

Springs eternal.

Print

Title Annotation: fashion modelling

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Date: Jan 1, 1995

Words: 1583

Publication: Artforum International

ISSN: 1086-7058

I always say, Proust and Batman--you need both!

Gianni Versace, 1994

WITH GIANNI VERSACE referring to Nietzsche and Proust in a recent interview, Karl Lagerfeld talking about Ovid, and Valentino speculating in *The New Yorker* that his obsession with the perfect tray is sick, it wouldn't be long before this bookish Jewesse wound up doing runway during Fashion Week. Indeed, it really happened. Lurking around the edges of the spring collections like a faint echo of last year's grunge moment, sensitive ears could detect an apocalyptic rumble in the flat belly of Fashion, a hankering demanding belchlike to be released: restive with its own perfection, Fashion needed to inoculate itself against its own monotonous flawlessness with a homeopathic supplement of "reality" in the form of "real people" models. Fashion-challenged by my dainty Jewesse frame, I fretted that I wouldn't show off J. Morgan Puett's spring collection to fullest advantage, but who am I to argue with someone who's inviting me to model? Indeed I wanted to ask for the invitation in writing, signed by two witnesses, but feared appearing indelicate. If supermodels can write books, there could be a slight opening for me on the runway. No way was I gonna miss my microsecond before we're back to the usual diet of anorexic beanpoles.

Something strange was in the air during Fashion Spring, which occurred, as usual, around Halloween. (Fashion does Spring in fall and Fall in summer, like an ill relative who takes Jell-O for breakfast and cereal for dinner somehow to plate a perverse digestive tract.) "You're not going to believe who I saw in a beige Rolls-Royce near 57th Street!" quizzed my friend D.B., an emerging artist who makes "clothes as art." "Jenny Holzer!" I shot out. "No!" he declared, "Linda Evangelista!" triumphant, as if granted a special sign by gods of fabulousity through his personal sighting, right in midtown, of their earthly representative, a Brand Name Super model. Brand Name Super models are bigger than ever this year; the real-people thing only highlights the preternatural clothes-wearing skills of the pros, lest we get numbed to them.

At least half the fun of modeling consists in telling people about it. I proudly announced my new career option to one of my quote "friends": "You have to stop this!" he brayed. "The only way to end this fantasy definitively is to turn it to s--t!" I sagely replied, secretly hoping for some great tear sheets. Proust observed, through the character of the painter Elstir, that the only way to "cure" a daydream is to daydream more rather than less: "One must have a thorough understanding of one's daydreams if one is not to be troubled by them." Indeed I came to look upon my runway debut as an act of mental hygiene. On Week 30 of my "2 Weeks, No Flab" workout regime, I hoped for more--maybe a fashion score for the People of the Book?

In the fall of 1874, Stephane Mallarme's high school English students had a field day: "Mallarme, on ne fiche rien dans sa classe; il ecrit tout le temps pour des journaux de modes!" That season the Symbolist poet single-handedly ghost-wrote a fashion mag, *La Dernière Mode*, cranking out prose-poems (under a drag nom de plume) honoring this most material and most fleeting of realms as the privileged altar of the eternal: "What a miraculous vision, a tableau to dream about more than to depict, for its beauty suggests impressions analogous to the poet's most deep and ineffable ones!" One imagines Mallarme after a long day at the lycee, his daily fashion-deprived "martyrdom," dreaming, upon creamy white pages, of tulle, groves, and quality chapeaux. While fashion is an effective aid for reverie, reverie is necessary for fashion consumers. There is no fashion reality without a fantasy frame. Before one garbs oneself in the "thing in itself," one must already have wrapped oneself in the fantasy, the libidinalized chunk of reality (represented by the ad or retail environment) supporting one's desire for the garment in question. Like Freud's garden-variety psychotic, every fashion dreamer retains libidinal contact with reality--as fantasy. Sharing Mallarme's enthusiasm for a nice outfit, what I lacked in his literary skill I would make up for in fieldwork. I prepared to enter the fantasy my fashion fate had dealt me.

