

Kerby Jean-Raymond

by Silvia Bombardini



'please speak only to my attorney' Kerby Jean-Raymond.

Fashion resolves to be noble rather than precious, and the flaunting of spending power gives way to that of ideals. A young designer who's been leading the way for some time now is Pyer Moss' Kerby Jean-Raymond, whose outspoken collections pile up to remind us and denounce, season by season, the unresolved issues of contemporary American society – racism, violence, inequality. Up until recently though, speaking up wasn't such a simple feat: it doesn't seem like it now, with such a long way still to go, but the industry has made huge leaps in just a year or two. Back when Jean-Raymond unveiled his SS16 collection in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, taking in police brutality and mass incarceration, critical favour came alongside financial setbacks – retailers pulled their orders as his message was deemed too 'risky'. Still, he didn't pull his punches. The next season Pyer Moss was back with a show to spotlight depression and mental anguish, a tribute to Black Lives Matter activist MarShawn McCarrel, who committed suicide a few weeks prior. Below, Jean-Raymond tells me about the meaning of symbols and that of success, of humbling experiences and conscious consumers. Of SS17, crafted from the looks of noted movie villains but inspired by both Bernie Madoff and Bernie Sanders – the two

extremes of capitalism, greed vs the equal distribution of wealth. Obvious should be by now whose side he sticks to.

Silvia Bombardini: The concept of activism isn't new – and yet as the Doomsday Clock moves 30 seconds closer to midnight, it's perhaps more urgent now than it ever was before. But it's also more widespread, thanks to the internet and a new generation of clicktivists. Where once there were anarchists we now have protesters, and even beauty, as a value, takes a back seat now to a powerful message. This could lead to a very different fashion industry from the one we're used to – what responsibilities, in your opinion, does a designer have in this respect?

Kerby Jean-Raymond: It's a scary time for designers who had no intent of ever being political or humanitarian at all. The consumer is more conscious now of fair practices as it pertains to labour, is researching a brand's beliefs and philanthropy before purchasing goods, is less inclined to spend frivolously and is actively looking for emerging talent to support, whose personal values align with their own beliefs.

There will always be the consumer that buys into trend, but the new loyalists are looking deeper than what the coolest blogger is wearing and that poses an interesting problem and opportunity for many fashion brands. The designer has a responsibility to their bottom line, but how sustainable will your business be if you ignore the new values-based spending patterns and subsequently, the times that we're in?

S. B.: A TV series premiered on Netflix a few months ago – the protagonist, Luke Cage, is a black and bulletproof superhero. He wears a hoodie that becomes riddled with holes as the bad guys shoot him, and all the people in the neighbourhood begin to wear holey hoodies to show their support. Last year you were invited by MoMA to discuss the hoodie together with Black Lives Matter's DeRay McKesson, who described it as a piece of *worn resistance*. But just like clothing can raise awareness, it can also become fashionable – there's always a risk of commodification. What do you think is the value of the hoodie as a symbol, today?

K. J-R.: Luke Cage is such a phenomenal show. It ties in so many elements of modern black culture and black history so well. I remember that scene you're talking about, it was great because the appropriation came from a place of support. So often now, we see appropriation without any consideration of origin. You have large companies that steal, mimic, and repurpose styles that were worn by disenfranchised people with no regard or credit given to said people. The hoodie is the perfect example of how a piece of clothing can be used to make a white frat boy cool in his circle and at the same time, get a black teenager killed. The hoodie shouldn't have stood for much more than a comfortable piece of clothing but unfortunately, it represents a sort of twisted double standard now, and martyrdom.

S. B.: Your SS17 collection, *Bernie vs. Bernie*, focuses on power, privilege, and corporate greed. Ahead of the show, a spoken-word poem by Cyrus Aaron asked “*what is the meaning of success if your people can’t afford you?*”. In 2015, you made Forbes’ *30 Under 30: Art & Style* list – what is the meaning of success to you, today? And how do the themes of the season relate to your own experience?

K. J-R.: SS17 was prophetic. It was two months before the election and I knew Trump was going to win. I was surprised that everyone was surprised. Our obsession with fame, reality television, money and stupidity let Trump skate right in. And let’s not forget the lack of empathy when it comes to racism, sexism and xenophobia by privileged Americans.

Trump was going to win because the meaning of success to so many people in this country is convoluted. People associate success with gold fixtures, money and an ostentatious posture. I believe that success is a level of comfort and happiness that can only be measured by the individual. For everyone, its tailored. For me, success is the ability to help others at will, to travel at will, to create some work or legacy that outlives me and the ability to relax at will.

S. B.: You’ve mentioned among your references for that collection Patrick Bateman and Gordon Gekko, fictional characters driven by greed as much as various public figures today, whose morals seem just as dubious. What elements did you borrow from their closets, and how did you proceed to update them to suit your very different ideals?

K. J-R.: I loved the shoulder pads and double-breasted sport coats more than anything. The pastels were so ironic. These were some of the most morally corrupt characters wearing colours typically synonymous with Easter.

S. B.: I’ve heard you skipped Art Basel Miami in December to visit the Standing Rock reservation and bring the protesters supplies. Will you tell me about your experience there, what did you learn on site, and how the determination of those Native American tribes could perhaps inspire the rest of the world, now desperately in need of new role models?

K. J-R.: I went there to help demonstrators who were being blasted with water cannons and sleeping in below zero degree temperatures by providing thermal gear. On our first night there a horse trampled some tents around me, imagine being woken up to minus three degree weather at four am. In the mornings, at six am, we had group prayer followed by a walk to the water, where we would deposit tobacco into the water, as an offering. One by one we would go down to the water and it was icy so we all needed help, we formed a human railing down the mountain. People would line up and help everyone down. It was over 2000 people. We always let the elders go down first, then the women, then the men. There was such intense silence at times, 2000

people, completely silent as the Tribe Elders spoke. The level of respect we all had for one another was fascinating.

I learned there that I personally needed to focus more on family. There's a difference between family and relatives, and I needed to focus on family. I learned that I needed to understand the environmental ramifications of mass consumption. I learned that the most important thing we leave behind when we go is memories and not stuff.

This prompted me to create the series of collections *Stories About My Parents* to mend fences with my father and show him that I'm grateful. The trip also prompted me to think of even more ways to reduce our footprint on the environment going forward.