

Hardcore Romance

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'You thought I was too dark until I stretched into a galaxy' – Valentino X Undercover, fall 2019 via valentino.com

It is often said, by bachelors most likely, that true love only lasts three years – yet the idea of romance, the quest for it, the wooing and worshipping of lovers, has occupied humans and our imagination ever since we first set foot on this planet where roses grow. The plight and rapture of love links us to our ancestors as it will to posterity. Still the idea we have of the romance we want, the way we picture what love should feel like and what to expect when we long for it, mutates over the course of centuries of romantic prose. In the contemporary world, what romance looks like is changing yet again. A version of it we'd been satisfied with

for a while now no longer fits the times – it no longer fits the women, that is, for mostly women they are, who toward romance are drawn at the same time as they have grown sceptical of how it's often portrayed, in films and books alike, through rose-tinted glasses. This is not the same as saying, as some are wont to do whenever new dating habits take root, that romance is dead. It just doesn't equate anymore to naiveté: the fabled figure of the hopeless romantic, which is but a kinder way to call the helpless romantic, can't be identified nor sympathised with by the woke generation. That's it: guilelessness has lost its appeal in love as much as in everything else. And as much as its tenderness is needed in a world where certainties about the future are few and loneliness afflicts the younger the most, the violence of falling in love and the vulnerability on one's part that the process requires must be acknowledged too. Slowly but surely, literature and the movies, the culture industries at large, begin to let go of sugar-coated love stories and cookie-cutter romantic heroines and make space instead for a more complex, conflicted or darker idea of romance – and for post-postmodern women in love.

This is happening in fashion as well, faster perhaps than elsewhere. Along with the hopeless romantic as a character, so the virginal white dress she wore has lost its appeal too. But fashion continues to exist to sell us romance or the prospect of it – this is truly, what fashion is for – and in the wardrobe as much as anywhere else, and all the more there when everywhere else it's missing, the pursuit of romance remains a necessary incentive for our purchases. What recent collections have ushered in therefore, is still a take on the romantic fantasy – but of a palpably different kind: a tougher and meaner, thorny for all its roses romance of sorts. As it's often the case among high fashion brands, it's Prada who leads the trend. Titled *Anatomy of Romance*, the brand's fall 2019 collection marries the sartorial tropes of traditional romance – blown-up prints of roses and bouquet-like appliqués, a profuse use of lace, daisies as earrings and glittery pumps – with the bravery and danger always symbolised by military-inspired outer- and footwear. On closer inspection those bouquets seem wilted, and the illustrations of a red rose and a heart split in two are both detailed with loose screws and thunderbolts. These are the work of artist Jeanne Detallante, and so is the collection's standout print, from which comes the biggest cue for the twisted romance Miuccia Prada had in mind for the coming winter: a portrait of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster and his bride with her trademark conical hairdo.

There's also another print of lovers and red roses that we'll come to remember this season by. Designed in collaboration with Jun Takahashi – whose own fall 2019 collection for Undercover also references a horror movie, Luca Guadagnino's recent remake of Dario Argento's *Suspiria* – the motif features prominently across Valentino's ready-to-wear. It depicts a neoclassical statue of a kiss shrouded in florescence, butterflies and a snake, caught in the moment when the white marble that the couple's bodies are made of, magically turns into the deep blue sky, presumably for the monumental force of their love. Altogether, as straightforwardly romantic as an image can get. Yet the models at Valentino's show this season walked beneath a glowing billboard poem by Scottish artist Robert Montgomery, reminding the audience that *'the people you love*

become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive'. Extremely romantic yes, but also somewhat sombre, somewhat sinister: such is the trend around romance this season. Contemporary romance is as layered as the layers of tulle of a cerulean blue dress in between which another short poem is found – *'leave your door open for me / I might sleepwalk into your dreams'*. It is as wise, too, as the contemporary women who will wear these clothes.

Different designers according to their different sensibilities offer different interpretations of this season's darkened, multifaceted romantic theme, some more at home with it than others. Unsurprisingly, Sarah Burton's work for Alexander McQueen, a brand that's always revelled in darkly romantic narratives, presents us with several examples at once. In the same show, there's a black leather dress with laser-cut rosebuds worn with a diamond necklace-cum-choker, a creamy, hyper-romantic knit skirt with rows of mohair ruffles paired with a studded biker jacket, and Licett Morillo wearing a black taffeta dress puffed up, tucked in and wrapped around her body to resemble the petals of a woman-sized inky rose – perhaps the look that more than any other can claim to be hardcore romance at its purest. But if not as impressive more unexpected, and a testament to the persuasiveness of the trend, is that young and fun designers like Ryan Lo, who's made his signature out of a penchant for the resolutely saccharine, have also turned this season toward darker shores. Lo's fall 2019 show opened on an unusually solemn note, a monochrome couple pushing a black pram filled with black roses, him in military tailoring, her in a bearskin hat and stilettos. A sequence of five more all-black looks followed – one could call the procession funereal, were it not for the milk and pink ensembles of marabou feathers and tulle that came right after, more familiar to Lo's fans, to sweeten the palate and close the show.

Half of what hardcore romance as a fashion trend is all about is a question of styling. Keep the virginal white dress of the hopeless romantic but wear it with flat, black, lace-up combat boots such as those seen at Prada and Alexander McQueen, wear the biker jacket over your ruffles. The other half is in the choice of materials: lace, leather, and latex are the defining textures of the fall 2019 season. Rubber in particular, is at its most novel when associated with the stereotypically romantic. At Richard Quinn, black latex turtleneck bodysuits reaching down to cover both fingers and toes are worn beneath sequined floral dresses – the rose featuring prominently among the other flowers – with padded shoulders and tulle trains, whose over-the-top romanticism could have come across as anachronistic without them. At Christopher Kane meanwhile, a collection sweet with flounced cocktail dresses in lace and blush satin is deliberately soured with latex inserts fastened with snap buttons, latex overcoats, and tongue-in-cheek slogans like *'rubberist'* – a specifically sexual term for rubber or rubberwear enthusiasts to identify themselves and one another with. But the exploration of female eroticism often leads to its best results, no pun intended, when at the hands of a female designer, such as it was this season in Simone Rocha's too. Her full-skirted frows of flushed tulle have over the past few years become something of a uniform for the contemporary romantic woman. But her fall 2019

collection, inspired by work of Louise Bourgeois – the late artist best known for her textile sculptures of soft, woven bodies and phallic forms, for giant spiders and pink and red paintings of cobwebs, as in tune with Rocha’s aesthetic as it is with the hardcore romantic trend as a whole – had within it the traces of a sexual awakening: drop-shoulders bras worn on top of dresses or visible beneath sheer layers, twin half-circle of ruby beads framing the breasts almost as decorative underwire. There was something bolder to Rocha’s dresses this season which complimented their consummate loveliness, and it wouldn’t be amiss to ascribe this to the influence of the new ideas around romance, and new romantic ideals, gaining momentum now.

It is tempting to read into all this more than perhaps one should – a response to the apathy and solitude of the digital age, to ever more frequent breaches of privacy and trust, to the resurgence of feminism as a cultural force. But dark romance as a trend in fashion and the arts at large is not altogether unheard of, and like all trends will wane before it reappears. What’s rather unique about its current iteration though, is that it now seems that the promise of romance this industry has long shrouded itself with has ceased to be the message to become the medium instead. The promise of romances to come, remains at the core of shopping as therapy. But there’s an edge to it now, something fortifying in between the petals. The sweetness of fashion becomes the selling point to circulate more complicated narratives, frightful, sexy and melancholic – at times at once.