

Prada's F/W 2020

Sex-ish?

This is a review of Prada's F/W 20 runway show, Miuccia Prada's last solo womenswear presentation. The following season, during Men's Fashion Week, was her last, but due to COVID-19, the collection was never presented on a catwalk. Raf Simons joined Prada in early 2020, marking a new era for the Italian house.

Red light district via Giorgio de Chirico. Stylised flowers with their stems forming tracks down the runway floor, morphing into sinuous lines, part-Vasarely, part-O'Keefe. Bass sounds open for three looks featuring boxy tailored wool jackets snatched by the waist. Wide shoulders shrink down to the tip of the A-line that emerges beneath the belt. The belt buckle: a vanity case, a clutch-meets-fanny-pack-meets-oversized jewellery. The skirt is full-on *silk fringe*. Looks 6 and 7 refashion the skirt from strips of suiting wool, a Roman gladiator gone corporate for daytime, but ready for the jazz club after hours. A dash of the roaring 20s in the jet beads. These women command their long coats sliced open until the hip line, thigh-high slits producing the movement usually enabled by pleats and gathering. Straight lines fail in blocking the human curves from coming through. Peekaboo. There's a knee and our gaze follows the muscle, but it's too late. The leg has already retreated behind the tailored panels in motion. Masculine sartorial coda is not being used as a shield to protect femininity but rather positioned as her shadow. She is not a *femme fatale*, but rather a *femme totale*—one that is in control of the ground she walks on. The elements bend to her will: boxy shapes are cinched and flared, gauze-like shift dresses shed as she walks.

I'm drawn to the sexual side of the Pradasphere because, under Mrs. Prada, addressing sex has always been about interrogating representations of power. The trite hard/soft dichotomy popularised through couture—the tension between tailoring and “flou”—was always in



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All images: Prada F/W 2020 documentation, as shot by Bruno Zhu. Courtesy the artist. For full colour, jump to page 100.

deference to female fragility, one that is protected and choked by the harness of style. When true hardness was suggested by Yves Saint Laurent through a biker jacket in his 1960 collection for Dior, he was fired by the house. Throughout the years, Mrs. Prada's background in Italy's Communist Party was mentioned by fashion journalists to package a seemingly ideological a-sexiness to the consumer—as if being militant meant refraining from sex—or that her sexiness was erudite. Sex, here, was synonymous with something cheap. God forbid selling “that”! Thus, cheekiness became play devoid of sex. Sex turned bookish. Sex-ish. This elevation antagonised the visions of womanhood put forth by Tom Ford's Gucci then, or Donatella's Versace now. The mainstream fashion lens would pit a Prada woman against a Versace woman, and stay miles away from a Mugler muse. She probably would be seen chatting with a Margiela type, but would ultimately be deemed matronly next to Belgian cool. Not only do these conversations bastardise the positionalities of bodies in sex, they reproduce normative sexuality through enforced antonyms if we think fashion as text. Why is sexiness posited as an image when Mrs. Prada has been proposing it as a politics instead? In looks 15 through 22, the clashing of knitwear with silk gazar bottoms exists in a spectrum between librarian chic and librarian shtick, between Agent Provocateur and *agent raconteur*.

Prada skewed the representation binary by being first and foremost utilitarian. Her late 80s runways were a string of wardrobe basics for everyday life. There was bareness in her use of cotton, both as a texture and as an earthbound material that granted the female body an universality, a carefreeness. Then came the military-grade nylon camouflaging as satin duchesse. If plain cotton humanised a hyper-sexualised female body in the 90s, a woman clothed in a satin-like tech fabric was indestructible in facing the new millennium. The Prada psyche was complicated through the lens of Norbert Schoerner and Steven Meisel. In their campaigns for the brand, the women were stressing the clothes that bound them to their gender. They were at times lost in a desert (F/W 1998/99), trapped in a hotel room (F/W 2003), caught between high-rises (S/S 1999), on a boat with Joaquin Phoenix (Glen Luchford, F/W 1997), enjoying the beach (Peter Lindbergh, F/W 1993), or burdened by the aspirations of a capitalist class (Helmut Newton/Manuela Pavesi's 1986 collaboration). These images lifted the Prada woman from the catwalk into an individual haunted by contradictions. She presented herself womanly, but with a girlish twinkle. She was decked out in Italian lux yet always looking slightly bothered, aloof. And that's what fascinated me about her: she seemed worried. Inquisitive. Her outings every season were manifestations of her timely concerns that impacted her bearings, ever-transforming her. Mrs. Prada projected the act of dressing as a negotiation between her muse's contemporaneity and the world's. How does she move from summer to fall? Will it be harmonious, seductive, combative, or diplomatic? Are the puff nylon tailored coats in looks 27 and 28 about comfort or about armour? What if it's both, and what if they are in leather?



