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# Work It: A Study in Fashion Photography Portraiture

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**WORK IT: A STUDY IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY PORTRAITURE**

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THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON: HONORS PROJECT

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## INTRODUCTION

Fashion is a device with which the perception of one's appearance is manipulated. It is a device that is used across all cultures to identify, symbolize, isolate, and appropriate. It is figuratively and literally woven into the fabric of humankind as a whole. Fashion has the ability to reinforce gender or create dissonance within it through androgynous silhouettes. It can express strength and confidence or emphasize vulnerability.

Through this study, the use of specific studio lighting techniques accentuates design elements of a highly curated collection of avant-garde, 21<sup>st</sup> century garments. Drape, texture, form, and luster are but a few elements examined. The models were given time to familiarize themselves with the aesthetics of their assigned fashion and were briefed on the designers' intentions, cultural backgrounds, philosophies, and design principles before each shoot. Thus, the study depicts all models embodying a strong sense of oneness with each of their corresponding looks, allowing for highly informed expressions and poses.

The study makes use only of black in the fashion to eliminate distraction, paradoxically create tranquility and severity within the setting, and to further emphasize silhouette and human expression in a deeply thoughtful way. Four of the eight participating models were female, however all garments used are menswear pieces.

A strobe-light system with a seamless backdrop was used to photograph each look. By using a single, main light source with the addition of a secondary light source, umbrellas, diffusion, fill cards, and flags when necessary, allowed the characteristics of each garment to be exploited.

The augmented reality incorporated into this exhibition allows for the inclusion of more than sixty additional photographic works while also dynamically emphasizing the conceptuality of each print through an interactive, digital component. By using the mobile phone application, Layar, the viewer can see each printed piece come to life in real-time as the models abruptly change their poses to emphasize intended emotions through movement and rhythm.

### **01. HEIDI S.**

Heidi, the first model to appear in the exhibition, is a 33-year-old female actress who can be characterized as intensely passionate and overtly theatrical. It felt appropriate to put her in a sleeveless, full-length Rick Owens cotton gown from NASKA SS12. Native Californian, Paris-based designer Rick Owens, widely considered to be one of the lead innovators in fashion design of the current century, draws his inspiration from cultural tendencies and ancient architecture while producing severe

simplicity through an ascetic discipline.<sup>1</sup> Much of his work hearkens back to historical references while typically juxtaposing sumptuous fabrics and modern textiles. The collection NASKA SS12 for instance, can be described as a derivative of ancient Egyptian form as the models entered the Paris runway through an Egyptian-like stone monument. Specifically, this collection is known for its introduction of skirts and gowns to his mainline.<sup>2</sup> Within the augmented reality of this exhibition, the model can also be seen wearing an oversized parka from GLEAM FW9/10, also by Rick Owens. Here he references ancient Roman militia while incorporating the use of lustrous, modern tech fabrics against primitive textiles.

By briefing the model, Heidi, of the strong narrative background of each garment, the resulting poses came naturally as she exemplified a tranquil, classic appearance with yet a sense of power through her form. The voluminous quality of both garments can classify them as a typical example anti-fashion, however, the model conveys the ability to embrace the form of each garment and celebrate the shapelessness of her figure.

A single diffused light source and fill from the opposite side was used in this case to create soft shadow detail within the drape of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Friedman, "Rick Owens: Secure in His Own World," *The New York Times*, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/fashion/paris-fashion-week-rick-owens-studio.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/fashion/paris-fashion-week-rick-owens-studio.html?_r=0).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Blanks, "Spring 2012 Menswear — Rick Owens," *Vogue*, 2011, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2012-menswear/rick-owens>.

gown.<sup>3</sup> The same lighting was used with the introduction of the parka because of its ability to emphasize the sheen of the polyamide fabric and reflectiveness of the full-length metal zipper.

