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THURSDAY STYLES

FASHION DIARY; A Tremor of Rebellion

By **GUY TREBAY (NYT)** 1399 words
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CORRECTION APPENDED

TREND-SPOTTING is a little like the ancient Roman art of divination. You stir the ashes. You consult the entrails of birds. A pattern emerges, and perhaps it is even one that contains unexpected meanings about where the culture is headed. Maybe this seems a nutty assertion to make in regard to fashion, which many still find it easy, if not intellectually obligatory, to dismiss. But in a culture of surface it's a mistake to ignore the potency of any visual language. And it does not take a sibyl to survey the current fashion season and see interesting portents and signs.

Of what? Well, to paraphrase the breathless observers at Condé Nast's glossy Web site, Style.com, a revival of Bold Prints, the arrival of something called the New Innocents, an infusion of the New Sexy, whatever that may be. These gaga-sounding categories are correctly descriptive, since the first five days of Fashion Week were replete with upholstery and wallpaper patterns, First Communion dresses, tense imaginary sophisticates and stylish but crazily anachronistic renditions of a Working Girl -- as imagined by a working woman, the designer Diane Von Furstenberg, whose leisure time these days is spent working out the details for her new 300-foot yacht.

The working girl of Ms. Von Furstenberg's fantasy -- curvy as Veronica Lake in snug Raymond Chandler-era jackets and skirts worn with vertiginous come-hither platform sandals -- was a tiny bit more playful than the grim "Ice Storm" outfits Carolina Herrera propelled onto the runway on robotic Eastern European blondes who often looked as if a different fork in life's road might easily have led them into sexual slavery and not the catwalks.

Critics greeted one show with hosannas, the other with a collective raspberry. But what was striking was how fundamentally alike the collections were in their packaging of sexuality, in how they celebrated feminine passivity both through period attitudes ("This season is about playing the game of seduction without showing too much skin," Ms. Herrera said) and costume.

One good place to check out the number of playful tools for sartorial self-expression in a postfeminist era is the trillion little blogs on MySpace.com. There are some plural ideas about what constitutes femininity these days, and so it was that much more depressing to encounter a wall of conformity, fashion's version of capitulation to what Susan Sontag called our "polite fearful" world in the Bryant Park tents.

But then something great happened, and it started when Holly Golightly strummed a three-chord lick at the Union League Club. Ms. Golightly (her real name) is a garage band cult musician who started her career in 1995 as a founder of an all-girl band called Three Headcoatees and who has since released 12 albums, toured the country eight times and played with the White Stripes and Mudhoney, all the while remaining delightfully semiobscure.

Hers was the music that the British designer Luella Bartley was listening to when she designed her current collection, a group of clothes that referred to British Invasion bands and the kind of clothes that would not have been out of place at the Mudd Club, the 80's underground music mecca. The territory has been covered before in a dozen New Wave revivals.

Ms. Bartley's messed-up party dresses and ironically worn strands of pearls, her cheap looking white sunglasses, Carl Perkins hair styles and pipe-cleaner jeans looked cool, which may have had something to do with a more serious general re-evaluation of that time in the 80's when New York could still credibly lay claim to being the pop culture center of the Western world.

No more convincing proof of this can be found than at the "Downtown Show" at the Grey Art Gallery and the Tisch Library at New York University, parallel shows assembled by the curator Diego Cortez. They barely scratch the surface of that period when Late Warhol Factory New York began blurring into the New York of Eric Mitchell's and Amos Poe's Super-8 movies, of Mudd Club performances by Lydia Lunch and Exene Cervenka, two performers who may not have been the first to smear their lipstick and shred their stockings, but who could have given fashion tutorials on how to skew the prim pretensions of a party dress and give it a kind of raunchy chic.

The mood of Ms. Bartley's presentation turned up again at Alice Roi's show, where the clothes were inspired, the designer said, by Wednesday Addams and Cousin Itt.

