

Viktor & Rolf: And their Creations

Makoto Ishizeki (Curatorial Assistant, The Kyoto Costume Institute)

The Black Hole

The lights are turned low and the venue is shrouded in darkness. The audience becomes quiet as the entrance to the stage is illuminated. The backlit models standing on the stage are transformed into black silhouettes, like shadow puppets. We immediately realize that the models are not only clothed in black, but that their entire bodies—including their hair and faces—are totally black. Viktor & Rolf's autumn and winter collection riveted the audience from the outset.

The black silhouettes—appearing in succession as the collection unfolds—are tracing “the history of 20th century fashion.” The Chanel suit, Balenciaga's “semi-fitted” dress, the marine coat and le smoking by Yves Saint Laurent whom Viktor & Rolf's continue to revere. The latter half of the show features designs, the forms of which are unique to this duo. The big corsages, the over-large ties and cuffs, the enormous Gigot sleeves and the excessive pleating.... It is almost as though the designers are making a declaration: “We are taking the spirit of the inventors of the great silhouettes into the 21st century.”

The theme of this collection—*The Black Hole*—succeeds in revealing the strong centripetal force of black, an invisible presence sprinkled throughout the universe and which swallows up not only matter but even light. Viktor & Rolf describe the relationship between the Black Hole and the silhouette as follows:

A silhouette is an empty template, a mere black surface deprived of substance. Unlike the colour white which reflects light, black absorbs light, as well as warmth and energy. Any object wrapped up in black cloth, or any drawing that filled in with black ink transforms into an impenetrable surface. In that sense, the silhouette has the properties of a black hole, sucking in distinctions, details, and ultimately, visibility.¹

Through the color “black” which reduces everything to nothingness, the silhouette=shadow—a virtual image without substance and which conveys a sense of “absence”—connects with what lies beyond the galaxy. Viktor & Rolf have succeeded in consolidating, on the catwalk, the cosmic power of black.

Presentation that Reflects What Lies within

Viktor & Rolf have always had an interest in the potential of the immaterial silhouette=shadow as an avenue of expression. Their Spring/Summer 1996 collection, shown at a contemporary art gallery in

Paris in October 1995, was titled “L’apparence du Vide” and took the form of an installation, without using any models. Golden dresses were suspended in the gallery space. On the floor lay black garments, like shadows of the glittering dresses. The names of supermodels were written across one wall, while voices on the soundtrack playing in the gallery whispered the names of these supermodels.

The supermodel boom had become something of a social phenomenon at the time, causing a huge rise in the fees paid to such models. More attention was paid to which of the supermodels were appearing at a show rather than the designer’s collection. Viktor & Rolf, irritated by this situation in which “everything was about the surroundings of fashion and never about the clothes themselves”² devised a plan to restore the rights of clothes in fashion. Although the golden dresses are three-dimensional, there are no heads or limbs—clothes with a shiny surface but no substance—and suspended in the air, they symbolize the emptiness of the fashion world that was in a frenzy over supermodels. The shadow-clothes which lie, unnoticed, below the glittering doll=models are the “real clothes” which should be the stars and yet finds themselves threatened, about to be ostracized at any moment. These are clothes that can actually “be worn.” By emphasizing the shadow rather than the body, Viktor & Rolf are turning the tables on fashion, plotting a reversal of emptiness and truth.

Viktor & Rolf’s resistance towards the state of fashion and their passion towards fashion itself were clearly expressed in their five haute couture collections, the first of which they presented in 1998. In their first haute couture collection (Spring/Summer 1998), the duo focused on fabric, embroidery and color—the essence of haute couture. They also articulated their irritation with the trend for a disproportionate emphasis on accessories through a performance in which ceramic necklaces and hats were thrown onto the catwalk, shattering. In their fourth collection (Autumn/Winter 1999), Viktor & Rolf combined “a diamond that everybody can enjoy, but nobody can purchase it”³ with haute couture, with one model wearing layers of different garments, like a nested Russian doll. Considering “fashion is something you can hear arrive or it’s something you can feel,”⁴ in their final haute-couture collection (Autumn/Winter 2000), a model wearing a dress covered in embroidered bells appears out of the mist to the sound of tinkling bells.

