

IF YOU'VE GOT A TASTE FOR TERROR, TAKE HYEIN SEO TO THE PROM.

“The children are wandering through the valley of sin these days,” said worried Mrs White, Carrie’s mom, in Brian de Palma’s 1976 classic horror tale. Now, four rough decades later, she’s still right. From the internet to the streets in a glowing spell, wearing ghostly coats, chokers, and furry stoles, as fierce and fearless as Wednesday Adams and just barely this side of puberty. It’s a student from Antwerp (one of Walter van Beirendonck’s) who is dressing them these days — with Rihanna and G-Dragon already bewitched — and this is her story. Like those on George A. Romero’s zombie apocalypse, “reports, incredible as they may seem, are [still] not the results of mass hysteria.”

by Silvia Bombardini

Silvia Bombardini: No more than a couple of seasons old, and already VFiles’ so-called “user-generated fashion show” is a proper Day-Glo highlight of New York Fashion Week, and one of the boldest and brightest at that. Could you tell me a bit about your experience with them, from setting up your profile on the VFiles website to your very own, thrilling runway debut?

Hyein Seo: After he saw some of my work on the internet, Solomon, the VFiles editor, sent me a message inviting me to join the VFiles Made Fashion 2, which actually I’d never heard of before here in Belgium. So I asked all my American friends what VFiles was like, and everybody said, “VFiles is super cool!” Then I just simply applied, if only because I wanted to visit New York. I didn’t expect this VFiles and the show to have such power and influence. It still feels surreal with all the things that have happened and are coming to me now.

SB: The tender age of VFiles might just about mirror its values: a creature of the internet itself, its wildly democratic, horizontal approach means they’ll go pick their talents directly from school and across the globe. It has gained an ever younger, loving audience, all the more excited by such direction. Do you think it’s true then, that the new fashion capital is the web?

HS: I think I am a good example of someone who experiences the power of the web and new media in a very short time. I was just a student from Antwerp a few months back and now many people treat me like a fully fledged designer and

give me credit for what I make. All this happened just a few days after NYFW.

I feel that VFiles has got a whole new shopping experience to offer. Having more access to those young groups of people who are up for new fashion means a lot to me as a young designer starting up. But I am also afraid that people won’t care anymore once the web is flooded with new stuff. Nevertheless, the web will never stop growing, gaining power every day.

SB: Looking that way from across the pond, it would indeed seem that the times are changing, and the NYFW landscape with it. But more likely perhaps, it is the very idea of street style that is mutating: what once was a *promenade*, is heading now towards more and more riotous shores. Blame it on politics or social awareness, but today’s street culture is guerrilla-style, and fashion worldwide is responding to it. With the street being a major theme in your work too, what kind of subcultures did you look at in particular?

HS: My boyfriend who came to study with me in Antwerp was a huge influence. What he sees and listens to sort of got me into the whole street culture idea and that also led me to design my BA collection inspired by this. I wanted something that was raw. I think there are so many different scenes in street culture but mostly I was inspired by the retro look brought back today by kids in the year 2014. As a student, I also wanted to experiment and explore different genres. My BA collection was made through this approach, but now that this collection has made

its way to NYFW with such great feedback I feel responsible for my future work.

SB: But maybe it’s because of this approach that “Fear Eats The Soul” appears so fresh, and charmingly wearable. Coming indeed from a degree at Antwerp’s Royal Academy, a place we know and love for its unabashedly avant-garde stance, it’s nonetheless very welcome news. I know it’s only your BA graduate collection, but following such widespread success, do you have any plans for production yet?

HS: I know very well that my style is not the school’s favorite. I admire those graduates who still carve their experimental world out of the fashion business and trends, but at the same time I saw many of them who got frustrated and stopped working after a few years of suffering. Maybe because I noticed this sadness behind fashion, my goal as designer is now to become rather commercial and wearable, even if I’m in one of the most avant-garde schools in the world. Time has changed and so have fashion trends, we all see how recent fashion is rather standing on the safe side, but I think it’s the role of the designer to follow those changes and the flow of the world too. We can see how Raf Simons, a symbol of subculture, absolves high fashion so well now. I want to become a designer who creates and sells the cloth, which clearly is different from an artist.

The reason why I took the VFiles offer is also because it was an opportunity to sell my stuff after the show, which you rarely get the chance to do as a student. Putting my label on the pieces

before the show was a little dream come true, but as it's becoming rather big now, hopefully you'll be able to see my collection in various selected shops all over the world, not only through VFiles. Production is in progress now.

SB: "Fear Eats The Soul" was certainly much praised in London as well in February, and among some 150 participants from all around the world, it won you, with Korea, the International Fashion Showcase Emerging Talent Award for 2014. Well done on that! It must have been brilliant. Would you tell me a bit about that moment too? Also, in such a cosmopolitan environment, and between Seoul and Antwerp, London and New York, do you find that people across cultures react any differently to your work?

HS: First of all about the IFS exhibition, it was interesting how I got to communicate with all the experts on how to set up the exhibition, which was full of new ideas and something different from a runway show but very exciting too.

And I can say, being awarded the Best Designer prize for 2014 is something I never expected. Because of NYFW I couldn't even be present on the day the winner was announced, and when I heard the news I was happy but worried because there are so many good things happening to me recently, I thought that I might just be spending all of my luck at once. It still feels very surreal. And the feedback is very positive and warm from all over the world, though maybe it's because I'm still a student and being a student is actually a great excuse. But this status will last only a few more months, which makes me a bit frightened to step into the real world.

