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## DESIGNS FOR THE STAGING OF FASHION SHOWS ARE NOW AS IMPORTANT AS THE CLOTHES THEMSELVES, WRITES CAROLINE ROUX

PHOTOGRAPHS **JULIAN ANDERSON** (MCQUEEN)/**MICHAEL MACK** (CHALAYAN)/**PAUL DONAHUE** (BERARDI)

**It used to be about the clothes.** But now the show's the thing. A few days before his recent London show, Alexander McQueen was fired up with excitement. "You've got to see it," he enthused. "It'll blow you away." He wasn't talking about the clothes, however, he was talking about the show itself. "Bring an umbrella!" was his parting shot. An umbrella?

In a process that began in the 1980s with avant-garde fashion designers like Bodymap and John Galliano in London and Jean Paul Gaultier and Martin Margiela in Paris, those who want to position themselves at the cutting edge of couture must do so through the presentation as much as the content of their collections.

Galliano has since presented an entire circus scenario peopled with coveting women. Last month he recreated the rooms of a belle epoque apartment inside the staid setting of Carrousel, Paris's custom-built fashion complex. Margiela has shown in an abattoir, and the unconventional African designer Xuly-Bet in a Metro station.

This September in London Hussein Chalayan, Britain's most modernist designer, headed for the second time to the vast empty space of the Atlantis Gallery in Brick Lane. Far from the normal beat of Prada-clad, Manolo-shod fashion editors and buyers, the location alone creates a frisson for those who will have spent much of fashion week in the soulless tents installed twice yearly on the lawns of the Natural History Museum.

Chalayan's message that he works beyond the conventional boundaries of fashion is amplified by his occupying a space that hasn't seen a parade of camel coats coursing down the same runway just a few hours previously. "I feel the way I present my clothes must do justice to my ideas," says Chalayan. "Catwalk shows are just about the clothes and give you nothing else to think about."

The Atlantis Gallery is big and white and empty, 16m x 60m of unbroken nothingness. It was up to Michael Anastassiades, an industrial design graduate from the Royal College of Art, to redefine the space, create a backstage and a seating plan and finally a place for the action reflecting the spirit of Chalayan's clothes. On a minute budget, he divided the space into front and backstage with a pure white silk curved curtain and lit the show with white light. The extreme sparseness, he says, gave it the air of a Greek tragedy.

This design intervention at Atlantis was one of ideas and atmosphere. "I approach a space the same way as a product, which is to create an experience," says Anastassiades. In this case it was the audience and the models themselves who brought the sterile space to life, just as it is the act of putting on a dress that brings that inert object to life.

The models were choreographed to move around the periphery of the stage area, instead of in the usual straight lines, and to stop in moments of what seemed more like



For Alexander McQueen's recent London fashion show a vast concrete bunker in Victoria was transformed with music, light and a sensational 20-metre-long water-filled clear Perspex catwalk, above and right.

The catwalk was prefabricated by ICI Acrylics in 25mm Perspex sheets and assembled on site. During the show the catwalk became a focus as black ink was pumped through the water-filled tanks and rain fell on the models

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contemplation than seductive posing for the battery of photographers. At times what they wore became part of the set itself: three black headdresses, for example, suddenly punctuating the space with moving black squares.

"A catwalk probably does show clothes most efficiently," concedes Anastassiades. "But Hussein's work is concerned generally with shifting away from the clichés of fashion, and that includes bringing a different perspective to the act of looking at clothes."

