

A SERIES OF ESSAYS

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ACNE STUDIOS
RICK OWENS
PLEATS PLEASE

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DESIGNER IN FOCUS: ACNE STUDIOS

They say a name by which a thing is known, lays foundations for how it expresses itself. If there was no better instance of this adage, it would be Acne Studios - an acronym standing for 'Ambition to Create Novel Expression' - from which its namesake does it derive a reason for being.



Acne Studios Bla Konst campaign
by Collier Schorr

Acne Studios started out from Stockholm in 1996 as a multidisciplinary creative collective, an idea which strongly nodded towards Andy Warhol's Factory as influence. The early years would see the collective simultaneously engage in various creative practices such as film and graphic design. It would only be a year later in 1997 that Jonny Johansson, its Founder and Creative Director, would bring Acne into fashion through the most iconic and democratic of garments - jeans. The denim jean as a monument of pop culture was important to Johansson, but just as important was how to do so with their own personal sensibilities.

Those first jeans were done in distinctive red stitching and a flame logo which adorned their right back pockets. A 100 pairs would be made and shared to a 100 family and friends within the creative scene. Thus a cult was born - the jeans found feature in heavyweight cultural publications such as Wallpaper and Vogue just as they were exploring Scandinavian design at the time. A year later in 1998 would see Acne's first full-fledged seasonal collection.



(left) The original Acne Jeans

That expansion has continued to progress over time as Acne Studios today - being more so than just denim - exists as an entirely contemporary brand. Acne's approach succeeds today for its ability to propose interesting design and proportion into clothes without losing sight of its function. One best describes this balance between those oft juxtaposing elements as lagom, a Swedish term to mean 'just in the middle'.

However big fashion has become, as a part of its identity, the brand remains just as involved with other modes of creative expression. Its Stockholm headquarters are housed in a grand old bank of five stories which thus enables it to dabble in various disciplines such as furniture, kid's toys and publishing in the pursuit of (novel) expression no matter the medium.



'Chester'
A Kid's Teddy Bear
By ACNE JR



Acne Paper Past Issues / Spring 06 + Spring 07 + Spring 08

This latter practice culminates in the form of a biannual magazine entitled as Acne Paper. It's printed in a large format, on matte paper and is austere in its visual layout. Much lauded for being more than just a commercial vehicle, and having an 'organic and authentic' curiosity into what is culturally relevant and interesting.

These integrated crossover of disciplines run counter to how the playbook of running a fashion house goes. But it's exactly this detachment from expectations and an outsider-in perspective on fashion by Johansson - who notably didn't have a fashion education - which has garnered Acne its credence of cultish cool. The point serves to say that 'Cool' can't be manufactured nor be engineered, it's instinctive and real.

Then consider how far they've probably managed to shift a Millennial generation's impression of a word much associated with adolescent awkwardness, towards literally being an emblem of Scandinavian Cool. Now that, stands to be some feat in itself.

DESIGNER IN FOCUS: RICK OWENS

The American who heads his Parisian-based namesake label, 'isn't really interested in the clothes' for clothes sake, so much so as it is a medium for him to explore aesthetic challenges to conservative norms in exaggeratedly brilliant...clothes and presentations.



(above) Rick Owens



(above) Bakersfield, California

Close your eyes. Think, of brooding otherworldly men and women slink by the room in monochrome lean-layered silhouettes; priestly hues of dusty greys, beige, khaki and black. And you have just arrived at visions of the monastic gothic tribe of Rick Owens, who once described his inspirations as a trio of the 'biblical, brutalist and Bakersfield'.

Born in Southern California, Rick Owens grew up in the conservative town of Porterville. Here, he would feel a dissonance between the culture of his geography and who he believed himself to be. Such a place, where conformity thrusts itself unto a person, would manifest in himself, a personal rebellion against such limited expectations. In his own words, he 'became as flamboyant' as he possibly could - living in a warehouse, wearing platform boots, full make-up and going to bed with gloves still on.

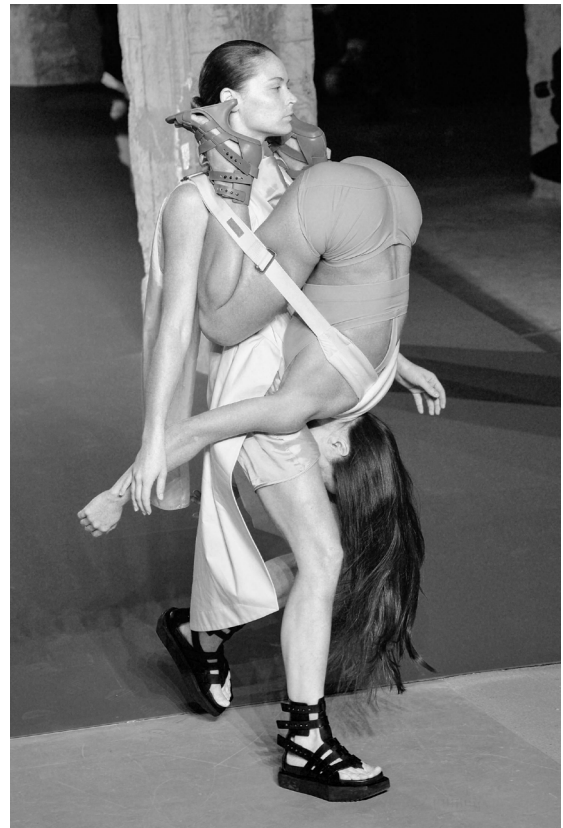
“Having an uncomfortable childhood makes for an interesting adulthood, I think...What would have happened if I’d had a completely well-adjusted childhood? I wouldn’t have the rage... the vengeance that I feel now.”

