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Miuccia, Raf and the Future of Prada

Inside fashion's most idiosyncratic, influential design duo. 'Why don't we do over-decoration?' Raf asks. Miuccia's exuberant reply? 'Yes!'

By

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War looms in Eastern Europe. “This is not the time for pure fantasy,” Miuccia Prada sagely observed during our Zoom call on Sunday. It seemed an appropriate moment to revisit the question she posed two years ago, as the pandemic first made its presence felt in fashion. How can fashion be meaningful at a time like this?

Miuccia and her co-conspirator Raf Simons were seated at a desk against a blank screen, looking a little like newsreaders. She wore a sensible grey sweater and white shirt. He sported a black hoodie, branded “ANTWERP.” She had a sheaf of papers on which she would occasionally scribble, keeping on top of what she wanted to say. Occasionally she’d tap the papers on the desktop, again like a newsreader. There was the banter, too, the verbal to- and fro-ing that suggested a duo who have settled

into a comfortably contentious working relationship, co-hosts as much as co-creative directors. It could have been a network broadcast, bar the short break Miuccia took for a glass of champagne.

But back to the topic of the day: fashion's meaning in a moment of menace.

Simons claimed the question had been uppermost in their minds as they worked on the collection the two will show in Milan on Thursday afternoon. "More and more, I believe our job is in the service of people," said Miuccia. "I never liked the word 'dream,' even if it's in the title of the Venice Biennale this year. If I have a dream, I want to make it true, so it's a wish, not a dream. I always thought it was kind of stupid to dream something impossible. You dream something you want to achieve, not just for the sake of dreaming."

"I don't know if it's because of the pandemic and everything, but the idea of reality always seems to win," Simons chimed in. "We don't really want to just make pieces that are great in the context of a fashion show." That set my mind racing through a few decades of Prada shows, studded with looks that transcended reality in their eccentricity, their wilfulness, their perversity. "I always said I like eccentric pieces," said Miuccia, clearly reading my mind, "But it is still possible they make sense in life. So, for me, it is kind of not a change."

A month ago, there was a men's collection that matched the functionality of a gas jockey's jumpsuit to the fantasia of a leather-coated film noir private eye. Prada and Simons wouldn't reveal much about their upcoming women's presentation, though she conceded that the seam of eccentricity in their menswear was something they'd worked on further.



Prada Men's Autumn/Winter 2022 look 7.(Prada)

“We started more formal, but we are getting used to working together, and the more we work together, the more we can go deep in our thoughts about people.” That has brought her to a stark realisation. “I realised I never cared about the history of fashion, but I care about the life of people.” And there’s your answer to Miuccia’s question about the meaning of fashion, translated into the new womenswear she has created with Simons.

She talked about “pieces of people, pieces of history, pieces of beauty.” Fragments of Prada past, a tantalising appetiser for the new collection. “There is this desire from both of us to evolve the brand, not just repeat it,” said Simons. Initially, that desire was expressed in a very spare vision with an emphasis on the architecture of the brand: its minimalism, its purity. But Miuccia remembered Simons saying to her a few months ago, “Why don’t we do over-decoration?” Her exuberant reply? “Yes!”

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That’s long been fashion’s traditional call and response. Long follows short, white follows black. But in Prada’s case, it’s also been the driving impulse behind some of the most challenging and influential collections of modern times. So, Simons said

we could expect a collection that was different from the ones they'd done before. "Way more embellishment, more Prada DNA." Miuccia countered, "You say that embellishment is Prada DNA?" Simons qualified, "I think it's *one* of the Prada DNAs."

"Any time he mentions something I never did or never focused on, I embrace it," Miuccia said. "Because it's new for me, of course." Fact is though that embellishment has *always* been a major component of Prada's irresistible, skewed eroticism. So, the thought that it might be an ingredient in the brand's latest offering was stirring, with last winter's collection — the sequinned dresses, the faux fur wraps — as a prelude.



Prada Women's Autumn/Winter 2021 look 32.(Prada)

By this point, I was zooming in on the duo's exchanges, the interjections, the body language. How could one not be absorbed by the absolute interweaving of two of the fashion world's most idiosyncratic, influential personalities? For me at least, it was hard to resist the notion of them playing a fashion version of Surrealism's favourite parlour game, the Exquisite Corpse, where one artist would make a drawing on a piece of paper, fold it and pass it to another artist who would add their contribution without knowing what had come before and then pass it on, etcetera. "We talked about it in the past," Miuccia acknowledged. "Me from the waist up, him from the

waist down. We wanted to be free of doing 100 percent Prada. We didn't want to have a system."

Mercifully, that idea went no further, though it's a fancy way of highlighting the fact that two very assertive individuals are embedded in a very joint project with all the contradiction that implies. One instance: Miuccia's fascination with the way that women's clothing in the past was a significant reflection of their lives versus Simons' fixation on the future. Although that is actually the nub of their most contradictory divergence. Raf is over the future. "I used to over-romanticise it, but in a way, it's an idea of the '60s and I don't really feel it right now."

"We wanted to be free of doing 100% Prada."

