
Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons : Japanese fashion visionary

If you are into design, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons will ring a couple of bells as she has been heralded as one of the most influential luminaries in her field. Ever since she debuted in Paris in 1981, she has succeeded in blurring the divide between art and fashion and transformed predominant notions of beauty, identity, and the body.

Her fashions not only stand apart from the progenitor of clothing but also resist and actively defy labelling and clichés. Her work is centered on the concept behind the idea of the “in-between”, which according to her approach is situated between space and emptiness. NYC’s MET Costume Institute’s spring 2017 exhibition examined the work of fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, who is not unknown for being an agent provocateur challenging the status quo and what is considered to be good practice by the mainstream.

The show that was based on the theme of “in-between-ness” featured around one hundred and fifty exhibits of the womenswear Rei Kawakubo and Comme des Garçons have become known for, not only stopping at recent collections but dating back to the 1980s to her most recent collections. The galleries illustrated the designer’s endeavours in the space between boundaries, which are infused with a gusto for revolution. Objects were organized into the nine core concepts behind her aestheticism:

- Absence/Presence
- Design/Not Design
- Fashion/Anti-Fashion
- Model/Multiple
- Then/Now
- High/Low
- Self/Other
- Object/Subject
- Clothes/Not Clothes

What Kawakubo accomplishes, is tearing down what is perceived to separate the aforementioned dualisms and exposing those barriers for what they are: Artificial and arbitrary. As one who is remotely familiar with Kawakubo’s oeuvre, the show was challenging, with the astonishing garments, installation design and catalog forming an unrivaled juggernaut breaking down barriers between art and fashion, that is in book form articulated by Andrew Bolton and photography by Nicholas Alan Cope, Inez & Vinoodh, Katerina Jebb, Kazumi Kurigami, Ari Marcopoulos, Craig McDean, Brigitte Niedermair, Paolo Roversi, and Collier Schorr. This catalogue is meant to accompany The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute exhibition, which was centered around Kawakubo’s definition of fashion: “What I’ve only ever been interested in are clothes that one has never seen before, that are completely new, and how in what way they can be expressed. Is that called fashion? I don’t know the answer.” - Rei Kawakubo. This lavishly illustrated publication weaves an illuminating narrative around Kawakubo’s experiments in oppositions and the spaces between boundaries. Kawakubo regards her fashions and their environments as a Gesamtkunstwerk, i.e. a “total work of art.”

This synthesis of the exhibition and this book is therefore designed as a complete expression of the Comme des Garçons “universe.” It is intended to be a holistic, immersive experience, facilitating a personal engagement with Kawakubo’s emissions. Brilliant new photographs of more than 120 examples of Kawakubo’s womenswear for Comme des Garçons accompanied by Kawakubo’s commentary on her designs and process reveal her conceptual and challenging aesthetic as rarely done before.

A chronology of Kawakubo’s career provides additional context, and an insightful conversation with the author offers a fascinating glimpse into the mind of this Japanese fashion visionary. The book includes a bonus foldout poster featuring 2 Dimensions, autumn/winter 2012–13 and Invisible Clothes, spring/summer 2017. A book that is minimal, arresting, and impossibly chic eye candy photography not just for hardcore fashion aficionados but one that can be appreciated by many artistic disciplinarians and one that gives insight into Kawakubo’s process and thinking.

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