

Dress of the Year 2020

By Iain R Webb

At the tail end of 2019 I was thrilled to be invited by Rosemary Harden at Fashion Museum, Bath, to be the selector of Dress of the Year 2020, especially as this was the second time I had been asked – in 1998 I had previously selected a Sonia Rykiel ensemble when I was Fashion Director of *ELLE UK*.

This time around I began the process by taking the conventional approach that started by looking at the catwalk shows for Spring/Summer 2020. Fashion always works on fast forward; designer collections are shown six months before they are intended to be worn. By February 2020, and a new round of shows presenting Autumn/Winter 2020, I had already formed a few ideas.

Rather scarily, this year it will be four decades since I graduated from St Martin's School of Art, where I studied Fashion Design, so I wanted to choose an ensemble that would have some connection with this momentous event (for me). Initially I pondered an Alexander McQueen gown designed by Sarah Burton that incorporated embroideries based on illustrations that had been done by Central Saint Martins' students during a workshop with artist Julie Verhoeven at the McQueen London store. The remit to select something that will represent the times in which we live got me thinking about John Galliano (another St Martin's alumni) and his reconstructed proposals at Maison Margiela (I'm a sucker for the spirit of make-do-and mend) and also Rei Kawakubo's gender bending boys in what looked like Chanel-redux skirt suits at Comme des Garçons. Or maybe even an extravagant future gazing gown by Rick Owens?

However, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that it wasn't just the conversations surrounding fashion that were changing but that the entire landscape had shifted. Fashion is now communicated and disseminated in so many ways other than from the catwalk, which in itself often feels, well, old fashioned. As does the selection of one garment, one ensemble, in the attempt to encapsulate 365 days, especially when each new day brought dreadful news.

As February turned into March the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic terrorised the world. In May, the killing of George Floyd horrified. In 2020, how could these things still be happening? This was no conventional year.

I have therefore chosen to take a radical approach, curating instead a collection of garments that combined tell a story of a moment in time. This moment. While traditionally the selector might nominate a womenswear ensemble accompanied by a menswear outfit, the late Isabella Blow, who, wanting to promote her favourite crop of young British designers, selected the work of seven including Hussein Chalayan, Shaun Leane and Philip Treacy among them, set a precedent in 1997.

I hope my selection will prove as thought provoking and cogent.

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Camel cashmere and brown leather cape with gold metal hardware by Riccardo Tisci for *Burberry*, worn by Naomi Campbell, with Tyvek hazmat suit, facemask and rubber gloves.

At the dawn of the Covid-19 pandemic, in her attempt to get home before lockdown, Naomi took a flight from LA to New York. She documented that trip and posted the film on her *Being Naomi* YouTube channel: "I was genuinely nervous about travelling at a time like this, but I needed to get home...we cannot live in fear".

When I watched this film it was like watching a new sci-fi mini-drama on Netflix, except it was a reality. An unreal reality that almost a year on is still with us and is still having devastating effect all around the world. It has caused death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. It has changed the way we live, act, think and dress. Throughout history the clothes we wear have told our stories. The hazmat suit, along with the mask, gloves and goggles, has become symbolic of our times.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iqFRaCoyvw>

Khaki cotton twill scrubs consisting reversible slipover shirt, drawstring trousers and matching mask, beanie hat and bag - *Marine Garment* by Ian Jeffries.

“I made the scrubs on Long Island, New York during lock down,” says Jeffries. “I am so happy they will play a small part in documenting life during the Covid-19 pandemic. Making masks, scrubs to order and bread filled my days.”

Designer Ian Jeffries, who having worked in the industry for labels such as Karl Lagerfeld, Perry Ellis, Neil Barrett, Alfred Dunhill and Bamford & Sons, launched his own label *Marine Garment* in 2017. His gender-neutral designs are inspired by utilitarian uniforms; embracing the practical, functional and protective qualities imbued in these styles of clothing. His version of hospital scrubs are now being worn by the very practitioners that originally inspired his designs - see Dr Manolis Manolakakis.

***Black Lives Matter* cotton T-shirt**

The T-shirt has long since been a blank canvas for messaging be it political, emotional, humourous, cultural or cute. Most notably it is a garment that has been harnessed for political and social protest – who can forget the image of designer Katharine Hamnett meeting Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 wearing her ‘58% DON’T WANT PERSHING’ T-shirt.

Political slogan T-shirts have become part of the fashion activist landscape and are now as likely to be seen on the catwalk as they are on the street. ‘WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS’ T-shirt by Maria Grazia Chiuri for Dior was actually selected by editor Sarah Bailey as Dress of the Year 2017. The Black Lives Matter slogan, ‘a rallying cry for all black lives striving for liberation’, became synonymous with the mass global demonstrations instigated by the killing of George Floyd in the USA in May 2020. The slogan was not only printed on T-shirts but also appeared on banners and cardboard placards. It has been painted on a section of 16th Street in Washington, now renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza. In 2020 this powerful message has become inescapable.

