



KID AIN'T CRAZY; HE'S A PROPHET

by Silvia Bombardini

Spring 2014 marked ten radiant seasons of Lulu Kennedy's Fashion East's Menswear Installations, and we were lured there, as if further encouragement was needed, by the sweetest, cockiest invitation seen in a long time: a pumpkin orange background with a tinfoil crown, and a simple prompt: "rule #1: SAY YES." It was designed, as many cool things these days tend to be, by multitasker Tom Ryling, whose latest fashion story was also on display. Well, when I say on display... Models were perched on a tentative island of taped cardboard boxes, against a huge, site-specific collage that had something of Kurt Schwitters about it and whispered of Tom's fine art studies at Goldsmith's. Hastily written upon it, "a little mantra," "a sort of non-formalized haiku": *KID AIN'T CRAZY; HE'S A PROPHET* was the title of the show.

"Childhood's massively important to all of us and through my work I find myself replaying events and visuals and moments from these years," the London-raised designer explained. "There's something so powerful about these memories." The collection was thus inspired by those windswept holidays of the nineties spent somewhere along the British coastline; and then later the warmer, bustling shores of North Africa, traditionally known to seduce creative hearts with their siren songs, ever since Delacroix and Paul Klee went there. "I really am enamored with that part of the world," Tom confirms. "I remember reading some Burroughs when I was a teenager and thinking this place sounded just so fantastically exciting so I hot-footed it over as soon as I could. It's a part of the world that invites discovery and a certain amount of introspection, too." Like a textured and layered chronicle of Tom's own boyhood and adolescence, with a salty nautical taste and the familiar, intimate charm of a shared keepsake, the collection recalls those times when denim was a given, bleached by breeze and sand and the lone ray of a hesitant sun, to then move on towards the tactile, exotic appeal of sackcloth, a hint of futurist PVC. When I ask about his favorite piece, Tom chooses a pair of hand-painted shorts. "They remind me of painting bedrooms in the summer," he says.

Stylist, illustrator, film director, as well as a writer with a series of short stories to be published soon ("let's see if I'm brave enough!"), Tom builds his narratives on a softer space, gracefully "juggling mediums and disciplines." As for his literary influences, he ruefully admits to be part of Bukowski's hardcore fan base and quotes Jean Genet as his ideal client. I suggest he should pick and restage one of his plays. "You've just described one of my dream projects!" he exclaims. "I'd love it! *The Maids* is ace but actually, come to think of it – aren't we due a new Genet biopic? Can I produce that show? Ha-ha. Can you imagine? A play about sex and theft and literature and wine. Would be fantastic." I can, and I have no doubts.

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