"There are a lot of choices there this season," said Linda Fargo, the new fashion director of Bergdorf Goodman. "There's a lot of 1940's, there's a lot of Cristobal Balenciaga influence with the swing coats and balloon shapes." But there is also something compelling, Ms. Fargo added, about the appearance at a variety of shows of women wearing black lips and black nails, motorcycle jackets with Frankenstein zippers, buffalo plaids of the sort that Vivienne Westwood was toying with in what seems a century ago.

"Perhaps when you look at what's happening politically in this country, you can understand why people are looking for something that's less about conformity," Ms. Fargo said.

Her point was borne out by the aural backdrops of so many shows, where in place of tame club remixes and mash-ups, there was an emphasis on early punk, the more playful bands of the 80's like Tom Tom Club and the stylized tristesse of bands like OMD and Depeche Mode. "There's a lot of New Wave again," said Michel Gaubert, the French D.J., who was in New York to play for the Proenza Schouler and Michael Kors shows. "But it's new New Wave."

As usual it was Marc Jacobs who synthesized what this observer likes to think of as a bracing spirit of resistance with a show less about referring to anything so chronologically limiting as a specific decade as to a long bohemian genealogy. Lazy minds drifted from the huge knit caps and skirts worn over trousers to associations with Mr. Jacobs's notorious 1992 grunge collection, which got him fired from Perry Ellis and more or less established him on the fashion map. But the collection was grunge only in the sense that it refused to capitulate to conventional ideas about what renders clothing masculine or feminine and what it means to be sartorially legible as an adult.

If there is anything in the success of "Transamerica," "Brokeback Mountain," a spate of transsexual plot lines on cable television, drag kings in cabaret and movies like the new Miramax production "Kinky Boots," it seems to show that Americans are regaining their interest in cultural flux. This is not to suggest a revolution is going on or, for that matter, that the barricades for such an event are likely to be the celebrity-lined bleachers at a Marc Jacobs show. But even small subversions come as welcome at a cultural moment as static, obedient and politically benumbed as our own.

Correction: February 23, 2006, Thursday The Fashion Diary column on Feb. 9, about echoes of the 80's in current designs, misidentified the curator of "The Downtown Show," an exhibition about the 70's and 80's at New York University. He is Carlo McCormick. (Diego Cortez, also a curator, was not involved.)

Correction: March 2, 2006, Thursday Because of an editing error, a Fashion Diary article on Feb. 9 about grunge and garage-rock influences on fall fashions misstated the name of a band that included the singer Holly Golightly. It is Thee Headcoatees, not Three Headcoatees.

Photos: LUELLA BARTLEY, 2006 -- The designer echoed the torn stockings and smeared lipstick of the Mudd Club. (Photo by Diane Bondareff for The New York Times); LYDIA LUNCH, 1980 (Photo by Corbis); EXENE CERVENKA, 1985 (Photo by Rocky Widner/Retna Ltd.); HOLLY GOLIGHTLY, 1999 (Photo by Johnny Volcano/Retna UK)(pg. G1); LUELLA BARTLEY -- A look, right, that seemed a cool tribute to 80's New York as the capital of the pop culture world. (Photo by Diane Bondarieff for The New York Times); MARC JACOBS -- Bohemian and grunge (in an elegant way) come to mind in the designer's fall styles, left and right. (Photo by G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times); 'ICE STORM' SUBURBAN -- Punk didn't enter the shows of Carolina Herrera (above) and Diane Von Furstenberg (above right). (Photo by G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times); (Photo by Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times); (Photo by Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times); ALICE ROI -- The designer said her clothes were inspired by Wednesday Addams. (Photo by Rahav Segev for The New York Times); IN THE SPIRIT -- Linda Fargo, the new fashion director at Bergdorf Goodman. The chains on her boots bear noting.; WARHOL ERA -- A book on the 80's downtown art scene published in association with two shows. (Photographs by Greg Kessler for The New York Times)(pg. G7)