Rick's own trip towards his own namesake label, would stand to be just as unconventional a pathway as could have been - if conventional had meant taking up a design course, graduating, working for a big luxury house or seeing it out on your own. He set out to study the fine arts at the Otis College of Art and Design before dropping out halfway, taking up a pattern cutting course at a technical college before going on to work in the garment industry, making designer knock-offs.

Then, later meeting Michèle Lamy, a muse, lover and creative consultant to him - or as he prefers to refer as 'hun' - would ignite the beginning of his label in 1994. The big breakthrough into wider consciousness, however, came in New York (2002) when he showed a Vogue-funded presentation entitled as 'Sparrow'. And ever since then, it has been a whirlwind of showstopping presentations that are as poignant as they are for their theatrical value.



Fall 2017, GLITTER;
The male figure, bundled in synthetic downs to lend it a 'voluptuous and elegant' silhouette. Simultaneously, it figured too like the encasing of fragile vessels, a topical commentary on the need for protection in these turbulent times, that has seen the year of 2017 as a battleground of clashing political extremities between the left and right.



Spring 2016, CYCLOPS;
The gesture of women hoisting women to speak of the female bond; sisterhoods that nourish, support and yield love between women.

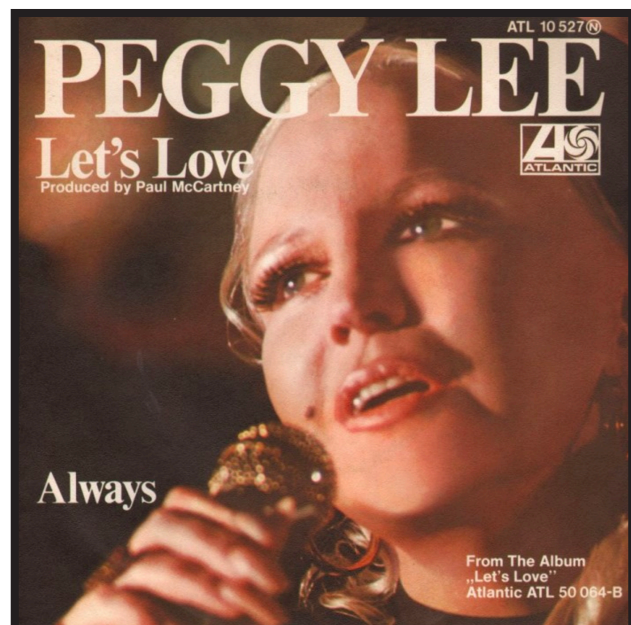


(above)
A swatch of the prominent hues that figure into the work of Rick Owens.

Viewing these histories and considering Rick's penchant for an obsessive lifestyle routine of the gym and an ascetic wardrobe of repeated multiples, we find a backbone for a personality that has a fascistic commitment to unrelenting rebellion. They are seeming manifestos that do not buckle to conservative notions about taste, beauty and masculinity and intently, by using artifice to exaggerate and enhance those ideas. Yet no matter how loaded his intentions might seem, it would be an erroneous assumption to think that Rick is a fascist with regards to how he sees the world. There are simpler terms to how he sees himself by once giving a comparison between a William-Adolphe Bouguereau painting and a Brancusi sculpture, and alluding that he never sees his work as being stiffly conceptual.

“I’m the Brancusi sculpture, just a slab of metal on a hunk of wood, but it’s about the right piece of metal and the perfect gesture.”

A serious view, but sensitive and good-humoured. Ideally, it's more proposal than manifesto, something that pushes forth an alternative rather than to insist upon as he says. It's a rigorous system we live in, but then, it so means to be ever more important that what we have to say lives to shout and celebrate our differences. In religion, culture, gender, politics. It must have been why 'Suckerball' (Spring 2003) had Peggy Lee's wistful 'Let's Love' belt out over the industrial techno of Autechre as soundtrack...Rick, is all about the love.



