and form*, Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 2017.

⁷ Tim Blanks, *ibid*, 251.

⁸ *ibid* 250.

⁹ *ibid* 252.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

¹¹ *ibid* 257.

¹² Even today 'suits' is a pejorative term meaning faceless business executives or bureaucrats exercising anonymous unquestioned power.

pure decoration or rejected altogether in androgynous hybrids, many of which come from popular culture sources such as pop music and street fashion.

The ongoing dialectic between militarised standardisation and peacock anti-modernism has resulted in a deconstruction of both fashion and masculinity. If neither fashion or masculinity come from a universal essence, then both can be constructed and reconstructed in favour whatever is aesthetically or politically expedient at the time. These are some of the exciting ideas suggested by the contexts of the exhibition *Reigning Men*, but do they measure up to individual garments on display?

For fashion historian and street wise fashionista alike, there are indeed many remarkable garments to be savoured in this exhibition. Some stand out for reasons of fabric architecture, the way a garment can hold or extend a bodily form, creating a textile house in which a man can shelter during leisure or work. Others project colour in a powerful way, from historical garments that use opulent dyes extracted from rare fauna and flora, or shimmering woven oriental fabrics, through recent designs based on geometric abstract art, up to the eye drenching colours created in contemporary industrial laboratories.

Vivienne Westwood and Walter Van Beirendonck are two designers in the show who work in this kind of space, to reach across both time and place to create the sense of an urgent present where men's clothes are always something more than they appear. Westwood finds resources in every age from 18th Century coats to traditional non-western dress, ultimately landing in the 21st century as seen through a restrained anarcho-psychedelic lens. Her original cut up style, developed with Malcolm McLaren in the punk inflamed 1970s, has evolved into a paradoxical classical yet post-postmodern blend of historical appropriation and deconstructivist form. In Westwood's first men's collection in 1991 she revived 18th Century macaroni jackets and breeches shoving them aesthetically into current time, by making them out of brightly coloured acetate satin and photographically printed with floral patterns. One of her pieces in *Reigning Men*, the Ensemble from the Spring/Summer collection of 2014, features a unified visual field created by using the same geometric pattern throughout shirt, jacket and trousers, blending precise Saville Row tailoring with the Kurta, an Indian long form shirt-jacket. Audacious buttons and orange paisley leather shoes turn the ensemble into a moment of visual music, one moment overwhelming like too much tartan and bagpipes, and the next remarkably relaxed in its long lines that draw the eye and ear out to the tones of a cooling breeze on a summer horizon.

Walter Van Beirendonck also draws from deep wells of cultural reference. His ensemble from the *Revolution* collection (Fall/Winter 2000/2001), combines a long orange jacket in late French Revolution style, with skin tight black fetish zippered trousers, completed with floral shirt and oversized cravat made from kitschy patterned bed linen. In this work the diversity of fashion sources creates a buzz of information that is sublimated by a tenderness for the phenomenal experience of just wearing clothes. By merely glancing at the ensemble, there is an immediate sense of the bearing weight of wool, the clinging of vinyl and softness of cotton, that show the body out visually and hold the body in at a sensuous experiential level. Fetish and bondage wear features prominently in Van Beirendonck's sartorial language cleaving a fine line between putting the body under stress, constrained, weighed down, yet not in distress, now bordering on teasing and suggestion, being held, cosseted by an ideal tension between grasping, holding and release.

Some of this idea also comes through the early punk works of Westwood and McLaren where a challenging leather accessory can transcend into catwalk poetry and then become an ironic yet powerful political statement appearing on a local street corner. These kind of garments-as-collage work on us at various perceptual and intellectual levels so they can be felt on sight, evoking a body memory through the eyes. In looking at these kinds of designed experience, I feel in to the intimacy of wearing them. As an observer at a distance, I can have a sartorial experience of wearing and being worn, as opposed to other kinds of work that trigger mere mental-isms happening at the level of visual codification and cultural reference¹³.

Appealing to the eye at a chromatic level, Van Beirendonck's choices of visual composition are inspired by variants of avant-garde modernism, ranging from Day-Glo fauvism, through punk expressionism, to trippy geometric tessellations pumped up by digital design. The intensity of all these combinations reaches a kind of excess that almost supersedes the wearer. The clothes are suddenly wearing you, the garments absorb the look of others, and begin to project out, becoming a source of intensely private light and trans-cultural vision. This unusual mode of push and pull, showing out and holding in, is apparent in another Van Beirendonck work, the Ensemble from the "Lust Never Sleeps", Fall/Winter 2012-13 Collection. It features a plain weave wool suit split by two strong colours, yellow and mauve, that seem to compete for visual control of various components of trousers and jacket. At one moment the trousers are yellow but the mauve circle claiming most of the jacket seems to slip down and reveal yellow shoulders, while trying to invade the upper part of the trousers turning them into shorts. The mauve circle becomes like a spotlight that reveals a smaller man hiding inside a power suit almost like an astronaut inside a protective exoskeleton. The whole effect is completed by a gimp mask and matching gloves that suggest a friendly version of Hannibal Lecter arriving for a corporate dinner party. Van Beirendonck's interest in masks, sometimes fetish based, sometimes tribal, are filtered through references to contemporary artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Jean-Michel Basquiat who used the mask as an expression of subcultural pride. The result in Van Beirendonck's clothes is a subversion of current modes of masculinity away from heterosexual binaries towards unusual poly-sexual trans-cultural male presences such as "the bear." The bear stands proud as an "untweaked, unshaven, full bellied"¹⁴ mature man in stark contrast to the standard catwalk presence of the skinny teenage waif.

Reigning Men gives an overview of how current designers standing on the shoulders of history and riding contemporary trends have shifted the performativity of fashion towards a question about maleness itself. Through street wise combinations of new textile technologies and social media awareness of current events, men's fashion has become a theatre of masculinity. On this stage actors play out new options of being a 'man' that are multimodal and polyvalent, rather than merely sitting at one end of a binary polarity. Whether fashion, on the catwalk or in the street, can get beyond mere symbols and signs and make an ontological claim about what it means to be a man in the 21st Century is something that comes through the work of Walter Van Bierendonck, Vivienne Westwood and many others in the show. Their work proceeds to the limits of both fashion and manliness bypassing historical forms of hegemonic masculinity to incorporate the dynamic of others and otherness. In this way the show stands as a gateway pointing towards clothing that is haute couture and pret-a-porter, clever and playful, wearable and understandable, while at the same time drawing on

¹³ A dynamic discussed in Robinson, T. 2019 'Attaining poise: a movement-based lens to explore embodiment in fashion', *Fashion Theory* in press.

¹⁴ Tim Blanks, "Walter and the 33 Bears", in *Walter Van Bierendonck: Dream the World Awake*, Tiel, Belgium : Lannoo; Woodbridge, 2012, 88.

awareness of binary power dynamics as highlighted in the Me Too movement, a polymorphous understanding of sexuality offered by the LGBTQIA community, and the context of a sustainable future for fashion in the time of the Anthropocene.