## 02. CARLY M.

The second model, 23-year-old Carly, was chosen to wear an Yves Saint Laurent SS11 tunic from a capsule collection designed specifically for Atelier New York, a men's avant-garde fashion retailer in Manhattan. This exclusive 17-piece collection was essentially the assimilation of the YSL aesthetic to Atelier. Characterized as dark and anti-fitting, the collection seamlessly resonated with the boutique's regular client base alongside Atelier's typical merchandise of such names as Ann Demeulemeester, Julius\_7, Damir Doma, and Rick Owens.<sup>4</sup> Existing as only one of three pieces ever created, the cashmere/silk tunic is a luxurious fully fashioned knit featuring a short kimono-style sleeve and oversized fit. The looseness of the garment allowed for the model to utilize her background in dance and theatre to ultimately express fluidity and movement with ease. A single light source from the side accompanied by

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<sup>3</sup> Fil Hunter, Steven Biver, and Paul Fuqua, *Light — Science and Magic: An Introduction to Photographic Lighting* (Waltham: Elsevier, Inc., 2012), 19–22.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, "News | YSL X Atelier New York," *The Fashionisto*, 2010, <http://www.thefashionisto.com/news-ysl-x-atelier-new-york/>.

the model's ability to gracefully contort her figure yielded in a dramatic accentuation of the garment's silhouette against the contrasting backdrop.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, through the augmented reality component of the exhibition, this concept was further carried out.

### 03. CARLY P.

Perceivable as poetic, intelligent, sexual, and introspective, 27-year-old Carly models a Rick Owens, boiled wool, fully fashioned knit cardigan from MOODY FW14/15. The collection represents the embodiment of authoritative power while it simultaneously hints of an inner struggle between dominance and submission.<sup>6</sup> This particular piece from the collection happens to be somewhat of a reoccurring, archival theme that Rick Owens incrementally modifies through fabrication. Throughout many of his collections, these modifications provide somewhat of a retrospective glance into his evolving aesthetic.

Informing the model of the garment's conceptual origin while yet still allowing for personal interpretation resulted in a mood that is both

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<sup>5</sup> Fil Hunter, Steven Biver, and Paul Fuqua, *Light — Science and Magic: An Introduction to Photographic Lighting* (Waltham: Elsevier, Inc., 2012), 95–96.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Blanks, "Fall 2014 Menswear — Rick Owens," *Vogue*, 2014, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2014-menswear/rick-owens>.

appropriate and self-expressive. By evoking her own sensuality, she relays to the viewer a welcoming sense of vulnerability. With the addition of more dynamic poses coupled with an alternating black/white background, a feeling of chaos emerges from the augmented reality that can be considered the disturbed struggle between both her dominant demeanor and her submissive tendencies.

The ribbing along the edge of the knit piece was purposefully highlighted as a focal element of the garment's design. By positioning a diffused, single light source to the side-front, the repetition of line is cleanly modeled by the light and produces a high amount of detail and clarity about the surface texture. A flag blocking the main light source was used to drop the value of the black background while maintaining strong light on the figure. Using a shutter speed of  $1/200$  was necessary in order to capture the swift movements of some poses and yet still maintain slight motion blur.

### **04. STEVE K.**

An athletic, muscular 30-year-old male, Steve sports a Rick Owens VICIOUS SS14 jumpsuit. VICIOUS was described on the runway as a bold

representation of urgent movement and fierce athleticism.<sup>7</sup> As his most athletic season yet, it was comprised of utilitarian, lightweight fabrics and practical silhouettes as it premiered his Adidas footwear collaboration on the runway.

Standing in a strong, secure pose, Steve is an ideal interpretation of the garment's purpose. He seems to embody a dormant potential energy through his serene, yet agile stance. His symmetrical positioning also calls to attention the hint of asymmetry within the garment in the presence of a single zipper functionally adorned on the left side of the chest.

### **05. TAMARA L.**

Tamara is a 25-year-old female artist, athlete, and activist. She is shown wearing a FW12 boiled virgin wool funnel by Swedish fashion label, Obscur. The dramatically large piece is simply an addition to the label's ongoing body of work, characterized as moodily gothic through the refinement of classic silhouettes.<sup>8</sup> Tamara's fierce, androgynous display accentuates the primitive nature of the garment with a modern flair. To take a more severe approach, the model utilized the excessive hood of the

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Blanks, "Spring 2014 Menswear — Rick Owens," *Vogue*, 2013, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2014-menswear/rick-owens>.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Prime, "Style — Obscur," *Cool Hunting*, 2010, <http://www.coolhunting.com/style/obscur>.

garment to conceal her face, thus exploring the garment's own shape and further expressing a genderless composition.

