

ON THE RISE

SIKI IM

Written by LYNN FURGE *Photographed by* ISABEL ASHA PENZLIEN

American menswear has long been saturated with polos, sensible worsted wool suits and the ever-present blue and tan of the country club set. For years, businessmen had a look to subscribe to. Visualize the New York financial army in command of the city, hopping from the Upper East Side to the lowest tip of Manhattan, helming Wall Street and listening to money manager after money manager running their mouths ad nauseam, all the while wearing “the uniform of the job” and aspiring to both blend in (heaven forbid wearing a Yohji blazer—the details are too defined) and to stand out (how to make the double-breasted pinstripe look new?). One would think Manhattan was on a perpetual Bret Easton Ellis trip. Enter Siki Im.

Im embodies the balance of man and nature, a nod to his Korean heritage. He has the steadfast precision of his German home, possessing similar qualities of the greats—Karl Lagerfeld and Tomas Maier. As Senior Designer at Helmut Lang, he was schooled as an architect and educated in the business of fashion. He has been prepared by diverse happenstance to produce what has been one of the most thoughtful menswear collections for Fall 2010.

A burst of youth and levity was apparent on the runway, alongside a very serious nod to both traditional tailoring and a nomadic element. His clothing announced itself as a viable presence amongst the traditional “new cool” that has been seen for so many seasons from burgeoning labels.

“There is definitely humor... and youth in terms of what inspires me,” Im says. “[It comes from] the subculture of where I grew up, with skateboarding and music. It is still included even if the reference is created out of expensive suiting elements.

“There is a lot of history of me and myself in my collections. East meets west. My parents and I. Asians in Germany. There are huge contrasting elements that go subconsciously into my collection. Indigenous cultures are also a way [for me to] get inspired. Mix and juxtapose [them]... or harmonize [them]. That is my challenge and that is what I love,” he states, with the subtle whimsy he portrays so well in his garments.

Delving further into Im’s fall collection, a little

deconstruction seemed to come into play, but the designer likes to define it—again—in his own terms. “Traditional fabrics with new proportions and new themes. In my opinion, it is ‘post-construction,’ not deconstruction.”

The Fall 2010 season echoed the de- (or post-) construction of the economy, specifically in Manhattan. There was the three-piece suit, but with a twist, where the sleeves are jet black and only the body has the traditional pinstripe—and in place of a trouser with the perfect break, he paired the jacket with a skirt. But for all of the talk of humor, music, skateboarding, and young boys, the core of Im’s collections is in the Italian and Japanese pure fabrics—no blends, and a great deal of cashmere produced in well-known luxury mills.

“I am always looking at different ways to sew a seam, different purposes and different construction options to get a specific quality, aesthetic and feel,” he explains. “I play continuously with proportions as well: how a piece can drape and not drape. How a shape can give forth a certain emotion. All of these practices are the same thing that I look at when designing buildings.”

The play on proportions, and creation of details as beautiful on the inside as they are on the outside, are indeed an obvious nod to his architectural past. Im had not originally planned on going into fashion, but has always been about following where his instincts take him.

In Spring 2010 his instincts took him to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, inspiring his

first menswear line. “It was a perfect metaphor for the launch of my collection. The preppy affluent rich kids stranded on an island, who have to create a new society out of nothing. For me and my environment, I wanted to introduce something new. The kids created something new from their preppy uniform. The youthfulness and playfulness. Then there is the obvious moral and philosophical level of the novel. I need to filter out what I like, what I feel, and what is relevant. There is an overall feel that I develop. Sometimes there is too much going on in the exterior world, so I filter it out and research the themes I have always been into further.”

But let’s go back to the clothes. Cashmere felt coats with asymmetrical hems. Chunky knit sweaters that read more like shrugs, hitting just at the rib cage or encircling the neck and sliding teasingly down a single arm. A palette of black, styled with hats and knuckle-wraps. Jackets become lapel-less; the traditional trench coat is quilted. Pants are cropped or long, while skirts follow with both long and short versions. Additions like military-type belts, shoulder harnesses, and a jacket with its own backpack straps bring the theme of strength in the hero versus the anti-hero out into the open.

Im’s target audience—people who like to read and who love art and culture, and who are fluent in the realms of politics and sociology, not just fashion—will understand all of this without even listening to the designer’s explanation. Because of the details and fabrics chosen, the pieces would appeal to someone a little different from the mainstream culture, someone well-traveled, who is brave yet embraces their insecurities and imperfections. Im doesn’t scream through fashion, nor does he need to be loud or obvious to prove something. Quiet strength.

This newly evolved post-Wall Street world seems to encircle the Siki Im aesthetic. One might wonder—at the end of the day, does the designer have hope for the men of finance he depicts in his collection? Or does he think that they will continue to behave like the adolescent tribe that William Golding so perfectly described, embracing the ‘survival of the fittest’ ethos?

“I can hope that there is room for different and new answers in the financial market. I can propose one answer through my collection, which can hint at and inspire a solution to the current problem, but I am not an economist. My fashion is me expressing my view. I am proposing new things and can only hope people are paying attention.”

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