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A SPECIAL REPORT

MEN'S fASHION

Upscale architecture at Saint Laurent; Dior revives



Stefano Pilati, of YSL Rive Gauche, at his menswear presentation.

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By Suzy Menkes

PARIS blue sky dawned at Yves Saint Laurent on Monday as Stefano Pilati followed in Tom Ford's footsteps at the famous but loss-making house. The menswear collection, shown on the racks with all the discretion of a private club, offered a fresh take on Saint Laurent's slender, raffish personal image in the 1970s. Those iconic black and white photographs displayed at the entrance were backed up with serious clothes in light fabrics and subtle colors.

Pilati, 38, who worked with Ford for three years, looks like an asset for Gucci group, for his menswear collection hit the right modern note. Wearing a textured jacket and a multi-colored belt bought in Guatemala (and remade for YSL), Pilati said that he was aiming for a younger customer and wanted to interpret the Saint Laurent look without bow-tie conservatism, but with a sensitive palette. (Think lilac socks displayed with taupe Prince of Wales pants.)

Cut and fabric were Pilati's mantra as he joined this season's revival of the blazer, cut close to the body, with versions in sky blue cotton and textured silk. A blue blouson and striped poor boy sweater seemed Gallic, in a way that Ford never quite captured for all his panache and elegance. Pilati also referred to Saint Laurent's Marrakesh in dusty orange and tobacco brown.

The YSL old guard love the respectful approach, judging by the reaction of Pierre Bergé, who was front row at Dior Homme.

"He's a good, intelligent designer — and at last we have got rid of Tom Ford who wanted to throw out the Saint Laurent heritage like a used Kleenex," Bergé said.

Dior's Hedi Slimane is a fine tailor, but was he wise to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death with a revival of grunge? That was the vision of young boys, hair sweeping over sullen faces, stovepipe jeans hanging from bony hips and dirty

white trainers.

Much was strong in the show, from the soundtrack by Beck through the cut of the shrunken jackets and sharp double-breasted white blazer, to the cool way that shirts and sweaters were tucked in asymmetrically. But even the judicious use of cherry blossom pink for a belt, jacket or even pants could not make this anti-establishment statement seem quite appropriate to upscale Dior.

Raf Simons, the Belgian designer who was the first in the early 1990s to give menswear a new, graphic pencil-slim silhouette, was back in splendid form. Using the angular architecture of the Paris Géode, with its eerie high-tech interior, Simons sent out narrow suits with sharp shirts and a singular mix of the traditional and the futuristic in rain capes in papery fabric, skinny pants with a signature calf stud and pin-thin coats.

Simons won the Swiss Textiles Award prize at the Gwand Fashion festival in Lucerne, Switzerland, and he proved worthy of the €100,000 prize money. As models rode the escalator in super-fine cotton shirts made by Alumo Textil, they showed the delicate detail of the Simons label inserted in the seams.

Helmut Lang is also a fashion architect, but, unexpectedly from this inventive designer, he worked to a familiar menswear theme: the navy. Maritime touches included rope dangling from belts, virtual ropes printed on cotton tops and more original ideas such as portholes cut out from T-shirt sleeves or a sweater forming a fishing net mesh of stitching.

"I found this book of knotting and it interested me," said Lang to explain the theme. His finesse is always in the details and, taken out of the Anchors Aweigh! context and away from the clumsy clog shoes, fabrics such as stretch seersucker gave a fresh spirit to the streamlined tailoring.

Hermès also seemed to be reaching for what the French call "le grand bleu," meaning the big blue ocean. The collection was tinged blue from the



RAF SIMONS



PAUL SMITH

brief swimshorts, draped in necktie fabric sarongs (dressed with cobalt blue watches) through pinstriped pants and blue suede jacket. The easy clothes made Blue Period canvases against the raw, minimalist space of the extension to the Odeon Theater. Designer Véronique Nichanian said that she worked with blue because it expressed summertime for her fresh show.

Rick Owens is between architect and decorator. His soft sculptures in rough fabrics made a collection intriguing for its treatments, so that a long vest would be in oiled suede or buffalo hide. Owens also insinuated color, with pinks and tangerines among his usual neutrals.

"You can only show a dust-colored