

THE SURVIVAL ALIST

IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD, THE CONCEPT OF FASHION AS ARMOUR HAS REACHED NEW LEVELS. HARRIET QUICK GENS UP ON A SEASON OF TOUGH TECHNICAL FABRICS IN PRACTICAL BUT COCOONING CUTS

Imagine the scene. Walking through Marylebone, a crew of construction workers cheer at the sight of your bright orange Calvin Klein 205W39NYC fireman's coat worn over a pencil-skirt suit and throw you a hard hat for good measure (better than a lone wolf whistle). Entering the doctor's consulting rooms in Prada's neon nylon gaiter-topped rubber boots, the medical team shower compliments on your germ-protective footwear. Or consider the alarm on the cloakroom attendant's face as you hand in Balenciaga's ginormous compressed "layer" coat (flannel shirt meets hiking jacket meets trench) that resembles a make-do protective shelter. "One item or three, madam?"

Fashion can take us to strange places and play havoc with our personal identities, but this autumn the taste for dislocating, discombobulating "experiences" has reached a new zenith. Designers have explored the limits of obscure protective workwear (yes, NYC sanitation department workers are muses), and the kind of kit that includes knee-high galoshes, vinyl capes, metallic heat-resistant balaclavas and pollution-filtering face masks, all of which you might expect to find at a genetic-engineering lab, inside NASA or at the morgue.

Is a biblical flood in store at the next full moon, thanks to global warming? Will the toxic fumes rising from

inadequately ventilated landfill sites poison a generation? Will shoals of bobbing plastic bottles be our sea-swimming partners hereafter?

Environmental crises, political extremism, personal data theft... there's a whole raft of issues to induce anxiety attacks. Fortunately, there's optimism, too, and a network of channels via which to take action as a citizen – at least in the democratised world. For 99.9 per cent of us, constructing a self-sufficient escape "shelter/villa" on New Zealand's North Island (as a few billionaire Los Angelenos are doing) is not an option. Face the dystopian storm we must. But what happens to our perma-chic wardrobes? Designers, sensitive to the headache-making aspects of modern life, are creating hyper-functional pieces for them.

That chunky, all-terrain Balenciaga Triple S sneaker was just the start. Some garments look as though they could also serve as portable geodesic domes, and others mutate into base-jumping suits (do not attempt). There are neon, spongy sleeveless cocoons at Prada (with matching bucket hats and clip-on ID-tag holders); lace-trimmed silver leather trapeze dresses and hand-knitted balaclavas at Calvin Klein. "From day one, appropriation was something I wanted to focus on," Raf Simons said of his clever repurposing of iconic American uniforms. There were vinyl-coated plaid capes at >



BALENCIAGA



PRADA



CALVIN KLEIN



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Fendi; striped-blazer-meets-duvet-coat at Sacai; and bulbous, quilted “swaddling” coats boasting giant detachable pregnancy pillows and bumbags at Rick Owens. Workwear pioneer Heron Preston collaborated with NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) on a capsule of technical outerwear including jackets, track pants and sweatshirts. Preston’s denim bib dress with an orange band reading Handle With Care looks neat, too.

This new breed of garment was showcased in a variety of raw, bleak settings devoid of creature comforts and bourgeois trappings. The scenographers must have experienced intense days watching *Survivors* (a cult 1975 post-apocalyptic drama series set in northern England) and listening to Massive Attack’s epic single “Protection”, recorded in 1994. Or watching multiple cuts of *Dune*, *Alien* and *Safe*, or recceing Google Earth for container sites and derelict utopian housing blocks.

The upshot included a snow-filled (albeit, it was actually popcorn) Midwestern landscape at Calvin Klein, a concrete and whitewashed attic in an “under construction” building in Paris for Sacai, and a South Lambeth depot for Craig Green. In Milan, Miuccia Prada opted for near darkness to show off her *Blade Runner*-esque merging of algae greens, flashlight brights and slippery asphalt-black cocktail dresses worn beneath shearling coats with electric-hued collars. The waxen-faced models appeared like a tribe of survivors. From the outside, the vision looks chilling. The clothes read No Entry, Do Not Touch, Authorised Personnel Only. The word “safe”, Simons said of his collection, “was an important reference for the feeling”.

Yet under myriad techno layers and beyond the industrial carabiner clips and Velcro tab fastenings, there’s a squishy core. It often relates to the designer’s own personal story. “I always try to make something you can’t find anywhere else. But on the other hand, I like basic items such as a sweater, military jacket, simple T-shirts and shirts. The reason I stick to ‘hybridisation’ in my creations is because once those familiar items get together in one piece, they create a different and unique silhouette, but still each part comes from something you’re familiar with or have worn before,” says Chitose Abe of Sacai’s ingenious half-and-half padded jackets and blazers and plaid military coats with visible quilted liners.