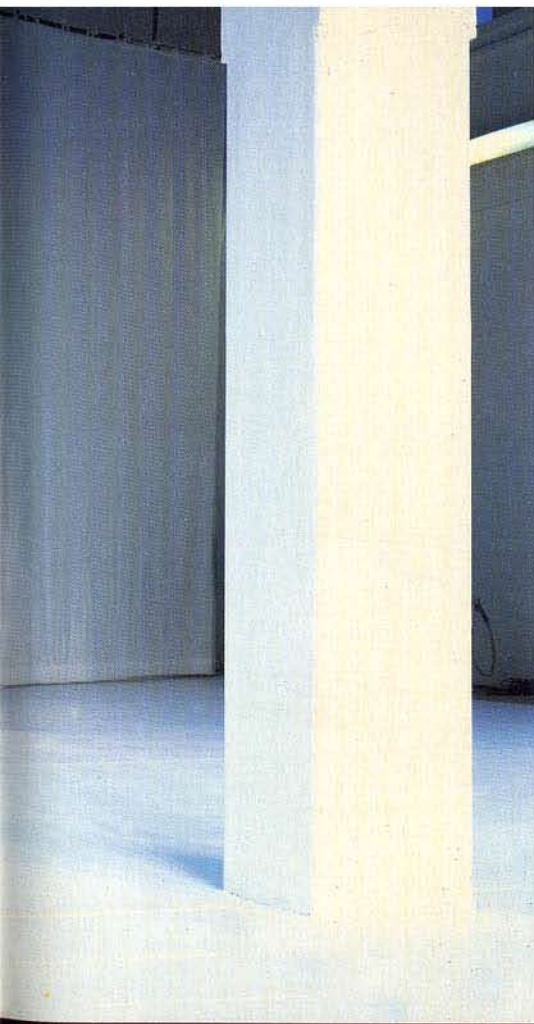
The following evening over in Victoria, a 40-tonne water-filled Perspex catwalk lay in wait for Alexander McQueen's show, and the warehouse was filled with the sound of whistling wind as the audience took their seats. Designed by the artist Simon Costin and made by ICI Acrylics, the runway became an installation in its own right when, during a halftime break, it was gradually pumped with squid-black ink which diffused through the water and turned red and purple under the theatrical lighting. As the second half began, so did the rain, falling in a fine curtain from a concealed overhead trough. Drenched models in increasingly transparent white summer wear splashed their way down the now sparkling Perspex path to a soundtrack of *I can't stand the rain*.

"It's a very rarefied thing. It's so particular in what it wants to do. But for us it's more than just presenting a collection and I see my part as adding another layer. I was

Hussein Chalayan presented his latest collection in a London warehouse transformed by industrial designer Michael Anastassiades, above and right. The relationship between the industrial aesthetic of the building and the simple, silk hangings provided a dramatic backdrop for the clothes. Patrick Donahue, who trained as an architect at PCL, designed the rock-style set for Antonio Berardi's show at the Brixton Academy, right and far right. Here, circus-style showmanship was the order of the day







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trying to make a piece of sculpture for the models to interact with. I think the art direction should give a context, and then people need to look at the clothes.”

For this collection, McQueen needed greater elegance and beauty than has traditionally been associated with his presentations, something to signal the sleek sophistication of the garments and to match his own development as head of couture and pret-à-porter at Givenchy. “He said everything would be stylish, refined, simple, no weird angles erupting out of jackets,” says Costin.

There was an air of control about the show, not previously one of McQueen’s preoccupations, and most of the iconoclasm you would expect from the designer was lost when American Express offered £30,000 of sponsorship. The working title, “The Golden Shower”, was exchanged for “Untitled” once the deal had been struck – proving that those Amex execs know a thing or two about perverse sexual practices. With it went the meaning of the rain, leaving it as little more than a special effects spectacle, albeit an impressive one.

But for spectacle, you could hardly beat the show at the Brixton Academy where Antonio Berardi set out to take his audience on a journey, showing his theatrical clothes in a camp extravaganza. A series of scenes took the models from Sicilian beginnings, represented by a long landscape backdrop of a hot dusty wilderness, to a tango dance where models moved through four glittering chan-

deliers which dropped stagewards; a day in Miami, where they emerged through a pink and blue neon curtain; and a Vegasesque rock and roll episode. For the last scene, shiny patent-clad girls lolled rock-chick-like on 1.2 metre high letters leaving you in no doubt whose show this was: BERARDI was spelled out in bright white bulbs against hot pink and red backgrounds. Following the trail of Berardi’s own family experience, it represented a trajectory from the southern Italian island to ever more glamorous show environments, as did the clothes.

It was, says designer Patrick Donahue, who trained as an architect at PCL and is now a set-designer for English National Opera, “a weird design challenge, especially evoking Sicily.” But most important was to sustain an ad hoc feeling. “I wanted to give a route [which became a T-shaped catwalk] but also have a sense of looseness and work with the venue, which after all is a fairly sleazy rock place, which is why we chose it in the first place. It would be wrong to create something too rigid, or architectural. The fashion show as an event is so quick-fire, instantaneous, temporary.” For the finale, Donahue removed the backcloth to reveal the peeling backstage – the battered floor, the no-smoking signs, all the clutter and dirtiness of theatre life. The message: this is just a show. And perhaps, after this half-hour of shameless razzle-dazzle, even some of the more serious *fashionistas* left with the realisation that these are only clothes. Don’t take it too seriously. **B**