As evident from these examples, Viktor & Rolf’s clothes and the way they are presented are always exciting. And their collections always result in various interpretations. Olivier Zahm, then editor of *Purple Prose*, used the word “metafashion” to describe the Spring/Summer 1996 show. This signifies fashion that functions as a “commentary” to reveal “the ostentatious ambitions of fashion, involving an impassioned quest for novelty even as it acknowledges the radical impossibility of this undertaking.”⁵ Richard Martin discusses Viktor & Rolf’s panoramic viewpoint within the context of their artistic approach, describing their work as a “hybrid of art and fashion” that transcends both of these to become “something larger and more important.”⁶ Viktor & Rolf’s work—unlike that of many designers who try and guess what the editors of fashion magazines and buyers currently want and then present designs that reflect this—incorporates a strong message and requires the “audience” to proactively read this message. This message comes from an intensely personal place.

With our collection we want to express an idea. Everything—material, form etc—is derived from this idea. Our clothes are the expression of our personal fears, frustrations, interests and fascinations, instead of being a selection of existing images put together. It comes from the inside, so it has nothing to do with “cowboy” one season, and “China” the next.⁷

In their sincerity towards clothes, Viktor & Rolf are very similar to Kawakubo Rei (Commes des Garçons), whom they respect. In one interview, Kawakubo made the following statement about what lay behind her creativity:

Many people create a collection by simply putting together things that they like. I was also like this many years ago. But this hasn't been satisfying enough for me in recent years. I want to use clothes to express something else, to express something that I really want to convey to others. This includes the values that I can relate to the most at the moment or my outlook on life. It does sound a bit dramatic and heavy, but for me, setting a theme like “China” or “the Seventies” for a given year just isn't challenging enough.⁸

Viktor & Rolf's philosophy behind their work that emphasizes the concept has been consistent since the beginning of their career. In 1993, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren who majored in fashion at the Arnhem Academy of Art in the Netherlands, participated in the Salon Européen des Jeunes Stylistes held in Hyères in the South of France (now the Festival International des Arts de la Mode d'Hyères) under the name “Viktor & Rolf.” They ended up winning prizes in the 3 main divisions including the top prize. The garments were the result of collecting “fragments of existing clothes” but the inlaid vests and suits were half-formless, and the fabric of the sequin-covered dresses was completely worn, torn and ripped, so that large numbers of sequins came off the fabric, scattering all over the floor. Despite this, Viktor & Rolf's designs mesmerized the audience. The garments which conveyed the passing of time—like Margiela's mold installation⁹—reveal a new kind of beauty that lies in something that is breaking down, something ephemeral.

Excessive form

The germination of form, the other feature of Viktor & Rolf's work, is also evident in their earlier work. The lower half of the dress created from layers of shirts sewn together billows out from below the bust line; the coat which at first glance looks like several layers of garments has three layers of collars; this excessive volume and the replicated use of certain parts of a garment remain consistent in their later designs as well.

One example is their 1994 collection. The duo used a garment found at a flea market as their departure point to develop a series of designs in a range of different shapes—in other words, the collection could be described as a variation on a theme. Several voluminous outfits reminiscent of 19th century bustles and crinolines appeared on the catwalk. In their Spring/Summer 1999 haute couture collection, the duo made generous use of ruffles to imbue their clothes with a sense of

movement and a strong three-dimensional quality. Every garment was in black and white, with each first shown in black light and then once again under normal light. Certain elements that couldn't be seen initially were then revealed later, making it a show that was both surprising and humorous. What first appeared to be white bones would be revealed as the pattern on a black suit. What first appeared to be a simple white suit was actually more—the entire silhouette of the suit featured black ruffles. Multiple layered shirts, jackets, coats and vests featured in the Autumn/Winter 2003 ready-to-wear collection. Although the designers were clearly aware of “wearability” when designing this collection, the form created by the layering succeeded in conveying a dense and yet innovative beauty.

“Exaggeration,” “excessiveness” and “replication” are arguably essential elements in Viktor & Rolf's work and shows. The emphasis on the extreme and three-dimensional created by the use of features which are abnormal in size, the tension and energy conveyed by the exaggerated volume and unnatural proportions, the subtle differences that result from the replication of the same item, the movement and rhythm that is created by repetition. It is the very “exaggeration” of Viktor & Rolf's “design language” that creates such a strong visual impact and successfully conveys their concept.

In their Autumn/Winter 1998 haute couture collection, Viktor & Rolf featured party decorations and the atomic bomb to express the festive mood of the world as it was about to celebrate a new millennium and the sense of anxiety surrounding Nostradamus' apocalyptic predictions that could well be realized before the world entered the new millennium. In the first show, Viktor & Rolf showed a series of tops that were so inflated that the models' necks couldn't be seen. The sense of imbalance in which the center of gravity has moved upwards is reminiscent of “the mushroom cloud.” There were also dresses filled with silk balloons in many different colors that seem to be symbolizing this upward motion and at the same time celebrating the coming of the new millennium. Multicolored streamers and pompoms like party decorations and harlequin motifs further enhanced the festive mood. In the second show, the stuffing inside the model's tops had been removed and the same clothing reappeared on the catwalk, but not inflated this time around—like the calm after a major global event. The colorful decorations have been removed and the tops, which were oversized to start with, appear deflated. What remains is the elegance of the draping of the fabric. Viktor & Rolf used “deformed form” to beautifully and successfully depict the two different “faces” of the same garment.

