

FASHION

Future, Take Note: Raf Simons Was Here

By CATHY HORYN

PARIS, July 5 — Few journalists were more aware of the danger of observation than Joseph Roth. "The 'good observer,'" he wrote in 1925, soon after arriving here from Berlin, "is the sorriest reporter. He meets everything with open but inflexible eyes." In his reports in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and in his novels, Roth, who died of alcohol poisoning in May 1939, at age 44, perceived that the world was continually changing: "In the space of a single second, everything can be transformed a thousand times over, disfigured, rendered unrecognizable." At most, he argued, a journalist can say how an experience felt to him. Because by the time he has set down his impressions, "the realities have grown out of the tight clothes we've put them in."

Roth's feelings sometimes overwhelmed his reporting. But wherever people strive to do more than what is expected of them (and very often we are content with less), don't they deserve our strongest emotions?

On Saturday, I almost skipped Raf Simons's show. It was far away and very late. And I had already begun to put my ducks in a row: Louis Vuitton (English flannels, cricket sweaters, silk pajamas — or "Brides-head Revisited" on a commercial level); Dries van Noten (Prince Harry on a pub and country-house crawl, with fab kilts); Junya Watanabe (potential potheads in Alpine hats and plaids lurking amid the edelweiss).

What Mr. Simons did in an instant was to render the day, and most of the previous one of the spring men's collections, obsolete. In 18 years of reporting on fashion, the last 5 at this post, I have stood up from only a handful of shows with a conviction that everything had been transformed. And I don't know why it is that out of a generation of so-called visionaries, only a few have Mr. Simons's capacity to deal with the future in a believable way. I don't want to see any more flabby impressions of the 1970's or hear them described as "ironic." And I don't want to go to "another country," because that country doesn't exist anymore.

Beginning with the skinny suits that made his reputation nearly a decade ago and made a Hedi Slimane possible, Mr. Simons gave a real glimpse of the future — heightened by the solemn descent of the models on an escalator and the music of Vangelis. To silky sport shirts he added trousers in a glacier-white leather that looked otherworldly, while chunky white sneakers were an ingenious blend of N.E.R.D. and NASA. In the fabrics, in the modern proportions — in the way a slim leather tunic resembled a T-shirt or a white nylon raincoat floated over a suit — it was evident that Mr. Simons was trying to work out fashion's next passage.

In the past, Mr. Simons, who is 36, used his clothes as social commentary, and he was startlingly prescient on the fear of terrorism. But he is no longer the reactionary. On his invitation was a random list of people and things that changed the world: sign language, Rosa Parks, the drinking straw, Taliesin West, Alan Turing, who cracked the Enigma code and hastened the end of World War II. Can a fashion designer make such a difference? Mr. Simons is bold to think so.

"I've always focused on my own history, my own evolution," he said as he was greeted with cheers backstage. "But now I want to think about the future." Last year, the Swiss Textile Federation awarded Mr. Simons a \$125,000 prize. He should have a Swiss bank.

The other cornerstones of the Paris season were Helmut Lang, Mr. Slimane and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons. On Sunday, Mr. Lang moved away from the dangling straps and erotic gestures that had punctuated his collections, though the fit of his jackets, now in seersucker, had a seductive pull. These appeared with white trousers, swagged with an ambiguous hank of maritimo rope, and white clogs, some covered in glossy fur. Very cool, and funny. Shirt sleeves were crunched just above the biceps. But except for a riotous Hampton's flower print on white jeans, the message was tough,

RIGHT A nylon raincoat over loose trousers, by Raf Simons.



Photographs by Jean-Louis Hardy for The New York Times



Mr. Simons's cotton jersey shell and skinny jeans.



Panel shirt and jeans by Comme des Garçons.



An Alpine look from Junya Watanabe.

NEAR RIGHT Helmut Lang's seersucker coat and cotton trousers with rope belt.

CENTER RIGHT Mr. Lang's plastic jeans, skinny tank top and two-tone shoes.

FAR RIGHT John Galiano's football pants and big sweatshirt.



impeccable tailoring.

By contrast, Mr. Slimane's Dior show on Monday was marked by sullenness, restlessness and, in a way, the rootlessness of the young lives that influence him. "I wanted everything to look natural, like the boys dressed themselves," he said.

Few designers are as concentrated on the continually changing world. The moment is his medium, and Mr. Slimane interprets it in all its bisuality and sweetness — with shrunken jackets, beautiful pin-tucked voile shirts in pale shades of green and pink and the tightest, lowest-riding jeans in the business. You can see the influence of the West Coast skate and rock world, which has caught his interest. He has published a book of his photographs of rock concerts, called "Stage." And like his clothes, its

view of Bowie, Beck and the Stooges is gauzy, reverent and curiously abstract.

The Pink Panther, hardly a cat you would expect to pop up at Comme des Garçons, grinned its naughty grin on T-shirts, though Ms. Kawakubo assisted after her show on Saturday that she wasn't thinking of the old pounce. "Rose-colored glasses," she said in her enigmatic way. Nonetheless, it was kind of wonderful to see so much pink on a man, even if her models seemed to be striving for the nerdy prize. Her jackets had that shrunken, hopeless look, but in the soda-pink brightness, there was no lament. Ms. Kawakubo was just suggesting that it is sometimes better to see the world through rose glass. Judy Blame, a London jewelry maker who has been on the scene for 20 years, supplied the gold chains

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