

NOTES ON THE CULTURE

The Renaissance Is Having a Renaissance

In revisiting early modern European history, artists and designers are finding old ways to address contemporary anxieties.

By Rachel Wetzler

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The Algerian Brazilian director Karim Aïnouz’s new film, “Firebrand,” which debuted at Cannes in May, takes place at a vast country estate where members of the British elite have retreated to avoid a rapidly spreading plague. Inequality has reached new heights, the role of religion in public life is a matter of urgent debate, political factionalism is tearing society apart and Europe is destabilized by war. The year: 1546. Based on the English writer Elizabeth Fremantle’s 2012 novel, “Queen’s Gambit,” the film depicts the last months of Henry VIII’s reign from the vantage of his sixth and final wife, Katherine Parr, portrayed by Alicia Vikander. Playing fast and loose with the historical record, it’s an allegory for our own era in the guise of a period drama.



A look from Matty Bovan's spring 2023 collection. Alberto Pezzali/AP Photo

Aïnouz is hardly alone in finding echoes of the fractious present in the annals of early modern Europe. The Starz series “The Serpent Queen,” renewed for a second season shortly after its premiere last fall, features Samantha Morton as Parr’s contemporary Catherine de’ Medici, an orphaned Florentine who became queen of France in the 16th century by ruthlessly manipulating her enemies.

Catherine was likewise the inspiration for [Maria Grazia Chiuri](#)’s spring 2023 Dior collection, which included dramatic structured skirts suggesting the exaggerated proportions of Renaissance farthingales — stiff hooped petticoats popular among women at court — accessorized with pearl chokers and ornate gilt collars. In fact, nods to the Renaissance and Baroque eras have been ubiquitous on runways for the past few seasons: There were boxy panniers at Loewe’s spring 2023 show and oversize corsets and puffed sleeves at Matty Bovan’s, and Chloé’s Gabriela Hearst identified the 17th-century artist Artemisia Gentileschi as the muse for her fall 2023 collection. The Renaissance tends to be thought of as the wellspring of high culture in the West, giving us humanistic inquiry, vernacular literature and linear perspective, but it was also an era of disaster and destruction, roiled by brutal confrontations over theology and territory and the rise of Machiavellian politics. If ours is another such age, these designers seem to ask, wouldn’t it be more fun, at least, to trade athleisure for jewels and brocade?



Chris Oh's "Nacre" (2023). Courtesy of the artist and Fortnight Institute, New York. Photo: JSP Art Photography



Julien Nguyen's "The Temptation of Christ" (2020). © Julien Nguyen, Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery

Many contemporary artists have followed a similar impulse, explicitly referencing the formal tropes and techniques of early modern art: The New York-based painter Chris Oh meticulously reproduces Renaissance Madonnas and weeping Christs on everything from abalone shells and geodes to encyclopedias, reanimating familiar art-historical touchstones and everyday objects with the mystical quality of relics. At the 2022 Venice Biennale, the Polish Roma artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas transformed the interior of the Polish pavilion into an approximation of the 15th-century Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy, recasting its cryptic frescos as a suite of textile murals depicting scenes from Roma history.

Few artists working today, however, have internalized the lessons of Renaissance composition as completely as the Los Angeles-based painter Julien Nguyen, who first gained acclaim for a pair of panels in the 2017 Whitney Biennial envisioning the front page of The New York Times as a demon-filled polyptych. For his 2021 solo show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, Nguyen interspersed spare, stately portraits of friends and lovers with riffs on biblical subjects like the temptation of Christ. (His current show at the gallery's Los Angeles location includes a self-portrait in the guise of the Renaissance artist Rogier van der Weyden's 1435-40 painting "St. Luke Drawing the Virgin.") Though his debt to Quattrocento painters like Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca is obvious, "it's a question of method, not style," Nguyen told Artforum in 2021. "During this period, painting became a form of philosophical play."

At a moment when the term “creator” is most closely associated with TikTok and Instagram influencers, perhaps it’s no surprise that artists and designers are revisiting the era when the idea of artistic self-consciousness first took root — when artists, in other words, were elevated from journeymen to philosophers. The renewed embrace of over-the-top embellishment likewise implies a backlash against the bland aesthetics of optimization so dominant in design for the last decade, for example in the muted tones and clean lines of digitally native direct-to-consumer brands. Intricate embroidery and theatrical agglomerations of fabric are by nature excessive and inefficient, serving no particular purpose beyond simply being a beautiful, special thing.

“The question I ask myself is why we perceive the fashion industry model as it is now as the end-all, be-all when clothing has existed for thousands of years,” says the New York-based designer Zoe Gustavia Anna Whalen, whose debut collection, for fall 2023, featured deconstructed panniers, corsets and stomachers sewn by hand from deadstock fabrics. Taking cues from preindustrial clothes and approaches to making them, she prioritizes “slowness and craft” — an ethos that she also sees as a recuperation of the “silent work by women” makers throughout history, whose contributions have been dismissed as mere decoration. The Australian artist and baker Jessamie Holmes similarly views the fanciful, historically inspired confections she makes under the name Thy Caketh — for instance, a Spanish Armada-themed cake festooned with ribbons, shells and a miniature portrait of Elizabeth I — as celebrations of unheralded female labor in fields including home baking. Part of her practice has been unlearning the principles of austere refinement imparted during her studies as a graphic designer. “Every time there’s a minimalist movement there will be a maximalist one in response,” she says. “We can only show restraint for so long.”