Blood orange satin padded bomber jacket 6XL, PVC trousers, hoodie, bodysuit and mask by Francesco Colucci as featured in his series of *Isolation Portraits* on Instagram

Colucci creates astonishing window displays for *Traid*, a network of eleven charity shops located across London, using garments, accessories and objects he finds in the stores. He says that his imaginatively dressed, themed mannequins dramatically highlight “sustainability and how wearing second-hand or vintage clothing can reduce the carbon, water and waste footprint of clothing consumption”. They are also an eye-catching riot of colour and pattern; a patchwork of visual references that include London clubland spirit and Italian cinema. During lockdown Colucci used himself as a mannequin for a series of *Isolation Portraits* that underscore how fashion can be both transformative and illusionary. His photographic portraits share a mood with formal old masters. Colucci’s fans range from American Vogue’s Sarah Mower to artists Gilbert & George.

Patchwork and appliqué cashmere and cotton kimono for *The White Company (TWC)* by Daisy Robbins, final year fashion student Kingston School of Art

As Professor of Fashion & Design at Kingston School of Art (KSA), it is part of my remit to help maintain the fashion course’s longtime connection with fashion industry – on this occasion a collaborative project called *Cashmere Couture* that highlighted TWC’s ‘Good Cashmere Award’, a benchmark on how to conserve, nature, protect animals, support farmers and minimize the impact of textiles on the world.

During Lockdown a live brief was set in association with TWC Clothing Director Barbara Horspool and KSA Senior Lecturer Wendy Baker, which asked knitwear students to produce creative couture designs using the brand’s recycled cashmere garments, left-over yarns, remnants and dead-stock. Finalist Robbins was inspired by John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s *Bed-ins for Peace* to produce a handcrafted kimono decorated with an appliqué pattern. She photographed her finished design on her flatmates, mimicking the imagery of John and Yoko’s original protest. Interestingly, during the

pandemic night attire, loungewear and slippers have been the biggest online sellers for *TWC*.

A Dress of Hope by Ibrahim Kamara and Gareth Wrighton

As associate lecturer in Fashion Communication & Promotion at Central Saint Martins (CSM), Kamara and Wrighton are among my ex-students (Class of 2016). At CSM both excelled as radical creative forces. Since graduation Kamara has established himself as a tour-de-force stylist, also founding a studio, a modern-day collective of like-minded practitioners including Wrighton, who has forged his own multidisciplinary career as a designer, stylist, photographer, filmmaker and creative director.

Their work, which challenges race and gender, appears in fashion periodicals including *Vogue*, *i-D* and *LOVE* and they collaborate with leading brands such as Burberry, Dior and Gucci. After conversations with Kamara and Wrighton I commissioned this dress as a symbol of hope. As a starting point I provided the duo with a selection of antique table linen, bed linen and lace trimmings that I had collected over the years. Wrighton explains: "By draping the oddments and making only three cuts into the fabric the garment exists in temporality and follows the current ideas of taking apart and refashioning as needed".

A heart-shaped locket integrated into the dress holds a message of hope. Kamara and Wrighton are storytellers and trailblazers in how they create and present their fashion vision. They are redefining the fashion landscape.

Matt viscose jersey dress with felt appliqué dress by Iain R Webb

Exactly four decades ago I graduated from St Martin's School of Art having studied Fashion Design. For my final collection I referenced the work of friend and artist Duggie Fields, who painted in a flat, graphic style. I wanted to create something that was at the exact opposite of the New Romantic theatrics being paraded in nightclubs and on catwalks as the latest thing. I chose navy and white Hurel silk jersey and silk chiffon, the two most classic fabrics I could imagine

and stitched them into cartoon-like silhouettes, a parody of the perfect hourglass figure, on floaty neo-kaftans.

Earlier this year I found one of my original toiles [a try-out design in a cheaper fabric], still with pins intact. I have updated with felt boobs, once again inspired by Fields' new work, in part as commentary on Instagram/Facebook censorship policy #freethenipple. Princess Julia, who modeled my original collection in 1980, is again photographed wearing the new version on the rooftops of London.

S.W.A.L.K – a film by Nick Knight, a collaboration with John Galliano that documents the process of making the *Maison Margiela Artisanal Co-Ed Collection Autumn/Winter 2020*

Like many others during lockdown I tried to raise my spirits and nourish my soul by watching films online. I was amused in the midst of such dark times to make a blink-and-you-missed-it onscreen appearance in Knight's latest fashion film. It seems that the Blitz Kids (of which I was one) style antics are still proving an inspiration for a new generation of creatives.

Knight's empathetic film is a collage of captured moments in the Margiela atelier, scrapbook mood boards, snatched Zoom conversations and the overheard mechanics of virtuoso makers that tracks the collection from Galliano's creative brief, disseminated via email, to regal realisation.

For the finale, Knight interprets the new Margiela proposal in swirling, neo-operatic splendour, all the time soundtracked by longtime Galliano collaborator (and fellow Blitz Kid) Jeremy Healey, including a particularly evocative version of 'Young Americans' that transports us seamlessly back to that original Bowie Night at 'Billy's', c.1978. Watch S.W.A.L.K. :

<https://showstudio.com/projects/s-w-a-l-k/fashion-film?autoplay=1>

What would you nominate as Dress of the Year 2020? Please post your selection on Instagram using the hashtag #mydoty2020