"That's why you should embrace the metaverse and NFTs," Miuccia immediately counselled, "because after, there is the whole world." She insisted she was dedicated to understanding the new digital frontier. The new exhibition at the Fondazione Prada focuses on digital role-playing, and her son and heir Lorenzo has brought NFTs to the company in partnership with Adidas. "We're living the biggest revolution of our time, much more than the invention of the wheel," she enthused. Simons sounded unconvinced. "It doesn't match the idea of what we define as fashion yet. I think that we have incredible examples in the past of when the world was exploding politically, sexually, whatever in relation to fashion and clothes."

Miuccia countered with a vision of fashion in the metaverse, "a crazy fantasy," though that hardly sat with her earlier vision of real fashion in the real world. But she insisted that her commitment to the real world necessitated an interest in this other "completely new" world. "Let's say it was not my cup of tea, but I want to understand and have my point of view on it." And that was one good thing Miuccia was able to extract from the upheaval of the pandemic. She had months alone at home which enabled her to finally come to grips with technology. "Without the pandemic, I probably wouldn't have approached it. It's made me change drastically."



Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons at Prada's Resort 2019 show in 2018, before Simons joined the brand as co-creative director. (Getty Images)

Simons' entire time at Prada has been spent under the shadow of the pandemic, so there were all those outside forces to which the duo had to adapt, but I was also curious about how their own relationship might have changed over the past two years. "I can say exactly," Miuccia answered instantly. "I see his vision of modernity. I was sometimes going too much in my loop of thoughts and with him I learned to understand what is contemporary and what is not. I have a great example. We spent the whole afternoon discussing one piece, because it's kind of a special piece. And he said it's not modern. I knew what he meant. I've learned to look at things with his eyes."

Simons looked momentarily nonplussed by the compliment. "This is the person whom I've been seeing my whole life, and probably the rest of my life, as the most modern designer in the world." Her faith in him has made a clear difference to the way he was used to working with his own team. "It makes you think so much harder and deeper about everything you do. And it's this constant dialogue. It's not just like, 'Oh, let's do this, it's beautiful' and then it stops. Maybe sometimes we want to have it look completely the opposite of what Prada has ever been. And a lot of the time, we want it to be so full-on Prada that people think, 'Oh, that is how we've known Prada for thirty years.' We like the idea that we can be that free. But what matters most is this: I don't know the proper English word, but I always have this feeling of a double check; it's such a learning process."

"It's not like Miuccia is designing a part and I'm designing a part, and let's see how it blends together. We do every piece together."

“I can dare to say my most stupid ideas because I know that he checks,” Miuccia added. “So I say I want to do this and he suddenly says ‘shit!’ But I dare more because I know he will think about whether I’m going to do shit.” But didn’t she have people who checked her in the past? “People were always receptive to my craziness. My small group of people, the crazier, the more stupid I was, the happier they were.”

But back to this un-modern outfit they’d been debating all afternoon. “Maybe that is my impression, maybe he wasn’t thinking that,” Miuccia corrected herself. “It wasn’t the piece,” Simons clarified. “It was more the way we wanted to eventually present it. We designed it together, I hope it’s modern in the end. [Cue a gust of laughter from her.] It’s not like Miuccia is designing a part and I’m designing a part, and let’s see how it blends together. We do every piece together. This was more about the context of how to present it. It’s partly dealing with the things we call pieces of women, pieces of history in this collection, so there are things you recognise, but how can we push them forward, bring them in a different way? That’s more what Miuccia means when I said it’s not modern. I love the piece, but I don’t think the way we’re presenting it now is modern.”

It’s a two-way street, incidentally. “I am completely astonished sometimes when I think something is not modern or not right, and Miuccia says one thing and I have to admit she’s right and I’m convinced,” said Simons. But for all the talk of mutual respect and ultimate faith in each other’s judgement, it’s certainly not hard to imagine two such assertive people, used to getting the last word, at loggerheads, at least sometimes. According to Simons, “It’s really good we’re so assertive because it wouldn’t be good if one would just shut up and bow and say ‘Yeah, yeah, let it happen because it’s Prada’. It’s not like that. It needs to be said, it needs to be clear.”

“Some people are surprised we work well together, that he’s not jealous,” Miuccia interjected. “But we decided to work together, so in principle, I’m not jealous, and in principle, he’s not jealous.” And have they come to understand each other’s quirks and flaws? Raf cautiously: “Yeah, I think so.” Miuccia: “I never thought about it, but yes.” And what might they be? Raf, deflecting it with a laugh: “I knew that question was next.”

The invitation for the new presentation is a pair of pyjamas, with the show details embroidered on the breast pocket. In light of the last two years, I’d usually be inclined to interpret this as a comment on WFH, but it hints at something more madcap, with the added encouragement of that advance word about new embellishment in the collection. It suggests a degree of the exuberance Prada has been wary of for a while, a welcome widening of the horizon and a reminder that Prada has always embraced a world of women.

“At the moment, each brand has a title. That is the sexy brand, that is the whatever brand,” Miuccia mused. “But Prada has so many titles that the problem is the complexity of the brand, and we know we’re working in a world that requires some simplification. But we want to escape from it.”

The challenge she and Simons will always face is matching their creative complexity with a huge brand’s need for directness. “We are kind of doing well now, so I think that we found a good balance.” But I got the feeling that the **brand’s current success and ambitious growth plan** won’t ultimately interfere with their shared inclination to push the boundaries harder and harder. “If we succeed or not is another problem,” Miuccia acknowledged. “But we try.”