

DEFENCE STRATEGIES

The pure excitement of fashion aside, our clothes are **tactical tools** we use in the power games we play. By Baey Shi Chen

If clothes maketh the woman, then the fashion runways of the world are an endless source of inspiration to the woman who prefers to speak with her clothes. Given the ever-morphing cast of characters who parade down the catwalk each season, we're perpetually confronted with the question: Who do you want to be?

Take this Spring's collections for example — whether you were drawn to Dior's film-*noir*-inspired mob moll with her old-school feminine mystique, the body-proud Gucci glamazon or Balmain's glowering rock chick with her brash and hard-edged glamour, the runway was replete with different characters ripe for appropriation.

This is what makes fashion fun, and much has been made about the fact that fashion allows us to tap our imagination and express ourselves. But what is not as often explored is how clothes are also worn to say things we don't articulate openly. Certainly, clothes are never a frivolity — they always mean something, and the effect is immediate and potent. Fashion may be worn on the outside, but it is also a fail-proof way to read a person's inner script.

So, just as we dress to look good to the world, the clothes on our back shield

us in equal measure. They are strategic weapons we employ to present an image that protects us as we negotiate the people and environment around us. Like speech or body language, our outlook is filtered and communicated through a complex combination of fabrics, cuts and colours, while ensuring that the person beneath is safe at all times.

The simple truth is that we wear clothes to feel powerful, and the most skilled of dressers know exactly how to array themselves to get what they want. Nowhere is this truer than in a world where the roles and definitions of an empowered woman have become more complex, translating into a need to become bulletproof. So, whether we are holding our own at work or navigating personal relationships, or whether we want to distinguish ourselves from the pack or deflect attention by blending in, we choose our clothes and *accoutrements* accordingly.

So while some may embrace the aggressive sexuality of Versace's second-skin dresses in a show of confidence and unapologetic femininity, Miu Miu's child-woman is disarmingly whimsical



CHANEL

BALMAIN

THE ARMOURY

ELLE takes a look at five key pieces of sartorial weaponry.

"What a strange power there is in clothing."

— Isaac Bashevis Singer, author.



Stiletto by Roger Vivier

THE KILLER STILETTO

It's no secret that the stiletto, fetishised by the darkly sexual and notoriously subversive photographs of the late Helmut Newton, is the weapon of choice in matters of seduction and intimidation. Unapologetically provocative, the stiletto heel is the ultimate fetish object, elongating the female form and transforming the gait in a way that is designed to devastate.

THE SEXY BRA

Women may have burned them in the '60s as an act of liberation, but bras are still linked to the female experience, and they serve the triple function of utility, sexual empowerment and eroticism. By the '90s, it had been immortalised by Madonna wearing Jean Paul Gaultier's conical bra.



RUNWAY PHOTOS: IMAX TREE



GUCCI

ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

DIOR

CELINE

in her swallow-embazoned dresses. However, lest you think her a harmless ingénue, the brazen cut-out bra and see-through shimmer reveal a knowing woman in full possession of her feminine wiles. Similarly, the Chanel woman had the charms of a provincial milk maid who is not opposed to the occasional flash of Chantilly lace to entice and provoke under the guise of her sweet florals.

At Celine, the subtly androgynous sophisticate in her stark moulded leather and simple silhouette communicates a cool self-possession, practicality and grown-up elegance that does not need to rely on body-con cling to appeal or impress. And who can forget Alexander McQueen's fantastical creature-women? Be it the odd-shaped clothes, devoid of almost any recognisable fashion reference; or the abstract hoof-like heels, this is a woman who revels in adventurous fashion and displays her fearless — even defiant — intelligence as her badge of honour.

Thus, while fashion is nonetheless a perpetual tribute to beauty and style, our clothes are indisputably tools that we use to assert ourselves. So, whatever character you decide to assume this season, know that your fashion choices — and others', for that matter — are never an accident. **ELLE**



THE PANTSUIT

Invented by the late, great Yves Saint Laurent in 1966 just as feminism was taking off, the *Le Smoking* tuxedo suit created a watershed moment in women's fashion, marking the point when women literally started to wear the pants in their own lives and began to hold their own in men's arenas.



FIERCE FUR & ANIMAL PRINTS

Overt symbols of wealth and glamour, there's something primal and predatory about a woman who is draped in fur or animal prints, parading the spoils from her sartorial hunt.



THE STATEMENT BAG

The ultimate status symbol for modern women, the statement bag, like the Hermès Birkin (left), conveys self-sufficiency and taste. It is also a means to outdo and compete with other women — and the more luxuriant the leather and hardware, the better.