

# On Fashion as Activism

by Silvia Bombardini

It is claimed that the fashion system as we know it is in danger: weakened by an ever-faster pace, social media, the bitter taste of elitism in the wake of economic decline. But before we start mourning, is this really for the worse? The current fashion system is laced with prejudice, from its labels to its castings, as far removed from politics and social consciousness as floral prints will take you. It is, as Pyer Moss's designer Kerby Jean-Raymond puts it, "a rich white person's game." But times are a-changing: a new wave of designers are finding their voice, and the world, for once, is listening. Jean-Raymond believes that their power, and responsibility, extends far beyond fashion: that they should aim higher, speak louder, use their influence to put forth messages of equality rather than trends. For SS16, Pyer Moss followed its menswear show with an art installation titled *Ota, Meet Saartjie*, in memory of Saartjie Baartman and Ota Benga, a Khoikhoi woman and Congolese man who were exhibited, respectively, in London in 1810 and at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. It featured live painting on clothes by graffiti artist Gregory Siff, and the screening of a documentary that would bring attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. Here, Jean-Raymond tells us more about Pyer Moss, finding out what matters, his friendships with Usher and Erykah Badu, and what we might expect from him next.

**Silvia Bombardini:** Let's start at the beginning — I read somewhere that you wanted to be a sneaker designer as a kid, and were inspired by watching your mum making dresses out of drapes. Shortly after, you were practicing with baby rompers at school, then bedding and pajamas under Kay Unger's wing. You launched your own T-shirt line as a teenager, *Mary's Jungle*, that was later called *Montega's Fury*. Was starting Pyer Moss something you always had in mind, and why was 2013 the best time?

**Kerby Jean-Raymond:** I always knew I wanted to start my own brand and, in hindsight, 2013 really was the right time. A new generation of designers of varied backgrounds and ages were coming in and started getting international attention all at once. I kind of snuck in through the side door. Stella Jean, Public School, Hood By Air, En Noir, Harbison, Telfar, Fear of God, Agi & Sam, and Off-White were starting to pick up traction and I came in at a time when these types of new designers were being welcomed and lauded by the international fashion community — something that had never happened in the history of this industry before. It's always been a rich white person's game.

**SB:** Does the reality of running a brand live up to your childhood dreams?

**KJ-R:** The industry lives up to my best and worst expectations. I've made some amazing lifelong

friends and I think I've made a significant impact on it by just being myself and staying true to my beliefs.

**SB:** What's the most important thing you've learned by training hands-on that they don't teach you at school?

**KJ-R:** The most important things I learned hands-on were the financial and logistical aspects of running my own business. I'm still actively figuring all that out.

**SB:** Since your first *Motoguzzi* collection, Pyer Moss has been partial to storytelling — from biker culture to hip-hop in the '90s, from samurai in eighteenth century Japan to sassy AI prototypes. Over the past couple of seasons, however, your work has turned more explicitly into a reflection of our current times, with all the issues that plague us and still their fair share of historical precedents. It started a discussion around activism that, with few exceptions — most notably Vivienne Westwood — has been shamefully absent from the fashion industry. What sparked your decision to head in this direction? Where did the idea for SS16 come from?