Craig Green (twice Menswear Designer of the Year at The Fashion Awards and with a fanatical female following) grew up in the suburbs of

London in a family of plumbers, carpenters and electricians. “I’ve always been interested in functional clothing,” he says of his love of workwear. “And uniforms have almost become a romantic idea, perhaps because industry is becoming more and more mechanised. There is beauty in the idea of garments that you can work and do things in. Something that’s both comfortable and functional, that’s my idea of luxury.” For the finale, Green sent out meticulously hand-stitched hooded ponchos, with dangling guide-rope-like strings, that were made from quilted cotton in a patchwork of reds, greens and blues inspired by Celtic flags. “I was thinking about being a child, when you used to dream of the future and put on an unpegged tent and pretend to fly,” explains Green.

His notion of romance is illuminating. The reality of Rust Belt America littered with disused factories and mines, and the crumbling industrial heart of Europe do invite nostalgia for uniforms. Today, it’s hard to find poetry in the millions of small industrial units and Amazon “pick’n’pack” warehouse cities that are cropping up everywhere from Milton Keynes to Kinshasa.

A fireman’s style coat, a pair of multipocketed plumber trousers or a cycling cape carry the halo of purposeful chic when reprised by the current crop of designers. “Reflective and protective outerwear is something I wore for as long as I can remember. Except they were real outdoor pieces, so I wanted to reinterpret those garments to fit metro lifestyle with elegance,” says Yoon Ahn, the creative behind the made-in-Tokyo label Ambush. The designer, who grew up between Seattle and Japan, counts a pair of sturdy weatherproof North Face Gore-Tex trousers as an all-time favourite. In her winter collection you will find voluminous popper-sided raincoats with trumpet sleeves and “suits” in brick and black featuring multipocketed flak jackets and cuffed trousers: just the kind of thing that would segue from your handmade carbon Colnago bicycle to the boardroom in high style.

Samuel Ross, the creative director of the appropriately named London-based brand A Cold Wall, says, “There’s a semiotic value in taking hardwearing coarse materials and unemotional visual objects to highlight an era in which people are so exposed.” Ross used thermo-reactive nylon for sleeveless parkas, and vinyl for rain helmets in his gender-fluid collection. His cover-up of choice? “A cropped, realigned navy utility vest, with hidden hood and

detachable plastic component. I wear this piece almost every day.”

Not so long ago, style pundits were lauding the benefits of double-faced cashmere overcoats, taxi-only heels and sumptuous handbags. Now, micro crossbody bags and multiple pockets, “transformer” coats that convert to jackets with a quick unzip (check McQueen) look the part. Multifunctionality, hybridity, efficiency and fun are the watchwords now. And “padded”. There are multiple versions of the padded jacket on the horizon. The cocooning feeling is a big plus. “I often wear down jackets, but I like something not too athletic that has a unique silhouette. Last winter, my favourite was an oversized khaki bomber from the Sacai x The North Face collaboration. And they are fun, whether you are in the city or climbing Everest,” says Abe.

Down jackets are squishy, comforting, silken and even decorative. Consider Moncler’s Genius range; a collaboration with eight designers, including Pierpaolo Piccioli of Valentino, Craig Green and Simone Rocha. At Browns, womenswear buying director Ida Pettersson envisages a total look from brands including Juun.J and Off-White. “I’m in love with the idea of a padded coat worn with a matching-colour padded scarf. There was a rainbow of colours available but also sensible black,” she says, suggesting you wear it with Alchimia di Ballin’s quilted, silver nail-heeled boots.

Overalls are another trend jumping out of this furnace. Artist Anna Blessmann – who is behind a capsule collection called... wait for it... A Plan Application, a venture backed by Virgil Abloh – concentrates on singular items such as knee-high stretch-leather boots and a perfect indigo cotton all-in-one. A blowtorch and a pavé diamond carabiner bracelet by Marla Aaron would be the ideal finishing note.

There are lots of erotic touches hidden in the new protection kit. Green’s one-size-fits-all garments (loved by men and women) have self-adjusting straps and ties; elsewhere arms zip off jackets to reveal shoulders, and drawstrings, poppers and toggles can turn a sterile-looking piece into something full of surprises.

Percolate the trend and you have some wise buys. Consider a cape-like coat, a pair of trekking/snowboard pants and a multipurpose silver cagoule as a starter kit. With such innovation, the apocalypse might well be averted. Buckle up, keep warm, seek big-hug protection. Fashion, to paraphrase Massive Attack’s “Protection” collaborator Tracey Thorn, might “take the force of the blow”. ■



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