SB: Oh, I'm sure you'll do wonderfully. But let's talk a bit about this collection now. I've read you were inspired by quaint horror heroines, those beautiful rich women with minks and pearls who unfailingly ended up as victims. That sounds like a possibly accidental joke on the changing times of fashion and its new targets that we were just talking about. Anyway, I wonder, is there a specific scream queen of days gone by that you would call your muse?

HS: The so-called muse of my collection is a rather round character who comes from my imagination. At the very beginning of my work, I always picture a story with certain characteristic women in it, and this time they were horror film heroines, who actually aren't passive and weak, but strong with their own style and a cool attitude, enjoying a bloody party.

SB: Browsing through your mood board, I am pleased to notice you've seen Dario Argento's *Suspria*. A gem of Italian horror cinema from the seventies, it's also one of the latest feature films to make use of imbibition Technicolor prints, which gives it that irresistible, red-tinged, glossy and gory sexiness it still has today. But what is it about *Suspria* that fascinates you the most? Do you have a favorite scene, quote, or outfit from the movie?

HS: Actually I wasn't a fan of horror cinema — creepy third-rate films from Hollywood or Japan, that's all it was in my memory until I watched

Dario's. While I was researching for my collection, I saw this film by chance and got so fascinated by his special and colorful horror world. It seems so cool and artistic with its unique atmosphere, even if it looks a bit funny because of that old film effect, I like that in a way too. And above all, the best soundtrack with Goblin! It wasn't a particular scene or quote that inspired me, but the whole atmosphere just surprised me with its freshness, so I wanted to express that through my collection, the cool and artistic atmosphere of this film. I hope I reached the goal in some way.

SB: I see posters from Brian de Palma's *Carrie*, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*... while your collection is anything but nostalgic, you seem indeed to have a taste for old-fashioned frights, that "old film effect" you mention, and I like that. What is it in your opinion that makes modern horror just that little bit boring? Is it the digital format, a matter of scripts or performances maybe? *Carrie*'s remake was released last year and that bothers me somehow.

HS: Modern horror cinema has got everything in one neat package, so I get it. But there's something missing that unnerves me. The problem with modern horror films is that they are all too predictable in their very clean and highly defined way. I like those old horror films because every cut, every image has creepy, yet beautiful settings.

SB: Humor certainly is an endearing value too, of those unintentionally acquired by a seasoned horror feature. It also seems to matter a lot to you, if those drippy, cartoonish FEAR patches and furry lopsided grins are anything to go by. Fashion traditionally errs by taking itself too seriously, but it's true that here and there certain designers know how to have fun. How important are these things to you, humor, spontaneity, and lightness?

HS: Adding a humorous code to horror films came to be because I was into the whole Danse Macabre idea of finding humor in fear at the beginning of the collection. I made lots of drawings out of my own imagination, for example like a horror heroine dancing with a ghost, yet not to old Saint-Saëns's music but mostly cool hip-hop. In this way I wanted to make this horror girl contemporary through humor — that was my goal in this collection, as well as a matter of how I enjoy working. I cannot work at all if I can't enjoy it — humor is very important not only in fashion but in our lives, isn't it?

By the way, making FEAR into necklaces and headbands was actually an idea that stylist Anna Trevelyan had after seeing some extra badges of mine. At first I was doubtful, thinking maybe it would become too literal and pop, but somehow it strongly impressed the audience instead and turned into a strong statement of my collection. It's all about the power of styling too.

SB: The massive faux-fur FEAR stole immediately became another statement piece from your collection, casually draped all over Rihanna at the Comme des Garçons show this past Paris Fashion Week. She looked glorious and I guess it must have attracted a lot of attention to you and your

work. How did this happen exactly, how did she approach you?

HS: Melitta Baumeister, who made the jacket for that Rihanna look, and I were contacted by Rihanna's stylist Mel Ottenberg, who said she wanted to use our silhouettes for Paris Fashion Week. Not only I but the whole VFiles team got super excited after the press came out. And so did thousands of new Instagram followers. I strongly felt the power of media and celebrity in this. Isn't it true that things are always sold out after she wears them? I just need to get the line sheet ready a.s.a.p.

SB: G-Dragon also recently wore one of your coats in his *Crooked* video, proof that this really isn't the kind of womenswear that is bothered by gender boundaries, and I bet the boys reading here will be very pleased to hear that. But if you yourself were to pick just one, what is your very own favorite piece in the "Fear Eats The Soul" collection?

HS: Above all, I would also choose the black ghost fur coat that G-Dragon picked out. Since his music video came out I've been getting more and more attention. It's a private matter, but my teacher Walter van Beirendonck also really liked the coat and after the school show I custom-made one for him and presented it as gift to him with pleasure.

And it would be the best compliment to my work if boys said they would want to wear my collection. I actually do like to wear menswear myself, like an oversized coat and MA-1 type stuff. Too much feminine and lovely is not my world. I wish I could keep designing womenswear that men would actually want as well.

SB: Then what comes next for you Hyein? What are you currently working on? What are your hopes, dreams, or wishes for the months ahead?

HS: I hope I can finish this Master's collection, which will have to be done within three months. Because of all that has happened, I somehow feel the pressure not to disappoint those who are expecting better work than the last time from me. It's a bitter process for now, but I hope it will become sweet afterwards.



photo Che Soonhyun