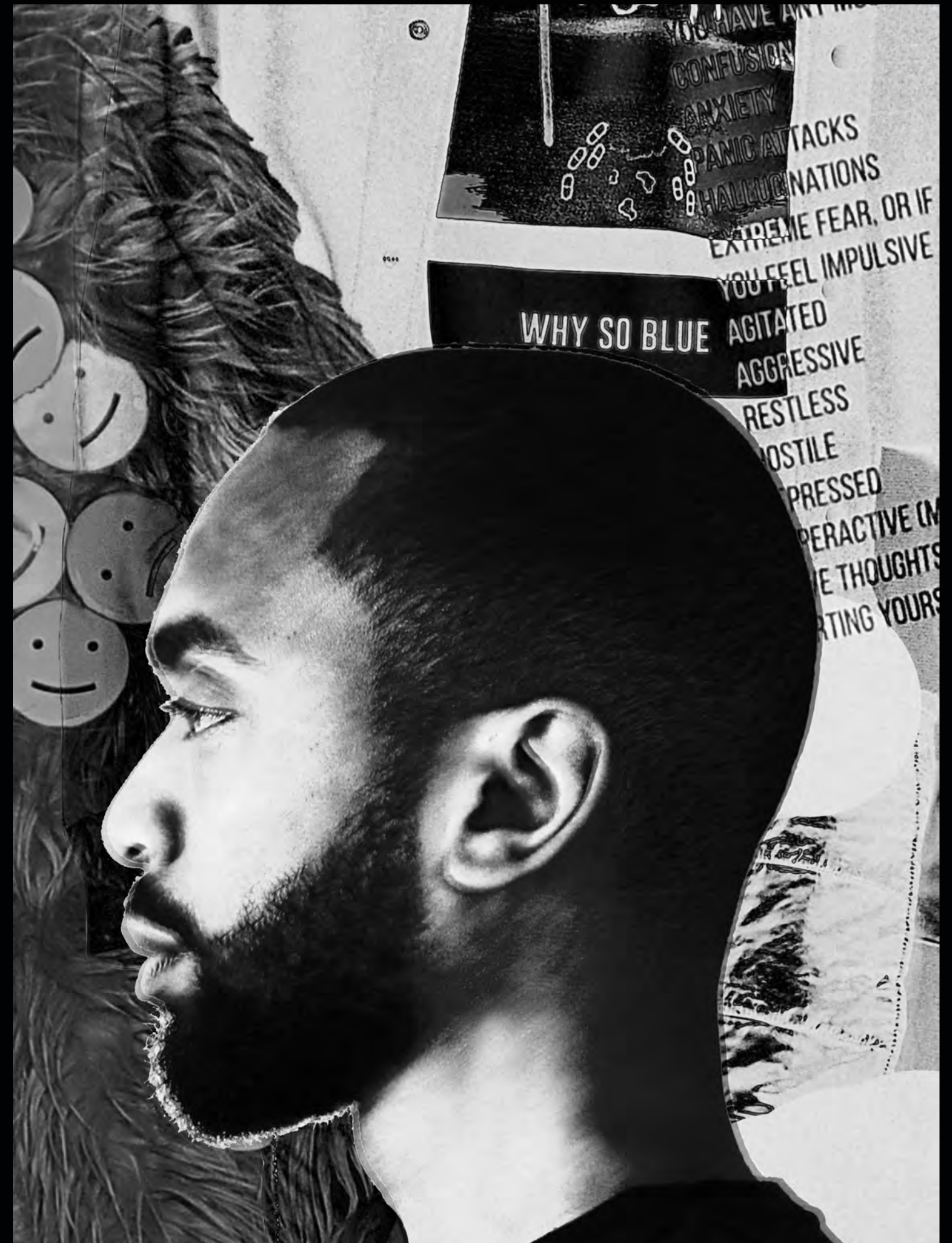
**KJ-R:** In the early days of Pyer Moss, I wanted to hide pictures of myself and didn't want anyone to know I was black. In fact, I was told by many

potential investors who believed in my vision of luxury sportswear, the designs, and the brand, that they wanted me to hide my face from the press. They felt it would hurt the business once the major stores and magazines found out what I looked like.

The truth is I've always been outspoken about injustice to any group of people in my personal life. Nothing has changed about this except my own personal choice to forego the pursuit of acceptance. Once I gave up the cowardice that most people of color in positions of power possess, I started making real art. It went from bullshit topics like the ones in my first three collections to embracing the things that made me different.

I spoke to Usher one day about how pissed I was with the way black people were being portrayed in the media, being exterminated by the police and systematically redlined into environments that bred criminals so that they could be funneled into mass incarceration — and we decided we would back each other publicly as we spoke on these issues. That gave me the push I needed to just go for it.

**SB:** Still, I imagine it may not have been easy. There's a reason why fashion so seldom touches on themes of such magnitude, and







FW16  
Collages: Merel Ana Lansink

callousness can't always be blamed. Fashion is a business known to benefit from media attention, and what Vanessa Friedman describes as a "retailization of cause" is bound to raise suspicion and criticism of the most selfless of designers' endeavors. On the other hand, one might argue that if designers don't do what's in their power to raise awareness, who will? Do you believe that with the great reach of fashion should come great responsibility, and if so, what more could be done?

