

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Raf Simons shuttered eponymous label as concerns grow over luxury's breakneck pace

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How sustainable is the speed of fashion and, moreover, how long can creatives keep up? Image credit: Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images

By AMIRAH KEATON

Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons' shuttered label signals trouble for fashion at large, in more ways than one.

Following a 27-year run, the co-creative director of Italian fashion house Prada announced plans to cease operations on his own ready-to-wear line last week. The designer's decision, however, is not an anomaly the frequent nature of fashion's creative director shuffle may signal a correlation between the industry's breakneck pace and the capacity of its most influential innovators.

"Raf has always been focused on only creating new collections when he felt that he had something to say," said Kimmie Smith, cofounder and creative director of *Athleisure Mag*, New York.

"Sustainability is not just about ethically sourcing your line and looking at ways that you utilize fabrics so that you're reducing waste; its also about whether you need to contribute 'x' amount of products each year for the sake of carrying a line," she said. "This is something that he has always believed in and to see that regardless of the successes that he has had in his 27 years, he felt the need to move on and to focus his creativity at Prada or other projects."

Stepping back

News of the closure of Mr. Simons' namesake label has sparked a new wave of conversations regarding sustainability and the speed of fashion.

The success of said effort is a feat all its own, considering just how unique Mr. Simons' origins are to begin with.

Born to working class parents, the Belgian designer maintained an appreciation for the arts, no matter the medium, from a young age.

Trained in industrial design with a focus on furniture, the creative eventually made his way into fashion. Touched by the Antwerp Six's influence, Mr. Simons took inspiration from anti-fashion visionaries like Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester.

This group, in turn, inspired a new generation of designers, bold in their own right, such as Martin Margiela, Helmut Lang and Rick Owens, to name a few.

A central figure in fashion history, Mr. Simons drove late 1990s and early 2000s dressmaking, his utilitarian values held close when it came to his design approach, before transcending into the upper echelon of luxury, filling its top ranks with roles at the likes of Jil Sander, Christian Dior and Calvin Klein.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Raf Simons Official (@rafsimons)

For some time now, everything that the designer has touched has turned to gold from couture to streetwear, to reaching new heights with a self-titled label part of the reason why his sartorial "resignation" of sorts comes with relative shock to the surrounding community.

In the aftermath of Mr. Simons' highly publicized revelation, fashion has reeled at the thought of his absence. Before the dust had time to settle, news of Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele's departure would soon follow ([see story](#)), further illuminating the connection between talent turnover and the working conditions imbued onto creatives.

"I think that there is always a push-and-pull relationship between corporatized fashion's need to take designers who have their own label and making space for them in their lines," Ms. Smith said.

"There is something about the cache of being able to take a heritage brand with their aesthetic and to showcase it in new ways and to be able to have followers of that creative director to see the iconic brand in a new light," she said. "But there is also the issue that that relationship may not last for a long period of time and the possibility of burnout, lack of interest, etc., may make the relationship one that is not able to move forward."

"It is important to brands to connect with those that they have brought in to make sure that everyone is on the same page and that the mutual visions and expectations make sense for both."

Root cause

An industry increasingly obsessed with the new and now must consider the implications of this level of demand, and its impact on the individual.

Though seemingly sudden, the abrupt nature of this news is misleading as, truthfully, the Belgian designer has been sounding the

alarm for some time.

Listen closely to his remarks regarding the subject of sustainability and output over the years and one can see how Mr. Simons' announcement stands out in the era of micro-trends, multitudinous seasons and fast fashion cycles.

The pressure to perform, and to convert social media buzz, celebrity hype and media moments to strong earnings figures, has never been greater. Opting out may be the only path towards protection, at the speed that fashion currently moves.

As fashion moves further into the corporate space, it also becomes that much more susceptible to losing touch with its originating concepts, burning creative talent out in the process.

Perhaps Mr. Simons is moving on for reasons unbeknownst to the public at this point, as reports regarding Miuccia Prada's rumored exit make the rounds. If enacted and as it stands, the gesture would essentially render her partner to Prada's creative helm.

"It definitely feels that with Miuccia Prada stepping down, that Raf would be at the helm of the label," Ms. Smith said.

The brand itself is one of the industry's only family-operated entities left standing.

"Prada is in a unique position as the sole familial/independent leader in the industry that remains," Ms. Smith said.

"Corporatized fashion is always going to be part of the industry with more indie brands being purchased," she said. "They dictate the way that we go about accessing fashion and purchasing it."

"It is essential that they do check in on what their customers and other consumers are saying so that they can see whether the way assortments are offered in terms of shopping is a model that need to be reassessed as we all approach buying in various ways."

Of course, the potential for an alternate succession plan always stands, but given the success of Mr. Simons' and Ms. Prada's vision over the past few years, the possibility does not strike as unreasonable.

Either way, Mr. Simons has sent sustainability shockwaves through the system, as far as bandwidth is concerned.

"I think that especially after the pandemic, many people have looked to reevaluate how [much] they give of themselves to their work and how they want to optimize their lives," Ms. Smith said.

"I'm sure that this is something that we will continue to see as we move forward."