The Power of Color

Since the Black Hole collection, described at the beginning of this essay, Viktor & Rolf have, on a number of occasions, presented collections with color as its keyword. In the Spring/Summer 2002 collection, the next collection after the black show, the duo showed a series of white clothes based on the theme *Holy Communion*. Through the generous use, in their own inimitable fashion, of “girly” elements such as ribbons, frills and heart patterns and multiple layers in their designs, Viktor & Rolf succeeded in creating an exquisite and at the same time extravagant style. Perhaps it is a little simplistic when this author finds that, in contrast to their Black collection, the power of white that

expands outwards is reminiscent of the radiating energy—the white hole—that represents the opposite to what the black hole represents. The collection in the following season (Autumn/Winter 2002) was titled *Long Live the Immaterial!* with models walking down the catwalk in royal blue clothing with their images also projected onto a screen. Viktor & Rolf used chromakey, projecting live images of the models onto a screen, but with the blue sections of their clothing replaced by different images. The proportion of blue part in the outfit grew as the show evolved so that in the end the entire model became a screen. Blue is a color that is rarely seen in nature and in the West, represented the Virgin Mary of Christianity, or the divinity of the heavens or a royal household. Because of its “immateriality,” it is used not as a “material” to determine the aesthetic appearance of the work, but to apply an “immaterial” element to the work. The relief and contours of the form are “equalized” by the flat screen. The organic association between real clothing and virtual images successfully conveys to the audience “a concept related to anti-reality such as escaping from reality or creating a utopia.”¹⁰

These collections that were held over three seasons, each based on three colors—black, white and blue—are never monotonous despite the fact that only one color was ever used at one time. If anything, the use of a single color successfully conveyed the powerful energy and the multi-layered meaning of color.

The clothes in the Spring/Summer 2003 collection featured flowers in various colors and shapes. Floral decorations covered, were woven into and printed onto the clothes. The models, dancing wildly on the catwalk and the flowers and colors that blossomed inside the venue combined to convey a message of “liberation from self-restraint.” And, speaking of models who continue to dance, the fact that every model—and naturally, Viktor & Rolf as well—wore red shoes in the Spring/Summer 2004 collection is based on Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the red shoes which, once worn, meant that the person wearing them was doomed to dance forever. We realize from Viktor & Rolf’s collections that for them, the fashion show is not simply a venue for revealing their new work, neither is it a spectacle for presenting a certain image. The show itself is a work of art, in which the elaborately created concept, the extremely formative clothing, and the high-impact direction of the show come together as one.

Furthermore, when we look back at the path that Viktor & Rolf have taken since their debut, the very process that began with the artistic approach towards their early work, which then evolved into haute couture, and then ready-to-wear (the two designers describe this process as “regression”) is arguably their concept. Viktor once made the following statement—“We first wanted to establish our name and image. Because once your name is known you can go on to create perfumes.”¹¹

Notes

1. Quotation from material distributed at the venue of the show.
2. *The Independent Magazine*, October 3, 1998, p.49.
3. Román Alonso, Lisa Eisner, “Double Dutch: The fantasy life of that famous fashion duo Viktor and Rolf,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 2002, p.114.
4. Amy Spindler, “Viktor & Rolf,” *Viktor & Rolf Haute Couture Book*, Groninger Museum, 2000, p.11.

5. *Artforum*, December 1995, p.81.
6. Richard Martin, "A Note: Art & Fashion, Viktor & Rolf," *Fashion Theory* 3, no. 1, March 1999, p.115.
7. *Purple Prose* 7, autumn 1994, p.73.
8. *SPUR*, February 1995, p.25.
9. *Martin Margiela Exhibition (9/4/1615)*, a project held at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (1997). Bacteria and mold were implanted into reproductions of Margiela's past designs and the growth process then exhibited. This project was recreated at the *Visions of the Body* exhibition in 1999.
10. *WWD Japan*, 19 August 2002, p.18.
11. *AXIS* 80, July/August 1999, p.110.

(This article is carried in an exhibition catalogue *Fashion in Colors: Viktor & Rolf & KCI*.)