

The END of an ERA

Sackings, meltdowns, closures... we haven't had the best of times recently. With high fantasy in peril and a growing emphasis on commerce and wearability, fashion is at a crucial turning point. *By Baey Shi Chen*

You must have heard: John Galliano was unceremoniously fired from Dior after an anti-Semitic outburst in a Le Marais cafe.

It dealt another heavy blow to an industry still struggling to come to terms with the hefty loss of Alexander McQueen last February and the closure of Christian Lacroix in 2009. Elsewhere, troubles are brewing. Balmain creative director Christophe Decarnin has left the house after suffering a breakdown, while gossip is persistent about Stefano Pilati's precarious position at Yves Saint Laurent. In an emotionally charged response, the latter said: "I should be here, thinking about how beautiful my job is, and come to the office every day and work with colours and fabrics. But no, you have something that undermines you."

All this, along with rising concerns about the survival of haute couture, leaves us wondering if the days are numbered for fashion's fantasists.

NEW LEASE OF LIFE

While old guards Karl Lagerfeld, Miuccia Prada, Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier are still holding court with their consistently ground-breaking designs and larger-than-life personalities, retirement is hovering on the horizon. This was recently reinforced by Lagerfeld openly declaring Haider Ackermann as his ideal successor at Chanel.

The lack of an obvious candidate to helm Dior after Galliano's hasty exit and the sombre atmosphere – many described it as "funereal" – that shrouded his last runway show did little to placate anxious fashion observers. Speculation is rife that

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the role is likely to go to Riccardo Tisci, who revived Givenchy with his stunning Romantic-Goth sensibility. Nonetheless, no one from the current cohort appears ready to take fashion as far as Galliano has.

To be fair, there are promising sparks such as Gareth Pugh, Christopher Kane, Meadham Kirchoff, Mary Katrantzou and Rodarte. But while admired for their sophistication and execution, they remain indie labels that come across more as an acquired taste than mainstream couture. In short, they aren't coming up fast enough to head the established couture houses.

MONEY MATTERS

As if consciously resisting the pull of storied labels – perhaps wary of the immense pressures and expectations – these younger talents are more interested in articulating their own visions. And with wearability becoming increasingly important, fashion as art may have to settle for a backseat.

Indeed, designers such as Stella McCartney and Phoebe Philo are at pains to ensure that their clothes

always hold up to the demands of real life. McCartney says matter-of-factly: “I’ve always been one of those designers who have made clothes to be worn and to sell.”

Efforts to grow a global empire and cultivate burgeoning consumer markets by luxury businesses also underscore that fashion today is often about commerce. Cross-reference formidable conglomerates such as LVMH and the Gucci Group, which aggressively bought up prized labels and turned them into profitable businesses.

Most recently, the former acquired a 20.2 per cent stake in French stalwart Hermès, escalating fears of loss of true quality to the commercial machinery. So far, the family-owned Hermès has stood its ground with a family holding of over 50 per cent of share capital. The final results of the tussle – with LVMH already owning Dior, Louis Vuitton and Fendi amongst others – remain to be seen.

THE FUTURE BEGINS NOW

Fashion is undeniably headed for new waters. It is evolving into an entity where creativity and commerce, as well as high and low influences, mix comfortably to articulate varying viewpoints, reflected notably in the rise of high street labels and growing sustainability of indie labels. Talents such as Raf Simons for Jil Sander, Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, along with Alber Elbaz for Lanvin, demonstrate how inspirational design can be successfully balanced with commercial interests without compromising artistry.

Take heart, also, in the much-heralded return of Tom Ford. His firm objective of celebrating fashion for fashion's sake has illuminated the seeming creative vacuum. And with his vision of nostalgic, decadent glamour and decision to host intimate catwalk presentations sans media, Ford is directing a “back-to-basics” movement that reminds us how fashion should be enjoyed.

Most significantly, this flux is the perfect opportunity to unearth new mavericks who can overcome challenging circumstances and steer fashion into the future. Adversity breeds innovation, and genuine ground-breakers – André Courrèges, Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, et al – succeeded because they could channel imagination into desirables. This period of uncertainty may just yield exciting times ahead, so hang on for the ride!

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