“as if being militant meant refraining from sex”

From a raised platform eyes are beaming down, gawking at the square. A bird's-eye view. The inaccessibility is annoying and titillating. Similar negative spaces have been staged in the runways of Vaccarello's Saint Laurent (S/S 2019) and Marc Jacobs (S/S 2018). It seems to be a matter of distance. Or rather an absence of closeness, the difference being that the latter forbids touching. Who would want to forbid such a thing? This woman intentionally cruising from afar, making strangers turn their heads for her? The body on the catwalk is both the alienation and the alienated, setting a duality between the present real and another temporal space. The invitation is to cross such a border, but we, the wearers, butcher this passage as we chop the look for parts. We make space for new items in our closets. We dig. We cease new pockets of time. At Prada F/W 2020, the viewer is hovering above, unable to meet her eye to eye. The viewer: a pigeon, a falcon, a vulture? The women strut wearing ties and fringed scarfs as if worked up to go speak to the manager. Or maybe even to kick out the manager? The tightness of the knot frames the silhouette in its situatedness, in its language of office attire and formal-wear. Her gaze is confidently seigniorial and so the t-shirt-cum-wind-breakers are less athleisure and more lab-certified surgeon's garb. The crimson Prada Linea Rossa logo is her scalpel. Mrs. Prada carved out a chapter in luxury performance wear and established cotton candy regality through Miu Miu. These are not closed-off aesthetic enterprises to me, but rather Mrs. Prada establishing wardrobe-worlds for an unabashedly multiple femininity. Her precision lies in welcoming us to *mix and match*. We're given directions rather than a singular identity: chop up 60s mod with 70s kitsch, a little bit of 80s power dressing trimmed with an art deco frou-frou. This is most evident in the footwear where a blend of sport, ballroom, gentleman, and gardening references confuse the boudoir with the conference room. Looks 40 through 52 propose such through clothing: the oversized vests in vinyl coated shearling, preppy vs. nakedness, literally (!) fringe tailoring, jet beads over embroidery, etc. This puzzle of textures is delivered in a gradual day-to-night colour scheme, but it doesn't make sense formally speaking. It doesn't have to. Prada's stubbornness intent on bothering us captivates me.

Critics have called Mrs. Prada's work "ugly chic" or "wrong chic" in order to identify these eclectic material deviations. The "ugly" in Prada has always been attached to markers of low culture—tacky wallpapers, trashy bijou, underrated female workwear—revealing a classist bias that remains unaddressed. As if decent fashion is solely an instrument for upward mobility. Tolerating a baseline where there is an "ugly" removes the revolutionary potential of clothes. They are bound to a capped emancipation. Circular. When ugly becomes ugly-chic, it never ceases to be ugly. It only gets given a polish to be bearable for the time being. Gvasalia's Balenciaga seems to have broken the loop through acidic cynicism, but to get to where? Meme culture pastiche hoodies? What if we pursued the rabbit hole that Prada opens every season to its full extent? What if we took this as an invitation to erase the lines between

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tolerance and acceptance? What would our bodies dress like if we diminished the size of "o" in "Other"? How would our fashioned bodies behave when there is no longer a morality behind taste? As the Prada women walk through the red-lit corridors, they don't answer questions. They refrain from being either/or. The show closes with three pyjamas ensembles in black silk. The graphic flower motif blossoms on their legs and chests. Jet beads peep through the hems. A metal headband tops their look. They look like either arriving home or on their way to fly a plane, sail a boat or drive a race car. In the Pradasphere, clothing never seemed to be worn for escaping, but rather establishing doors to enter roles of resistance. Resistance being a praxis of deconstruction and complication that meditates how one carries oneself in the world. This reminds me of Telfar, who has confidently built a wardrobe-world where dressing seems inseparable from how one lives. Americana meets cosmo-city grit. Like Prada, Telfar clothes are points of departure from where the wearer can choose to pivot her subjectivity.

The new collections co-signed by Raf Simons lack the astute, mind-boggling eclecticism of seasons past. They present volumes that are neither couture nor strange. Womanhood seems to have reverted to a pubescent state, seemingly desexualised under the franchise of the "unisex" and the "uniform." Wouldn't unisex be fantastic if it were a collision of multiple sexes rather than a cleansing of them? There's no tension now except drone-like cameras stalking models clutching their oversized coats, cartoonishly, over and over again. The anti-logomania logo has been spun like a fungus through awkward embroideries. Corny existential slogans (S/S 2021) about lost youth are grammed rather than experienced. The "ugly-chic" prints have been brought back as archival nods, therefore doomed to be "ugly" forever. A nuanced, at times idealist, optimism has been replaced by an irritating teenage rawr poetics. I will miss Mrs. Prada's solo work.



"trashy bijou"