KJ-R: I hated that *New York Times* article. She titled the article something like "After Tragedies, Then Comes the Memorabilia." The article was about all these dubious people selling tragedy merch and there were about two paragraphs in it that discussed how I was the exception. The title would've led most people who skim articles to believe that I was part of that bunch at first glance. I was fourteen months into my brand and that could've seriously hurt me.

Designers have power. It's rarely used. Images and sounds have the most influence over the social collective conscience. That's why musicians and artists have shaped culture for so long. All of us in the fashion industry should have been talking about these eruptions as it pertained to police brutality in real time from the second it started happening. We waited too long. We have the power to influence and mobilize the youth to help us deliver these messages of equality and we just waited too long.

**SB: Let's talk about your self-produced video essay for a moment. What was the thought process behind it, how did you go about filming the interviews? How well aware were you in advance of the impact and consequences its screening in September would come to have for your brand — both in terms of critical favor and financial setbacks? Is it something you would consider doing again?**

KJ-R: I wanted to talk about violence and racism, and spread a message of equality without talking personally. I have some cool friends like Marc Ecko, Robin Givhan, Joel Towers, Usher, Pastor A. R. Bernard, Nadia Lopez and Gregory Siff, who said the things I wanted to say for me in that video. We added commentary of family members of victims of police brutality and some graphic imagery to bring the point home. I wanted the film to be quick, painful, dark, and comedic. The video was twelve minutes long and was supposed to replace the runway show.

In all honesty, I expected and was ready for my career in fashion to end that night. My original plan was to show the video and no collection, but Dario, my show runner, brought the models out anyway. I can't control that asshole. The video wasn't meant to help my brand, it was to start a conversation about something relevant. It was to provoke emotion and piss people off. It worked. I guess the side effects of that were that it made me a semi-public figure and boosted the brand profile. I wasn't quite ready for that. It almost drove me crazy. However, I would do this and anything I have to again to provoke thoughts around topics I care about.

**SB: Usher told *VICE* that you "cut [your] clothes in a way that represents the culture but doesn't bastardize it." That's no easy feat: far too often, fashion treads a bit too close to the commodification threshold. How difficult is it to reach this balance for you, and where should the line be drawn?**

KJ-R: I design for people who don't care about trends, starting with the people I know. If my friends are willing to pay for it, when most of the time your friends are the ones who expect to be gifted shit for free, I know I'm doing something right. I have a talent for predicting when something is about to be tacky and I avoid that shit like the plague. Have fun in your giant hoodies in two seasons.

**SB: You've mentioned before that you intend to break away from a misleading streetwear labeling that doesn't fit your line, but these things do tend to stick — how is it going so far?**

KJ-R: I only got labeled streetwear because of the way I look, you know that. There's nothing wrong with streetwear. Streetwear is a vibe. But it wasn't the vibe of Pyer Moss. Let's be fair, if I'm making streetwear... Raf Simons makes streetwear. Rick Owens does streetwear, Wang does streetwear, Chanel's last campaign featured a snapback cap but those brands don't get that label of streetwear. I created a luxury sportswear brand — I want to continue to grow in this space. Mislabeling us as streetwear is like saying we don't exist in the space we've worked hard to be in. Pyer Moss sits next to all those brands at retail, so call it all streetwear if I'm getting that label.

**SB: This coming May you've been invited by MoMA to discuss the hoodie — an item ripe with symbolism — together with civil rights activist DeRay McKesson in the context of a series of talks leading up to their *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* exhibition. Could you give us a hint of what you'll have to say?**

KJ-R: I'm not rehearsing so I have no clue. DeRay was a huge influence for SS16 so I'm excited to meet him.

**SB: For SS16 and FW16 respectively, Pyer Moss also teamed up with artist Gregory Siff and Erykah Badu, who spoke of the two of you as "a match made in fashion heaven." How did these collaborations come about, and can we expect more of them in seasons to come? Who else is on your list of people you would love to have on board?**

KJ-R: I'm a spiritual person, and I believe that we are paired with people by a higher power. Gregory is my brother now. Erykah saved my life. I'm hoping to work with Fredo Santana, Future, and Shia LaBeouf soon.

**SB: Finally, what are you presently working on, and, if you can say, what shall we look forward to in SS17?**

KJ-R: I'm in the suburbs of Italy right now, it's almost 3 a.m., I'm making my collection here. SS17 is about gang culture. See you soon.

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