## 06. CHRISTIAN T.

24-year-old amateur male model, Christian, conveys pure excessiveness and glamour while modeling both Julius\_7 and Rick Owens. The FW9/10 collection, goth\_ik;, by Japanese label Julius\_7 is a celebration of all things tortured and superfluous through the use of dark and sinister materials and excessive seaming, as seen in Christian's posh lambskin jacket. The collection emphasizes notions of madness and insanity by the over-manipulation of fabrics and overuse of unnecessary seamwork. The cuts of the garments are in fact reminiscent of themes pertaining to that of an insane asylum. Particularly through the augmented reality, the model embraces the insanity of his look with quick head thrusts and arm movements.

A hard secondary light source was used in this series of shots to exaggerate the lustrous quality of the lambskin. With no added diffusion, the harsh light intensified contrast between the shadows and highlights of the surface to produce a more reflective appearance.<sup>9</sup> The model was also

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<sup>9</sup> Fil Hunter, Steven Biver, and Paul Fuqua, *Light — Science and Magic: An Introduction to Photographic Lighting* (Waltham: Elsevier, Inc., 2012), 66–70.

accessorized with a pair of buffalo horn sunglasses from Rick Owens's SS13 ISLAND collection. To achieve such a long-wrapping specular highlight on the surface, the large umbrella-diffused main light was used by simply positioning it within the family of angles, allowing the camera to capture a direct reflection.<sup>10</sup> The light was close enough to the surface to be large enough to spread across the entirety of the vertical plain.

### **07. KIT P.**

Kit, a 23-year-old male artist, wears another highlighted garment from VICIOUS SS14. Deriving from the same collection as Steve's jumpsuit, Kit's look is a portrait of fitness and agility. The garment is comprised of a mixed media composition of a smooth, silk satin and sturdy cotton knit. As a painter, known often to create large-scale self-portraits, Kit resonates well with the garment with a hint of vanity as he flaunts his precariously masculine sexuality. This notion provides a correlation between the garment's combination of silky and rough textiles and the model's robust yet flirtatious display.

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<sup>10</sup> Fil Hunter, Steven Biver, and Paul Fuqua, *Light — Science and Magic: An Introduction to Photographic Lighting* (Waltham: Elsevier, Inc., 2012), 53–60.

## 08. STEVEN K.

The last and in fact youngest model of the series is 19-year-old Steven. Accompanied by Heidi from the opposite end of the exhibition, the two flank the entirety of the photo series with a mirrored statuesque pose. Steven's look is a Rick Owens piece from SPHYNX FW15/16. The collection focuses primarily on juvenile transgression as the indecently exposed models took to the runway in an act of puerility and childish gesture.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the social appropriation of the collection was brought into question whereas the designer's intention was to simply celebrate the shameless beauty of male anatomy through distortional emphasis and exaggeration.

Steven's innocent, youthful expression, revealed only through the augmented reality component, portrays the immaturity his counterpart, Heidi, lacks. An infantile act: he mimics her posture and willingness to take on the shape of the garment and still conveys a sense of innocence from the garment's flamboyant silhouette. As his face becomes exposed in the augmented reality, his youth is in turn emphasized by curious and innocent facial expressions.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Blanks, "Fall 2015 Menswear — Rick Owens," *Vogue*, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-menswear/rick-owens>.

## CONCLUSION

Each model within the series was able to exploit their fashion in a way that reflected the designers' philosophies while introducing each individual's personal interpretation. By informing the wearer of their garment's carefully crafted purpose, this was made possible. Through informed exploratory poses and proper studio lighting techniques, the detailed aspects of each garment have been showcased and defined by their true essence. By calling attention to qualities such as drape, texture, sheen, construction, composition, form, function, and silhouette and providing the element of human expression, the manifested artistic vision of each designer rightfully becomes the focus of the fashion.

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