(above) Peggy Lee, Let's Love

DESIGNER IN FOCUS:

PLEATS PLEASE

BY

ISSEY MIYAKE

The Japanese visionary with an eye on the past and the future. How his innovative approach to design birthed a democratic, inclusive and yet elegant range of clothes for the modern woman, PLEATS PLEASE.



(above) a portrait of Issey Miyake

The 1970s and 80s came to be known as periods of fashion that tended towards glitzy glamour and the notion of power dressing - heavy-padded shouldered suits for the burgeoning executive class intent on expressing wealth with no apologies. These were after all, the heydays of Armani, Mugler and Versace.

However, before minimalism would replace the excesses of glamour and wealth in the 1990s, Western fashion would be both awed and shocked by the arrival of the Japanese avant-garde onto the Parisian fashion scene. A trio of Yohji, Rei Kawakubo and Issey Miyake. Each proposed clothes that lent themselves to a radically different set of design ethos from Western contexts; challenging notions of beauty, gender and the functions of dress itself.

Of the three, Issey arrived earliest, by establishing the Miyake Design Studio in 1970 and showing his first collection through New York in 1971.

He would complete his studies as a graphic designer at Tokyo's Tama university during the early 60s. However, a belief in fashion as a serious endeavour of design later revealed itself when he posted a question to the head office of the World Design Conference upon realisation of fashion's absence in the 1960 program. Issey would then leave for Paris in 1965, enrolling at the Chambre Syndicate de la Couture to learn how to make clothes, eventually cutting his teeth as a design assistant at Givenchy.

A witnessing of the 1968 Parisian student protests would greatly influence his perspective about cloth-making; prompting a desire to create clothes which were democratic and appreciable to a global audience - opposing his early couture training and the clientele it served.



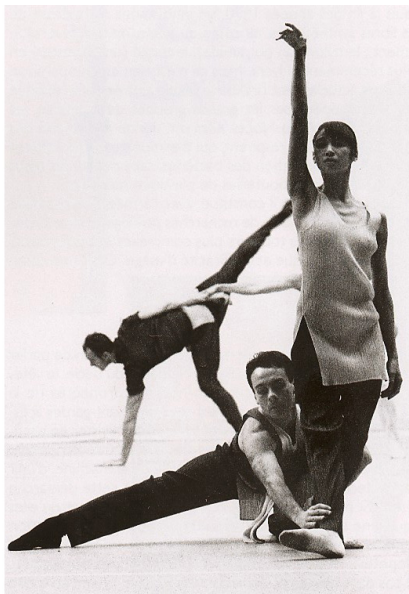
(above)
Young women during student demonstrations
29 May, 1968 in Paris, France

A realist who ideally saw his approach to fashion as more akin to product design aside the more frivolous practices of his contemporaries, Issey would say:

“In Paris we call the people who make clothing couturiers – they develop new clothing items – but actually the work of designing is to make something that works in real life.”

Issey's work looked for real solutions to contemporary lifestyles - informed by meticulous research into traditional production techniques and then how to wed them to new and contemporary technologies. It was about finding a path towards the future through the past as linked by the present.

In 1991, the renowned American choreographer, William Forsythe approached Issey to create costumes for his upcoming production 'The Loss of Small Detail' for the Frankfurt Ballet. It would be a timely catalyst for Issey to apply his work on 'pleating' as a medium towards clothes that would allow for freedom in movement. Some further experimentation and revisions later, led to the birth of PLEATS PLEASE as a standalone line in 1993.



(left) William Forsythe's 'The Loss of Small Detail'



(right) The revolutionary pleating process behind PLEATS PLEASE

PLEATS PLEASE would be a terrific revolution against traditional methods of pleating - where fabrics were pleated first, cut then sewn as a finished garment. Often, these pleats were non-permanent and had to be reset after repeated washes. Issey Miyake's approach involved cutting a full garment up to three times larger than the final article, and then fed through a heat press whilst sandwiched between two layers of washi paper. The use of 100% high-quality polyester also ensured the permanence of the pleats due to the material's thermoplastic qualities.

The range advocated styles that were 'light, ageless, trans-seasonal, cross-cultural and ambisexual' and rendered in a diverse range of colours. This coupling of versatile styling and easy care - the polyester lets it be machine washed, tumbled, scrunched and yet miraculously return to its original crisp state - would be blessing to the cosmopolitan traveller, dancer or anyone conscious to good design. Practical yet elegant, it seemed perfectly suited to the diverse needs of modern lifestyles.



(left) Yuriko Takagi's collaboration with Issey, 'Travel Through The Planet' whereupon the photographer travelled to far-ranging destinations to photograph locals in Issey Miyake's clothes, speaking to the global inclusivity of the Pleats Please range.

And when design can be such, as a solution to the everyday lives of many people, it speaks absolutely to freedom and a humanist spirit. Revolutionary? Yes, but also, entirely needed today.