Relentlessly rugged, with every detail including price tags picturesquely weathered, J. Morgan Puett is a SoHo retail environment where Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange would have felt right at home spending the whopping sums their work would eventually command on the prebust art market. The clothes are beautifully cut upscale Depression-era style, with a fanciful haute couture line that does amazing things with wax. Everything is very raw, artfully embracing decay, natural fibers, and degeneration. Helena Bonham Carter--or anyone in a Merchant-Ivory production--seems to be the ideal target customer. Since one's insertion into fashion, this mute language of clothes, must be supported by a fantasy, I imagined myself fresh-cheeked, running free in sepia-and-ocher raw silk, a stray Jew in *Room with a View*. How ironic that my entree onto the scene of glamour would wind up in this Depression pastoral, described by one of my queenier friends as "a bit too Les Mis" for him. While I tirelessly pursue glamour in all its artifice, the universe sends me back my glamour message reversed in the form of the country look, an idyll more *Grapes of Wrath* than Ralph Lauren.

Ingeniously designed by Morgan, the store converts to accommodate a little stage and runway, charmingly draped with bolts of fabric to evoke the workroom en *deshabille*. Two live chickens inspired the palette for this season's collection, "leghorn"; they were installed on tasseled silk pillows in cages above the crowd. A fan of taxidermy as well as of anything bee-related, Morgan rented two stuffed chickens to embellish the decor further and to corroborate the chicken concept. Behind the scenes on my big glamour day, my fashion-designer friend is busy easing the rented chickens out of their carton. Removing their bubble wrap, she lovingly intones, "Aren't they beautiful?" I forget I am disturbed by dead birds, and also my infelicitous struggle that day with water weight. (Let's face it--I was as bloated as Liz Taylor!) In perpetual motion, as trim and boyish as a country Coco Chanel, Morgan was an insanely supportive human fashion machine in beatific white, eyeing every detail, telling everyone they looked hot, apparently radiant while claiming she was about to have a nervous breakdown.

To every Model-for-a-Day, makeup and hair are the best part. I arrived early, but my hopes for some last-minute liposuction proved unrealistic. Still, my hair was done brilliantly by Bumble and Bumble with waxed cord gathering my tresses into little pigtails, evoking a kind of schoolgirl wood-nymph effect. Walking into the boutique unnoticed, I emerged a traffic-stopping eyeful coiffed for a frolic in a wooded glade. Other real-people models, including Jane Pratt, the pathbreaking former editress of *Sassy* magazine, and Pat Hearn, the ever soignée art dealer, were transformed into inhabitants of a leghorn-hued country idyll, with salmon accents. There

were real models too. We tried to ignore them.

My moment on the runway, darlings, went by altogether too quickly. Basking in the gaze of everyone, including Suzy Menkes of the International Herald Tribune, upon Me, I idiotically retasted the narcissistic bliss of the Baby, the delightful snap of flashes adequately replacing the supportive gaze of the Mommy as I felt appreciated for the stunning feat of walking, breathing, and wearing clothes at the same time. Suzanne Vega and another of the real-people models indeed toted babies as props, while another, the writer from Allure, had a white pit bull.

Still aglow from my ultimate glamour day, which was rapidly embellishing itself in the darkroom of my brain, I alit from my chariot, New Jersey Transit. Meeting me was my photographer friend, who passive-aggressively wasn't there to take pictures of me. "I looked really hot!" I reported. A Jew-lover with a crush on a sort-of-well-known supermodel, D.B. was like, "Was Shalom there?" "No, there were no Brand Name Supermodels . . . but I looked really hot," I reiterated. She looked oddly disinterested. "And I've been discovered by Shaynah Models," I continued, "a division of Models of Zion, a covert international agency based In Milan specializing in the Jew market. Jenny Craig's people have also been in touch."

Just this week, my editor discreetly kvetched that the art world is "totally not having a glamour moment now." Years ago, fashion went to Hollywood or to the music scene for libido inspiration. Now everyone else is going to fashion, and fashion is going to art, maybe not for models but for inspiration in putting together a show. I've noticed a corollary trend in the fashion press: designers who want to talk about anything (TV, art, the rain forest) but Fashion, just as artists want to talk about anything but Art--testifying to some law of human nature in which everyone thinks what other people do is cool and meritorious and what they do is silly. "Each of us sees in brighter colors what he sees at a distance, what he sees in other people," said the Duchesse de Guermantes. When you start to see this with everyone, it begins to be a healing thing: if everyone thinks other people are doing the important stuff, maybe we all sort of are. I think being a fashion designer is cool. I like my new hair.

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