Wales Bonner enchants Pitti Uomo with her culturally diverse fashion

By Dominique Muret - 17 June 2022

On Tuesday evening, Wales Bonner excited her audience in Florence with a show full of subtlety, vibrantly blending a variety of influences, techniques, attitudes and ideas. As the special guest of the Pitti Uomo menswear show, the British designer transported a slice of Africa into the heart of Renaissance Italy. More than that, she drew on the city's multicultural history to write a new chapter with a vista on multiple horizons.
To unveil her menswear and womenswear collection for the Spring/Summer 2023, Wales Bonner chose one of the Medici's most ancient palazzi, the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, built in 1444 by Cosimo de Medici, notably once the home of Alessandro de Medici, known as il Moro (the Moor) for his African origins, the Florentine republic’s first duke.

The palazzo’s courtyard and walls are covered entirely with burlap bags, of the kind habitually used to transport foodstuffs, especially from Africa. The bags were recovered and stitched together by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama, creating an installation with migration as its theme.

“My influences aren't drawn from fashion, but from the outside world. I delve into the past to look out to and project myself into the future,” said Wales Bonner, who called on artisans from all over the world to create the collection’s 36 looks, showcasing their unique skills. Experts in tie-dye techniques from Burkina Faso, embroiderers from India to make macramé dresses decorated with pearls, Savile Row tailors to produce a number of wonderful suits, and a Parisian artisan for a silk jacquard coat. As well as jewellery made by Ghanaian artisans using multi-coloured pieces of bottle glass.

All of this blends together in a harmonious whole, the silhouettes both elegant and flowing, masculine and feminine, the style at once couture and sporty. Wales Bonner's wardrobe is a well-balanced composition, featuring zebra and leopard-skin slippers worn with suits, and Adidas sneakers, re-imagined in silver by Wales Bonner, matched nonchalantly with white knee-high socks and ample shorts.

Wales Bonner is equally adept at using a variety of codes, switching from contemporary style to eclectic chic, as with the double-breasted gilet-blazer or the hybrid khaki trench coat, its back enhanced with finely striped white cotton fabric, then adopting a sportier register only to segue with hand-crafted items and end on a rocker flourish, with electric blue suede jackets decorated with silver studs. Notable too are the maxi shirts in blue cotton with white bibs, looking almost like boubous, worn unbuttoned over ample, sarong-style double trousers layered over one another.

Wales Bonner, 31, born of a Jamaican father and an English mother, knows exactly what she wants. “I started with menswear, because it's a more structured kind of fashion, and that also allowed me to break some rules. Nowadays, womenswear has the same weight as menswear in my collections,” said the designer, whose couture items are all made in Italy, and whose label is available at 85 top multibrand retailers worldwide, including Sacks, Ssense and Le Printemps.
Wales Bonner, who from the outset has put black identity at the heart of her fashion, caught the industry’s eye right after graduating from the prestigious Central Saint Martins academy in London in 2014. Her graduation collection, called ‘Africa’, won the L’Oréal Professional Talent Award. Her first collection, ‘Ebonics’, for the Fall/Winter 2015, was highly praised by critics. In 2015, she received the Best Young Talent menswear collection prize at the British Fashion Council’s Fashion Awards.

The following year, she won the LVMH emerging designer prize. “An award that has helped boost my self-confidence,” said Wales Bonner, who is very pleased to have remained independent until now. “More and more I appreciate the freedom I have and the possibility of expressing myself,” she concluded.

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